

OH MY ENGLISH..... ..MENTOR!!

This is a letter sent by a teacher to the Star Newspaper regarding her experience of the Project:

With the implementation of the new KSSR, the Ministry of Education introduced the Native Speaker program in 2011. We heard that five schools in the Selama zone had been selected and we received the 'good news' with mixed feelings. And to our surprise, my school was one of the lucky (or unlucky) five selected.

Personally, I didn't like it. I imagined having a *mat salleh* breathe down my neck and teaching me how to do my job. I became indignant and defensive. I felt that I was doing fine. Am I in need of help to teach English to the Level 1 pupils? No! I thought to myself. Plus I was still fuming over the fact that I'd been transferred from an elite urban school to a small rural school.

One fine sunny day, when I was having my routine chalk and talk day, an apparition appeared in the shape of this tall white man who cheerfully introduced himself as Mr. Thomas Wilson Lowrie and yes, please address him as Tom. I wasn't taken in by the bouncing ball of energy and friendliness. Premonition struck me! I Felt like I had been hit by a speeding train! Mr. Tom was full of plans and ideas while I was tongue-tied, mainly because I was trying to understand his Scottish accent and get away from him as quickly as I possibly could. By the time I had figured out the meaning of his first sentence, he was saying his tenth sentence!

I took a lot of motivation from my English panel head, Cik Hamidah who is also a Guru Cemerlang. I started to open up my mind and told myself, "OK, let's give this program a chance." But it was hard. Mr. Tom was full of energy while I plodded on. I did the new-style lessons just to get him off my back and would revert to my usual chalk and talk when he wasn't around. Many a time I sweated blood when he suddenly appeared at my class and asked cheerfully "What are you doing today?"

On the other hand, the pupils adapted to his presence pretty fast and would shout and jump in excitement each time Mr. Tom came. He was virtually a celebrity in my school. The pupils would rush to shake hands with Mr. Tom and tried their best to communicate with him. Much to my chagrin, they would inquire "*Mana Mr. Tom?*" on the days that he didn't drop by our school.

Slowly Mr. Tom became an important accessory in our school environment. The pupils basked in his attention and we were more prepared for his arrival. We had English workshops frequently. That's when we got the chance to mingle with the English teachers from all the five schools in the Native Speaker program. I saw a lot of great examples here especially senior teachers who were so into the program. Pn. Sarojiny, Pn. Kalsom, Pn. Asiyah and CikHamidah were extremely exuberant and contributed plenty of lively ideas. Even two of the senior assistants were avid participants - En. Karim and En. Zaaba. I was wrong to think that 'old' teachers were resistant to change. In fact, it was the younger ones who wore two hats.

As time went on, I saw positive changes to the pupils. They could read! And most of them understood what they were reading. Isn't that fantastic? By the time I had accepted that this program really works, 2011 had come to an end. I painted the Year 1 class and Mr. Tom helped me with the major portion of the painting during the year-end holidays. We decorated the class with phoneme word cards, chants and stories.

We eagerly jumped into 2012 with more observations, team-teaching (oops! Tom-Teaching), discussions as well as workshops in zone, district and state level. I don't know how Tom (most of us got comfortable calling him Tom by this time) managed to retain his exuberance despite the hostility shown by some of the other English teachers in the program. He exuded positive aura all the time and there was always a definite lilt in the pupils' voices whenever he joined the class.

My life came to a standstill when my father suddenly passed away in April 2012. I still remember Tom's innocent phone call that morning to reconfirm our plans for the day and I replied, "Tom, I'm not in school today, my Daddy died," and I just hung up. At that moment, I was actually with my mum, brother and husband - we were accompanying Daddy in his coffin back to our house. I totally forgot about the call and went on with the funeral arrangement with a heavy heart. Tom turned up to the funeral the next day at St. Joseph Church, Batu Gajah - two hours drive away from

Selama. I was touched. Tom went up another notch in my mind. I looked upon Tom as a genuine friend from then on.

I threw myself into work when I came back. Time went on and 2012 came to an end. We organized English Native Speaker Feedback Program Day in our school. We prepared Year 1 and Year 2 pupils for a variety of English performances like Action Alphabet, storytelling and jazz chants. Parents were invited too. Mr. Jeremy Bishop (Zone Manager) made a special appearance too. We also organized English **Activity Day** for the parents so that they could have hands-on experience about the English that their children experience every day.. Parents were amazed and we could see the pride in their eyes when their child performed in English. Tom not only helped us with the preparation and training but also conducted one of the **Activity Day**.

It's 2013 now and the three-year Native Speaker program is scheduled to end in September. We hope the program can be extended at least until the first batch of pupils reach Year 6. It would be a more complete circle then because we do not know what's in store for us when the first batch goes to Year 4 next year. It will be like being led into a dark tunnel blind folded. I can't believe I'm saying this but the Native Speaker program and Mr. Tom himself has worked wonders beyond our expectations.

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