

IMPROVING LANGUAGE SKILLS

Using Ambitious Targets Tool in Preparing an Improvement Goal:

My First Test ("Come to the edge, he said. They said, We are afraid.

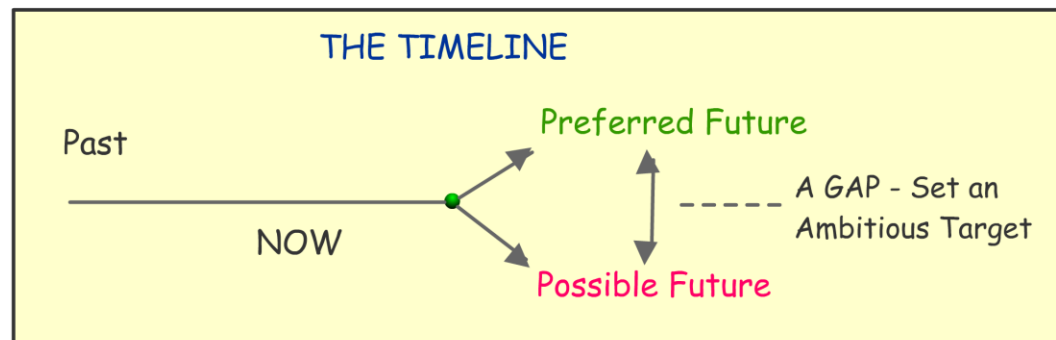
Come to the edge, he said. They came. He pushed them?. and they flew."

Guillaume Appolinaire)

When I was just a fledgling in TOC, I was coerced into taking on a slot for a presentation on TOC. By fledgling I mean the sum total of my exposure to TOC was a day's demonstration. This was an emergency workshop organized by the Curriculum Development Center in May. The head teachers of 45 Tamil primary schools were asked to attend a special course. Their schools were found to have zero percent passes for the Primary School Evaluation Exam because all the students had failed the Malay Language paper, mostly in Composition Writing in Malay. In our school system, children can attend the national schools that are taught in the Malay Language or vernacular schools (Tamil, Chinese) where lessons are conducted in the children's mother tongue. However, all schools use the national curriculum. Twelve-year old pupils sit for an important nationwide Primary School Evaluation Exam based on the same common National Primary School curriculum, which can be taken in the Malay, Chinese, or Tamil languages. However, it is compulsory to pass the Malay Language paper. Failure to do so results in failing the whole exam.

*TOC in Administration: Project Management, Khaw Choon Ean,
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The 45 head teachers of Tamil primary schools with zero pass rate for Primary School Exam all had to set an Improvement Goal for the year. The hotel room was a funny L-shaped one. 45 expectant faces looked at me as I was introduced. All the head teachers were Indians, mostly men. I wished them 'Good Morning' in Tamil and was quick to add that I come not as an expert but to share whatever I have. I did a little exercise as an opener. I asked for all the years of experience in education of everyone in the room. It added to a total of 1,745 years of service in education. My goodness, I was not going to fool these people! However, I was able to catch their attention. I warmed up with a little do-it yourself activity. I taught them quickly to do a time line. They listed all the significant events in their life on a horizontal line. At the meeting point where the horizontal line branched outwards into 2 lines was where they were. NOW. One branch would be their preferred future, the other branch the possible future. And then they were asked to look at the gap between their preferred and possible futures. How do we close that gap?



*TOC in Administration: Project Management, Khaw Choon Ean,
Improving language skills p.3*

Then I started talking about TOC and finally got to the only second tool I knew, working for an ambitious target collectively. The Ambitious Target was How To Improve Writing Skills In The Malay Language In Indian Tamil Primary Schools because it was the failure in the essay writing paper that had got these schools their bad results.

The group of head teachers were given the opportunity to identify what they saw as the obstacles that were preventing them from achieving their goal. To my surprise, it was not just the lack of writing strategies and methods that were surfaced. In using the tool we found that the head teachers started delving beyond the surface to address other issues that were contributing to the problem. The following obstacles were some of those seen as being in the way of the goal that had been set.

The OBSTACLES:

1. Pupils lack reading skills in Malay.
2. Pupils have limited vocabulary.
3. There is no interest in reading for any language.
4. Pupils do not use the Malay Language to communicate.
5. Pupils do not have enough reading materials in the Malay schools.
6. Pupils do not do any homework and so do not practise writing skills.
7. Lack of understanding of the Malay Language.
8. Pupils play truant and cannot follow Malay lessons.
9. Teachers have no proper and effective teaching strategies for teaching writing in Malay language
10. There are different expectations from education authorities and the school.
11. Parents and pupils are not aware of importance of education.
12. No love for the language.

*TOC in Administration: Project Management, Khaw Choon Ean,
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When these were brought forward, it was revealing that the identified obstacles had not touched just solely on the strategy of language writing but actually got into possible root causes of the situation.

Here were some of the Intermediate Objectives (steps) that they had for the obstacles above:

The INTERMEDIATE OBJECTIVES

1. Build proficiency in reading
2. Emphasize learning of vocabulary
3. Create interest in the language
4. Make them use Malay Language to communicate
5. Obtain more reading materials in Malay
6. Make sure they do their homework
7. Help them use and understand the Malay Language
8. Find out reasons for high truancy from school and find solution for truancy problems
9. Improve and introduce effective teaching strategies for teaching writing skills
10. Standardise the expectations between the different parties
11. Create the awareness in education for parents and pupils
12. Develop a love for the language

And they went on to give suggested steps that would later be used for their Action Plans:

SUGGESTED ACTION STEPS:

1. Prepare graded lessons.
2. Learn a word a day. Use peripheral learning-charts, posters, words on the wall.
3. Use audio-visual materials to stimulate interest. Use interesting approaches.
4. Have a Malay Language Week. Create opportunities to use the Malay Language in school.
5. Get sponsors. Identify reading materials that are effective.
6. Give a reward system. Set them goals to achieve.
7. Activities in school that will enable them to use and understand the Malay Language such as: Happy Hour in Malay using only Malay, Play Malay songs.
8. Give rewards for attendance. Address parent education on truancy.
9. Do not punish latecomers who have good reasons so that they will come to school.
10. In-house training. Invite experts to come and give training sessions.
11. The Ministry of Education should standardise expectations at state, district and school levels.
12. Build motivation in pupils. Visit homes to educate parents. Share success stories.
13. Create interest with activities. More usage of the Malay language.
14. Improve teaching methods and presentations.

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As a conclusion to the 2-hour session, the group of head-teachers were again reminded of their total years of service to education that had all added up to a remarkable grand total of 1,745 years of service. It seemed apt to point out that, with so many years of experience together in that room, surely we could do something to bring about a change for the children in their schools? The split second silence on realising this awesome total seemed thoughtful somehow. We finished the session with this empowering thought and a whole lot of ideas to take back.

EPILOQUE

The results of the nationwide Primary School Evaluation Exam for 2000 were announced on November 7, 2000. This is an extract from an analysis of results published in the newspaper:

<i>Subject Area</i>	<i>Type of Schools</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>Performance</i>
Malay Language (Writing)	Tamil Schools	24.90	39.20	+14.30

* Tuesday, November 7, 2000 THE STAR p.4

*TOC in Administration: Project Management, Khaw Choon Ean,
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Quoted from the same paper as the words from our Director-General of Education, Datuk Seri Dr. Abdul Shukor,

"The improvement of both Chinese and Tamil schools, particularly in the BM (Malay) paper, is encouraging and something to be proud of. They should be commended for this."

There are probably many other contributory factors to this improvement as a concerted effort to achieving the goal. But the important fact is that there has been an improvement as proof that when collaboratively we work towards a goal, it can be realized, however difficult it may seem at the beginning. During my workshop, I showed a few quotes and asked teachers to choose which they thought best reflected their situation. This is the one they chose.

"The Measure of Success Is Not Whether You Have A Tough Problem
But Rather If It is the Same Problem That You Had Last Year "
John Foster Dulles

I rest my case.