

Publication :	Straits Times
Date :	18 October 2006
Page:	Online
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Headline:	Grammar reclaims glory in English teaching

**Oct 18, 2006**

## **Grammar reclaims glory in English teaching**

**By Liaw Wy-Cin**

THE pendulum of change in English-language teaching approaches has oscillated between teaching grammar explicitly and having students learn it only incidentally.

After 50 years of swinging, though, it is 'back to basics' for the way English is taught here. The new English-language syllabus, to be implemented in 2009, will see a return to the explicit teaching of grammar - the rules and conventions of a language.

And that was how it was at the beginning, with the highly privileged here subjected to the colonial curriculum of drill and practice in the 1950s.

The 2009 syllabus will be the seventh syllabus issued since 1959, when the first one - for primary schools - was issued.

From then until the 1980s, English-language teaching focused on grammatical accuracy, with explicit instruction on how language rules were to be taught.

For example, the 1971 syllabus for primary schools required pupils to master 129 sentence patterns over six years. The modus operandi: repetition, drill and reinforcement.

In the 1961 syllabus for secondary schools, students were not only taught to identify the various parts of speech (noun, verb and adjective, for example), but also taught why and how they were used.

But there was a balance in those syllabuses - the rigidity with which grammar was taught was offset by the integration of literature for enjoyment.

The 1981 syllabus marked a departure from this.

In a 2002 Asia-Pacific Journal of Education article, Developments in the English Language Syllabuses in Singapore, academic Suchen Christine Lim singled out the 1981 syllabus for being the first since 1959 to not integrate language-learning with reading literature for enjoyment, storytelling, poetry recitation, speech-making and drama.

Compared to syllabuses before and after it, she wrote, it 'had reduced reading, writing, listening and speaking to the minimum core skills, which would enable a child to acquire a basic functional literacy in English'. She added that it was a response to what at that time was seen as a pressing national need for an English-literate workforce.

Of course, the 'correct' use of English remained central to language-learning throughout the 1980s.

That changed with the 1991 syllabus. It attempted to teach English in a more natural, contextual way, instead of through rote learning of rules. So while grammar was still an important component of the syllabus, it was no longer presented as a prescribed list of items teachers had to teach.

Instead, themes took centre stage and students were taught grammar only when the need arose or when an opportunity in the lesson presented itself.

So students didn't get formal lessons on tenses, for instance. They learnt about personal relationships, nature and science and technology instead. But if these topics lent themselves to a lesson on tenses, a lesson on tenses students would then get.

But language experts soon found that students in Singapore needed more explicit teaching in the rules and conventions of English grammar to be really proficient in the language. So grammar was eventually reinstated in the 2001 syllabus - although not to the depth to be found in the new syllabus that will be implemented in 2009.

Like many countries where English is not the native tongue, Singapore looked to the UK as the beacon of English-language teaching.

In the decades from 1950, the communicative approach of emphasising conversation and personal response was all the rage in the UK. Prescriptive teaching of grammar took a back seat. The wave of changes taking hold in the UK then inspired the 1991 syllabus here.

The communicative approach made sense for Britain, where almost all children are immersed in a home environment rich in English linguistic input.

Linguists believe that at birth, the brain is wired to automatically programme the rules of any language. For which language the brain ultimately programmes, the algorithm depends on what input it receives from its surroundings.

This explains why a child might say, 'I go-ed there yesterday', even though he never heard that usage before. The child has worked out the past-tense rule in English - he just hasn't been told about its quirks yet. Such exceptions to the grammar rule, he will have to consciously learn.

And that's the case linguists are making for the learning of English: as a first language, it is acquired, picked up naturally; as a second, or foreign, language, it has to be learnt - deliberately, explicitly and systematically.

The English-language learning environment in Singapore is a hodge-podge: There are those who pick it up as a first language at home and those who learn it in school. Then, there is also a group for whom the process of acquiring the language at home might be corrupted by another language.

According to the Ministry of Education, just 8 per cent of this year's Primary 1 pupils speak only English at home. The majority, at 42 per cent, speak mostly English and their mother tongue or other languages.

Another 37 per cent speak mostly their mother tongue or other languages and some English, while 12 per cent hardly or do not use English at all.

The 2009 syllabus seeks to marry the two main types of learning environment - one where students pick up English naturally and the other where they have to work a little harder at learning it well.

More emphasis is also being given to spoken English. But grammar - the foundation of any language - will once again be a crucial component of the English-language teaching programme.

For even in the UK, there has been a retreat to teaching grammar explicitly, a response to falling standards in spelling and written English.

So grammar, once relegated to being taught only 'incidentally', once again takes pride of place as the cornerstone of English-language teaching.

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