

# Suki in 9th Grade

"Use your imagination. Yes, we are going to write poetry again. Yes, everyone must do it. Yes, it will be for a grade." I shudder when I think of how many times I answered those questions during the past year.

Analytic Teaching had come to ninth grade in Arlington, Texas, but not without difficulty. Like most school districts, Arlington's curriculum is very tightly packed and time for "extras" is difficult. It was important, therefore, that Analytic Teaching be used directly in conjunction with my subject matter English.

The class I chose was a Basic English class, whose members converged rowdily on my room at 1:30 p.m. each afternoon. The number of students fluctuated from fifteen to twenty. Approximately one-third of the students were in the process of being moved from Resource to Basic English in preparation for high school. The other members were enrolled in Basic English because of below-average test scores on standardized tests e.g., California Achievement Test and Texas Assessment of Basic Skills, and the recommendation of previous teachers. The program was a modified version of the regular ninth grade curriculum with a heavy emphasis placed on grammar, oral and written communication skills. *Suki's*<sup>1</sup> emphasis on writing skills seemed to be a perfect way to blend Analytic Teaching with English.

Problems occurred almost immediately. Because of the demands of the curriculum, I was to be permitted only thirty minutes per week for Analytic Teaching. The rationale for this was that if more time was used, I would not be able to cover the required curriculum adequately. The potential value of the program was not a major consideration. The stated curriculum, however, was.

The physical setting also presented problems. My classroom is located in an old temporary building situated on the far side of the parking lot. The students, in order to function in these surroundings, needed a good deal of structure. They found it hard to make the adjustment from the main building, which is less than five years old, to my old temporary. I found that even though I would have preferred a less structured setting that it was impossible to do anything without strict rules. Therefore, my regular classroom rules were in effect at all times. They consisted of staying in your assigned seat, not speaking while someone else was speaking, and raising your hand if you wished to speak. People who disrupted the class were removed. It was interesting to watch, as the year progressed, how the students responded to people who were interfering. On several occasions, the class would request that someone be put out if they felt he or she was hampering the discussion. As the year wore on, the need to remove people all but disappeared.

One problem that I never found a solution to was the announcements on the P.A. which were given everyday during that class section. On some occasions, they all but destroyed my discussions because the moment was lost and eight to ten minutes later there was little hope of recapturing it. On many occasions, it took all my control not to yank it out of the wall as I watched a wonderful discussion fall by the wayside.

In spite of the problems at the beginning, we finally managed to get down to Analytic Teaching. Because of the time limitations, I decided not to read the novel. Instead, I tried to correlate the exercises in *Writing: How And Why*<sup>2</sup> with my regular lessons. The first few weeks were difficult. I found it hard to find exercises that blended well with my regular curriculum. The students hated the writing exercises. As a group, their writing skills were very poor. Most had trouble formulating a simple sentence. The thought of having to write seven or eight sentences put them at a high frustration level immediately.

At times, I found myself forcing them to participate in the activity by telling them it was for a grade and, therefore, if they did not participate they would receive a zero. (In a basic class five zeroes meant probation and eight zeroes meant removal and placement in a regular class. Several students were removed during the year, not however, because of their non-participation in Analytic Teaching.) Naturally, I never gave grades for the Analytic Teaching exercises. The ironic thing was that in spite of the fuss prior to each activity, no student ever asked what grade he or she had received for that activity. It thoroughly amazed me that this continued throughout the year. The more I thought about this, the more it bothered me that for this particular group of students, the threat of a zero was more motivation to work than the possibility of writing something to be proud of.

The first few weeks did not progress well at all. The group found it very difficult to write. The writing of poetry was even worse than prose for most of them. They had no self-confidence at all. Most automatically assumed they could not write poetry. Some even took "zeroes" because they "knew" they could not do this. I was determined to try and find a solution to the problem before it pushed the class beyond the point of return. Prose was not as foreign a subject matter as poetry. I decided this was the way to start. Even though they were not crazy about prose, they were a little more comfortable about writing in this form. I backtracked a little and we reworked several of the previous exercises as prose. The results were much better. They seemed to put more effort into their work and those willing to take "zeroes" disappeared. They were also more willing to share their work with the others in the group. I felt at this point that maybe I was on the right track. I still was not sure, however, if I was heading into the right station.

The class was working on a mythology unit. They loved reading about the Greek gods and heroes. Because of the different media we used during the unit, it was necessary to discuss both the Greek and Roman names of the gods and heroes. They had no trouble recognizing that even though they had two very different names only one person was denoted. This seemed like a perfect time to work with an exercise "Does having a different name mean a person or thing is different?"<sup>3</sup> (sic) We started off by reviewing the Greek and Roman names of our gods and heroes and working into our lesson. A few members of the group caught on right away and the discussion took off. As the discussion progressed, more members of the group became involved. Even some of the quieter ones made contributions to the discussion. (The group as a whole was not quiet. They would be considered very rowdy and verbal. There-

fore, in order to survive, even the quiet ones stood up for their rights.) They were managing well without my guidance and surprisingly they were listening to what each other had to say and responding well to each other. Everything was going fine until one of the boys insulted one of the other boys. I immediately jumped in and managed to steer the conversation in a more appropriate direction.

This became a problem I had to be on the alert for constantly. If it was at all possible to find an inappropriate point in the discussion someone in the group would find it. I found myself during discussions constantly trying to be one step ahead of the trouble. Most times I acted quick enough to prevent serious problems from occurring.

During the written exercises, it was necessary to reiterate the idea that what they wrote must contain appropriate content for ninth grade. (With this group, I had to do this before any written exercise, not just Analytic Teaching.) If there could be a seamy side to anything we did, someone in the group always managed to find it. The first few times it was done for the shock value. After they realized I did not shock easily, this subsided somewhat. Occasionally, however, it was tried to get a reaction from the group. This was a problem that came more from the age of the group (14-15) than from the subject matter.

When the class began working on short stories, I was able to adapt several of the poetry exercises to complement the regular program. I discovered with careful adaptation the exercises were both a great asset to the regular program as well as to Analytic Teaching.

My adaptation consisted mainly in changing the poetry exercises into prose exercises and sometimes finding a topic that the children could relate to better than the ones given in the original exercises.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was the next large project we were starting. I attempted to use a lesson on possibility to prepare them for future activities. It never quite took off, but I think this was due to my inability to make it concrete enough for them. This did, however, provide some basis for later activities with *Romeo and Juliet*.

The writing activities went much better as the term progressed. The students were not as reluctant to participate. In fact, I noticed a much better relationship among the members of the group as the term progressed.

In addition to the writing exercises, I found many of the grammar exercises very useful. As I mentioned previously, the grammar skills of the group were very poor. This lack of skills I am sure was one of the main reasons the writing exercises were so difficult for them.

We started from scratch in grammar, learning parts of speech, Nouns and verbs even in ninth grade posed a problem for many of the group. I found the exercises enabled us to review what we had been working on all week in a slightly different manner. They enjoyed playing the "word games" as we called them. We all found this a more enjoyable way to review grammar.

One of the most successful reviews was an adaptation of the old "I Spy Game" many of us played as children. Our first attempt was for a preposition review the day before the test. The rules for the game were:

1. One had to choose something in the classroom.
2. The item chosen could not be a person.
3. Each member had to give three clues and had to use a total of four prepositions.

When the game was first mentioned the response was less than enthusiastic. "We use to play that in first grade. You must be kidding." and "I ain't about to do that." were some of the initial reactions. Once we were underway, even the most vocal dissenters were heavily involved in the activity. The members listened carefully for the clues and were quick to point out those who had not used the proper prepositions. Instead of criticizing each other, however, they were offering each other suggestions for "better prepositions". The clues used by several members of the group were very imaginative. Even their fellow students congratulated them with admiring glances. The most amazing thing was when the bell rang and they did not want to leave. This was a first! The only way I could get them to go on to their next class was by promising we would do this again. A group, whose members for the most part do not even want to be in school, were pleading to stay just a few more minutes. It was a teacher's dream.

Many subsequent parts of speech reviews were done in this manner. The group never tired of the exercise. The amount of thought and effort they put into the activity was amazing. It also proved to be a very effective review method.

For the most part, the lessons that did not succeed were the ones where too much pressure was placed on the students. On many occasions, I think I pushed them to make connections that, because of their lack of background knowledge, they were unable to deal with. Therefore, they became frustrated and turned off completely.

Working without using the novel *Suki* was a definite drawback. A large number of the exercises are tightly connected with incidences in the story and adaptation was difficult if not impossible.

On the positive side, however, I did find many of the exercises well suited to adaptation for use with the ninth grade curriculum. I also felt that many of the exercises provided a much needed form of enrichment for this group in particular. On many occasions, the simple fact that we did something different from what the other class did made them feel special. This was especially evident when we played our "word games."

The way they handled the feedback many of them received from their fellow students was especially interesting. At the beginning of the year, the group was definitely at odds with one another. They did not mix before, during, or after the class and the cliques caused many problems within the class. Later on in the year, there was a certain amount of respect that developed among the students. Although the cliques remained, they were not as quick to criticize the opposing groups. There were even times when the simple fact that they listened to what someone else had to say without interrupting, helped them to see the value of other people's ideas and opinions. It also provided them with some insight into their fellow students which they never had a chance to see before, even though some of them had been together since kindergarten.

The hardest thing I had to deal with and probably the thing I had the least control over was the time. Thirty minutes a

week is just not enough. I found myself constantly feeling sabotaged by the bell as I watched a terrific discussion shattered by the sound. At this age especially, they needed more time to work into the discussion. They could easily have gone for another twenty to thirty minutes without losing interest.

Analytic Teaching may not have had a great impact on the ninth grade in Arlington, I would like to think however, that it did help to develop some worthwhile listening skills and promote a little academic self-confidence in a group of students who, as a whole, receive very little positive feedback in a very competitive academic surrounding.

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## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Lipman, Matthew. *Suki*. Upper Montclair, N.J.: The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1978.
- <sup>2</sup> Lipman, Matthew and Ann Margaret Sharp. *Writing: How And Why*. Upper Montclair, N.J.: The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1980.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 17.