

| | |
|---------------|----------------------------------|
| Publication : | TODAY |
| Date : | 06 October 2006 |
| Journalist : | Derrick A Paulo |
| Headline: | Tweaking English as she is spoke |

Tweaking English as she is spoke

Grammar returns to schools, oral skills to improve

Friday • October 6, 2006

Derrick A Paulo
derrick@mediacorp.com.sg

The Ministry of Education is rolling back the years for English lessons.

Under its new curriculum, pupils will go back to the basics of the language — and back in time — through the systematic learning of grammar.

It has been more than 20 years since the rules of English were an explicit and distinct part of lessons in the United Kingdom, from which Singapore's curriculum originated. But, standards are much more uneven now, especially of spoken English, among graduates and students in Singapore that not only is grammar making a strong comeback but oral skills, too, are being given more importance.

Both methods will underpin the "blended approach" of the MOE's revised English language (EL) curriculum, which will be implemented fully by 2009.

The new learning focus will be accompanied by the deployment of additional English language teachers to schools and the introduction of more programmes and subjects. These were among the EL curriculum and pedagogy review committee's key recommendations, which the ministry announced yesterday it has accepted.

Essentially, the new curriculum takes into account Singapore's particular linguistic environment, which is shaped by different home language backgrounds.

Ironically, the committee's report indicated that "communicative" language teaching, which 15 years ago displaced the importance of grammar in schools here, might have led to the communication problems of some Singaporeans. This approach emphasised student talk and personal response, which resulted in a more thematic curriculum. Teachers who taught English prior to that are now heartened by the renewed emphasis on sentence structure.

"We had moved from the grammar of the sentence to the grammar of the passage ... and it became fanciful and fashionable to talk about genres, text types, different types of passages," said former English teacher Swithun Lowe, 60. "But in looking at the whole house, we left out the cornerstone."

Although the 2001 EL syllabus saw grammar's return to prominence, teachers will now get the help they need to make it stick.

"Then, it was up to the teacher to decide how grammar was needed. Now, it's a more systematic approach. Each and every teacher enters at a certain point to introduce grammar," said Bukit Batok Secondary principal Lysia Kee.

Teacher training will be enhanced for both new and existing teachers to deepen their content knowledge. Other initiatives include an immersion programme for EL teachers as well as an overseas study award for selected teacher trainees.

Ms Clarisse Ng, head of department for English at Yusof Ishak Secondary, believes things are moving in the

right direction.

"In the past, the focus (of training) used to be on how to teach ... and not as much on what to teach," she said.

Importantly, all English-medium teachers will get a chance to improve their spoken English through the courses. Said Ms Ng: "Other teachers should also speak well. After all, how many hours a week do we (EL teachers) spend with our students?"

There will be more EL teachers in schools by 2010, though: Two more in all secondary schools and at least one specialist teacher to work with heads of the English department in primary schools. English-medium teachers in primary school could also specialise in teaching two subjects instead of three.

The MOE is studying this option, which would be more useful at the upper primary levels. For the Normal (Academic) and O-level courses, the oral component for EL assessment will be increased from 20 per cent to 25 per cent, the second 5-per cent increase in consecutive reviews.

At the pre-university level, a new subject, English Language, will be introduced. The subject will cover the area of linguistics through a critical study of language and communication. To further stretch students at the top end of the language spectrum, an EL elective programme will be set up at one or two junior colleges.

While many of the recommendations will be rolled out in the next three years, the reform of the teaching of English has already started in some schools. Bukit Batok Secondary uses a web-based portal for students to listen to each other's spoken English to improve oral fluency while Canberra Primary uses Channel NewsAsia's News in Class programme as one of its pre-assembly programmes.

Enthusing students is key.

"The first and most important desired outcome is to not only ensure that more of our students are proficient in the language but that they also enjoy the language, that they find it fun, that it's something they really love to learn," said Minister of State for Education Lui Tuck Yew at MOE's press conference yesterday.