

Trevor

Contributed by Viv King

Trevor is the only beginner-bilingual in Y7. He came from the Philippines six months ago and to school four months ago, in September; his language is Tagalog. Trevor has two younger siblings. His parents are professional / white collar workers who can speak some English, but Trevor had no English on arrival in UK. In Manila, he started school at the age of three or four and says the school day lasted from 7 a.m. till 5 p.m. In his Essex school, he has settled well. He also has demonstrated good learning strategies. For example, he is well organised, he has good concentration skills and is quietly confident in putting to use his spoken and written English as he learns it.

EMAS been able to allocate approximately one day's teacher support for Trevor. This allocation is richer than the more usual two or three hours TA time per week and is because there happen to be new arrivals in Y 10 and Y11 and a resultant EMAS focus on the school for a period. The Learning Development Department has liaised with EMAS to give advice and support to a staff who, in general, have limited experience of beginner-bilinguals. Three of the TAs have attended an EMAS course run at our centre for three half-days; and the school has arranged for all the TAs to participate in a two hour course run by us in school. Subject teachers have valued succinct written advice about Trevor's needs. Peer-support is used in classes, and one of the teachers uses his EFL experience to provide after-school English classes once a week. There is no-one at the school with Tagalog, but I have been able to pull some pages from the internet, giving them to Trevor and to appropriate teachers. These have mainly been for purposes of making him feel at home. Any learning has been for us, the teachers, more often than for Trevor. A page of Filipino cuisine was useful for the food technology teacher as it showed just how different Trevor's experience might be, to that which was in the current work module. Some Tagalog poems have been able to contribute to the class poetry in English lessons, and a glossary of 700 Tagalog / English words together with list of common greetings have helped the English teacher to build a good relationship with Trevor.

Since the initial week or so, when he was rather overwhelmed with the being in such a new environment, Trevor has become at ease with adults and with his peers. The reason for this is a combination of his character and the friendly support he has received from staff and from peers. In January, I asked him how he had felt when he arrived in September. He said "I don't know everyone here..." (Yes, he used the present tense instead of the past.) He told me that he has lots of friends now. They tend to go into the library at lunch times rather than playing football outside. From what I've seen, they are quite a chatty group and this must be a great help to his conversational English skills. Twice a week at lunch time, Trevor goes to basketball practice. "I have lots of fun," he said.

Trevor's progress has been good. He says he can understand his peers now, and understand most of the teachers' every-day conversation. In January, a teacher said, "I'd like you to come to the Humanities Office so I can show you exactly what I want you to do in your book." Trevor listened carefully, making eye contact. I was fully expecting the teacher to need to rephrase the sentence, but Trevor just asked, "Can I come this lunch time?" and when the timing had been sorted out, he asked, "Where is the office?" He thus demonstrated an ability to understand the message in general (even if he didn't understand "Humanities") He also showed an ability to process the instruction and pose two questions in correct interrogative English. I would suggest that being at ease with people is a key to Trevor's progress. He is able to be a risk-taker in his conversation. In January he was telling me about someone he sees at Church on Sundays: "She is inside and I am outside and the church is finished and we go to the town centre to go shopping every Sunday." There is no use of the past tense apart from the perfect tense "is finished", but the past tense was not necessary in order to communicate his message. He has used a long sentence and the vocabulary is accurate: inside / outside / town centre / every. He is also beginning to use correct verb formations: She is / I am / church is finished / we go.

In December, I withdrew Trevor to assess his reading and writing after a term at school. I had supported his English lessons in which he has been producing an illustrated play script. We read an illustrated level 1 EFL story book. He was able to decode with appropriate inflection and demonstrated understanding as I questioned him during our reading. At the end I asked him to write the story for me in English. I had clearly not thought very deeply about what he would do. After a few minutes I was a little concerned because he was drawing and not writing. Aware that we only had ten more minutes I gently asked him if he would do some writing too. I was impressed with the finished result. The illustrations encapsulated the main ideas in the plot and the story was written as a play script. I am not sure if he wrote the script because he thought that the English write stories in that way, or if he had decided to change the format of the narrative. Either way shows an alert mind. Here is a sample taken from what he wrote, using Trevor's own punctuation. He did not refer to the text for ideas or spelling in the following section:

*Mario have a expensive camera and she love taking photos
christine: takes a photos of a little cat in a window
Mario: what a little camera Mario's laugh
christine: said don't laugh with may little camera
crossties camera can shat with good photos
christine: have a lot of money she take Mario into a summer holiday*

In Essex, new arrivals very often find themselves to be the only speakers of their language in school. In fact schools often find they have not had a newly arrived beginner bilingual for a very long time. In this situation, both students and schools need support and reassurance. We pay a visit to the school, meeting the student, the school contact teacher, and the TA who is work most with the students. We emphasise that the student's own language is vital for conceptual development and that it should be continued at home, even if there is no opportunity to speak it in school. We can often pay for two or three extra hours' TA time. Sometimes one of our EMAS teachers can go into the school for three or four lessons per week for a term or so. A welcoming environment is, we find, the most important thing for students in these early weeks. Being isolated can be daunting, but I have found that the level of day-to-day English will usually develop quickly in the welcoming school where the only language to be heard is English. This is especially true if, as is the case with Trevor, there has been a good level of schooling in mother tongue prior to arrival in the UK. A problem we have is that our tiny staffing means we are not able to give very much support beyond the beginner stage. This means there is a big need for training and awareness for mainstream teachers, who have the responsibility to provide these students with the tools for using academic English.