



TeacherTalk by MALLIKA VASUGI

Language 'stars' at global meet

Some of the world's best English language experts, including poets, actors and writers will come together for an international conference in Malacca, later this year.

WHILE teachers can sometimes be a little unpredictable in their responses towards proposed activities related to their profession, one thing that's almost certain is they are not overly excited when words like "professional development" or "conferences" are mentioned.

Perhaps it is due to a lack of time, inner motivation, or experiences with past conferences that were a little lacklustre, but in a conference associated with language teaching, other questions in the minds of teachers signing up would be about how it is going to affect their own classroom teaching.

Will I go back with increased motivation and new perspectives?

Will the speakers be inspiring, will they be convincing, will they be real or will they put me to sleep? In a way it is a little like deciding to watch a movie. Knowing who the actors are may make the difference in your viewing choice.

Come November this year, there will be a conference for English language teaching which seems set to deliver what it promises. ICELT 2013 (International Conference on English Language Teaching) will be held from Nov 18 to 20 at the Equatorial Hotel, Malacca. It has a novel theme: Experiment, Engage, Enchant: Rocking ELT with New Rhythms.

Then there is the star-studded list of featured speakers beginning with renowned performance poet Valerie Bloom whose name will be familiar to English teachers as the writer of the poem *The River* which is part of the literature component in the Malaysian secondary school English syllabus.

After countless times of going through a certain literary text in your classroom, it will be quite another experience altogether to

watch the poet herself in action. Born and raised in Jamaica, Bloom was brought up reading Yeats and Wordsworth. Her enchantment with literature began at a very early age and she recalls how as a child she used to write her poems and stories high up in the trees she climbed.

At the age of 12, she had her first story published. After she moved to England in 1979, Bloom tried her hand as a librarian, arts officer and even steel band instructor and began writing and performing regularly. She earned an honours degree, from the University of Kent at Canterbury, and was later awarded an honorary Master's degree.

A poet's tale

These days, Bloom writes everywhere – in the bath, in bed, on trains and in hotel rooms. She also runs writing workshops and courses and performs in the UK, as well as internationally and has appeared on radio and TV programmes.

She writes poetry both in English and Jamaican patois. Her work has been published in over 450 anthologies, including GCSE and A-Level syllabi.

Among her poetry collections are *The World is Sweet*, *Hot Like Fire* and *Whoop an Shout*. Her two novels for young people are *Surprising Joy* and *The Tribe*.

The influence of the Caribbean life and culture is obvious in her writing.

"In Jamaica, old women will tell stories by moonlight. I remember quite a lot from my childhood – music and folk songs and work songs.

"One of the things that has influenced me is the interactive way stories are told in Jamaica. "When you are telling a story, the audience



Caribbean roots: Bloom is inspired and influenced by the interactive way stories are told in Jamaica.

is part of it and I ask my audiences to do the same and join in."

When she was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 2008 for her services to poetry, she found it to be "quite a shock because it was so unexpected and a bit humbling".

Today, Bloom lives with her family in Kent. Sharing Bloom's passion for creative arts but performing on a different stage is Carolyn Graham who is also featured in the coming conference.

Teachers who use jazz chants in their language classrooms will be familiar with her name as the creator of jazz chants that connect the rhythm of spoken American English to the beat of jazz.

Graham has a unique and rather wonderful story about what led to the creation of jazz chants. While teaching at the American Language Institute of New York University in late 1960, Graham was also performing ragtime jazz at a piano bar.

Someone came up to her after a performance and said "Gee, it's good to see you. You look wonderful!" When she responded automatically, "So do you!" the connection between the rhythm of spoken American English and the one-two-three-four beat of American jazz suddenly struck her.

After that, said Graham, she heard potential chants everywhere from ordering food in a restaurant, saying goodbye on the street, to making apologies in a crowded bar.

Soon Graham began to write chants based on spoken American English and to use them in her classes.

Jazz chants

Graham's jazz chants became immensely popular in English language classrooms and today remains one of the most popular techniques in English teaching used in thousands of classrooms around the world.

Graham who has conducted workshops and taught at Harvard University and other educational institutions throughout the world, is also the author of numerous English language teaching books, most notably *Jazz Chants* and *Let's Sing, Let's Chant*. Presently apart from training both pre- and in-service ESL (English as a Second language) teachers, Graham organises children's concerts with the aim of bringing comfort to children who need it most.

She recalls how she felt when she heard the lines of a child after 9/11 (the Sept 11, 2001 attacks in

the United States) "Look teacher, the birds are on fire!" All proceeds of her concerts and "Jazz Baby" CD sales are in fact donated to Ashinaga, a Japanese charity for children around the world who have lost their parents in war or other disasters.

"I have gotten so much joy from children around the world. This is my small way of giving something back."

Graham says that the real source of her creativity is her interest in her students.

"The magic is in the students. I try very hard to show the teachers how to do that, how to get the magic from the class. You create your class from your students, by finding out who they are through poetry, through storytelling. You have to open the door for them."

It is the quality of finding joy in what they do and wanting to give back that makes people like Bloom and Graham able to inspire and motivate others who listen to them. They will be at the conference and this is one conference you shouldn't miss.

ICELT 2013 is organised by Universiti Putra Malaysia and ELS Language Centres, Malaysia. Other featured speakers are Paul Cookson, the only poet to win the National Reading Hero Award; Jan Blake who is one of Europe's leading and storytelling consultant to the National Theatre, the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Battersea Arts Centre; Stan Cullimore who composes music and songs for children's television including Nickelodeon and other well-known speakers like Alan Maley, Andrew Wright, Dr N S Prabhu and Pearlyly Chua.

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