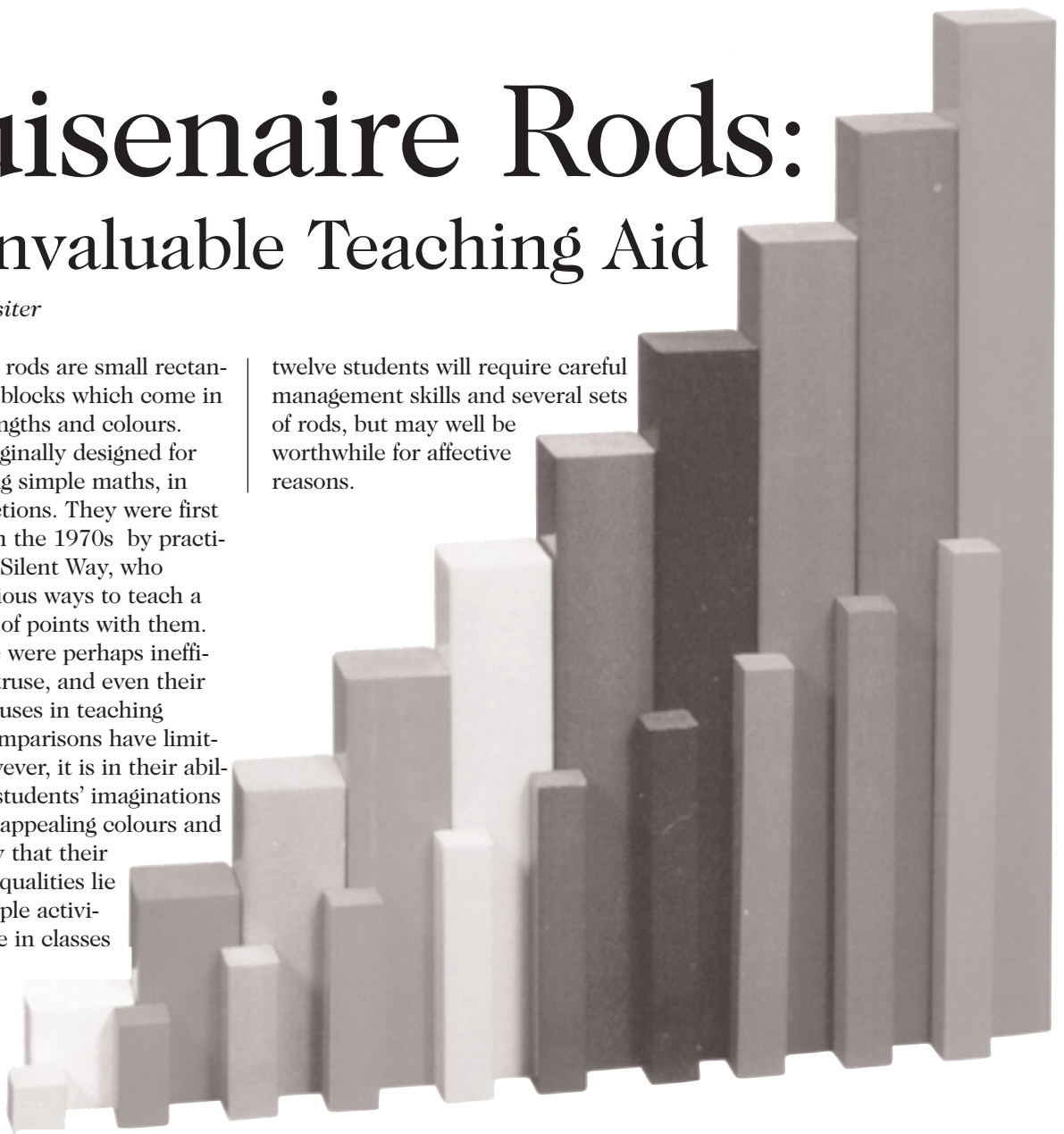


Cuisenaire Rods: An Invaluable Teaching Aid

by Mark Rossiter

Cuisenaire rods are small rectangular wooden blocks which come in a variety of lengths and colours. They were originally designed for use in teaching simple maths, in particular fractions. They were first used in ELT in the 1970s by practitioners of the Silent Way, who devised ingenious ways to teach a whole variety of points with them. Some of these were perhaps inefficient and abstruse, and even their most obvious uses in teaching colour and comparisons have limited range. However, it is in their ability to engage students' imaginations through their appealing colours and manipulability that their most positive qualities lie – see two sample activities below. Use in classes of more than

twelve students will require careful management skills and several sets of rods, but may well be worthwhile for affective reasons.



Activity One: Directions

Level: Elementary and above

The basic idea here is to get students to build their own town. This can be done after teaching exponents for directions, but with those who have been exposed to this language before, it may be better to build the town first and use it as a pre-teaching diagnostic. Using the long brown rods as roads, start to build a grid, eliciting (if possible) from the students what

this might be. They usually catch on as you start to fill in rivers (blue), a park (green), a station (black) with a train (purple) and so on. You can then more or less let them take over and decide what they want in the town, using red rods as buildings and shops (affixing them with sticky name labels to help students remember which is which). Once the town is completed, elicit or dictate a set of directions from the station to

another chosen point (this can also be done as a game in which they have to identify the destination). Teaching and/or fine-tuning, including exponents for asking, thanking and clarification, can then take place in a clear context which the students feel they own, with the added payoff of further flexible pair work practice using the town.

Activity Two: A Chinese Whisper Story

Purpose: For developing fluency in narrative tenses and discourse and wh- questions

Level: Low intermediate and above

Again, this can be done after teaching these features, or as a pre-diagnostic. Build a picture with different coloured rods to form the framework for a simple story, asking the students to guess what it is as you go. Any story will do, but I usually build a house with a chimney, a garden, a tree, and a wall on the other side of which is a river, a forest and then a road. I then make

a diamond necklace on the upper floor of the house from the smallest (white) rods, and have a rod-man come to steal it. As he's making his getaway a rod police car screeches up and he hides in the tree. By this stage the students will normally have taken up the story and be completing it themselves.

Depending on your approach you can then teach or review appropriate language forms. Next divide the students into pairs or groups and ask them to make their own rod picture story (the first time I gave this to a Japanese class I expected

silence and confusion, but was amazed by the alacrity with which they took to it). Once the stories are constructed, remove A students from the pairs and move them to adjacent pairs, where they can ask questions to help the original B students recount their stories. Then move B students on to other pairs, so that all the students are working with second-hand stories. Repeat the rotation, preferably until students come back to their original stories and see how they have changed.

Additional Activity: Co-operative Construction

by Maurice Jamall

Level: late-elementary and above

Skills Practised: Speaking & Listening

Language area: giving and following instructions/clarifying

Procedure

1) Put Ss in pairs and have them sit back to back if possible. If not, then have them use a textbook to form a barrier between them.

2) Give each S the same number of rods. Make sure they have the same colours and lengths.

3) SA constructs some kind of shape with her rods.

4) SA then gives instructions to SB who has to replicate the shape.

5) When they have finished, have them swap roles, (SB

builds/instructs, SA listens/replicates)

This is quite a tricky activity and can take a while. The lower the level, the fewer rods you should provide.

These are just a couple of ideas for using the rods in the classroom. For some further uses of rods, including some pronunciation activities, please look at the following website:

http://www.developingteachers.com/newsletterplans/cuisenaire_rods.htm.

A depiction of the size and colours of the different rods can be found at

<http://www.crpc.rice.edu/CRPC/GirlTECH/silha/Lessons/cuisen2.html>.

The rods can be purchased online from the Cuisenaire site itself at <http://www.etacuisenaire.com/>. There are a variety of sets available in wood or plastic going from small sets for \$10.95 up to jumbo class sets for \$64.95.

Alternatively you can purchase them from the International

Student Bookshop in England, who can be contacted at the following address: sking@studygroup.com. Last November, they were quoting £12.50 per box plus £4.38 postage and packing to Japan.

