

English Language Teachers Meet Malaysian Counterparts

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A joint workshop *Two countries, Two Associations, One set of learners* was held in the convivial surrounding of the Sheraton Subang Hotel in Subang Jaya, Malaysia on 13 September 2003. It seems strange that English teachers of Singapore and Malaysia, only a causeway away from each other, had never officially convened to discuss approaches to English teaching in the two countries. So, to rectify the situation, eight staff from NIE's English Language & Literature Academic Group and six Singapore school teachers got together for a weekend conference with 15 Malaysian teachers and teacher trainers. This was effected through the English Language & Literature Teacher's Association (ELLTAS) in collaboration with its Malaysian counterpart, the Malaysia English Teaching Association (MELTA), with funding from a British Council English Language Teaching Contacts Scheme (ELTECS) grant.

Each side gave an introduction to English teaching, including the strengths and weaknesses as they saw them. Assoc Prof Phyllis Chew (English Language & Literature), ELLTAS President, provided a historical background to the development and evolution of English teaching approaches while Ms Pearly Chai, a Senior Teacher at Ponggol Primary School, gave a vivid demonstration the approaches she



used in her school, along with samples of the students' work. For the Malaysian side, Dr Malchi Edwin Vethamani gave a historical account of MELTA's development and structure followed by Ms Sunita Biaspal d/o Basden's description of the problems and responses faced by English teachers. The participants, in groups, then discussed the situations in both countries and began to identify where future cooperation might lie. The general feeling was that although teaching situations differed, the two contexts were, in many respects, complementary and offered openings for mutual learning. The Singaporean delegates were particularly impressed by NILAM, a government-sponsored

reading programme, and the Malaysian felt that the Singaporean experience in using English across the curriculum was pertinent to the new government policy of teaching English and Mathematics in English throughout the Malaysian school system.

It was agreed that the workshop had been highly successful and should be continued, based on the areas of common interest identified. The workshop had also provided an opportunity for teachers and teacher educators to know each other as individuals and through this to provide a better understanding of one other's situation. So near, yet, now, not so far away.