

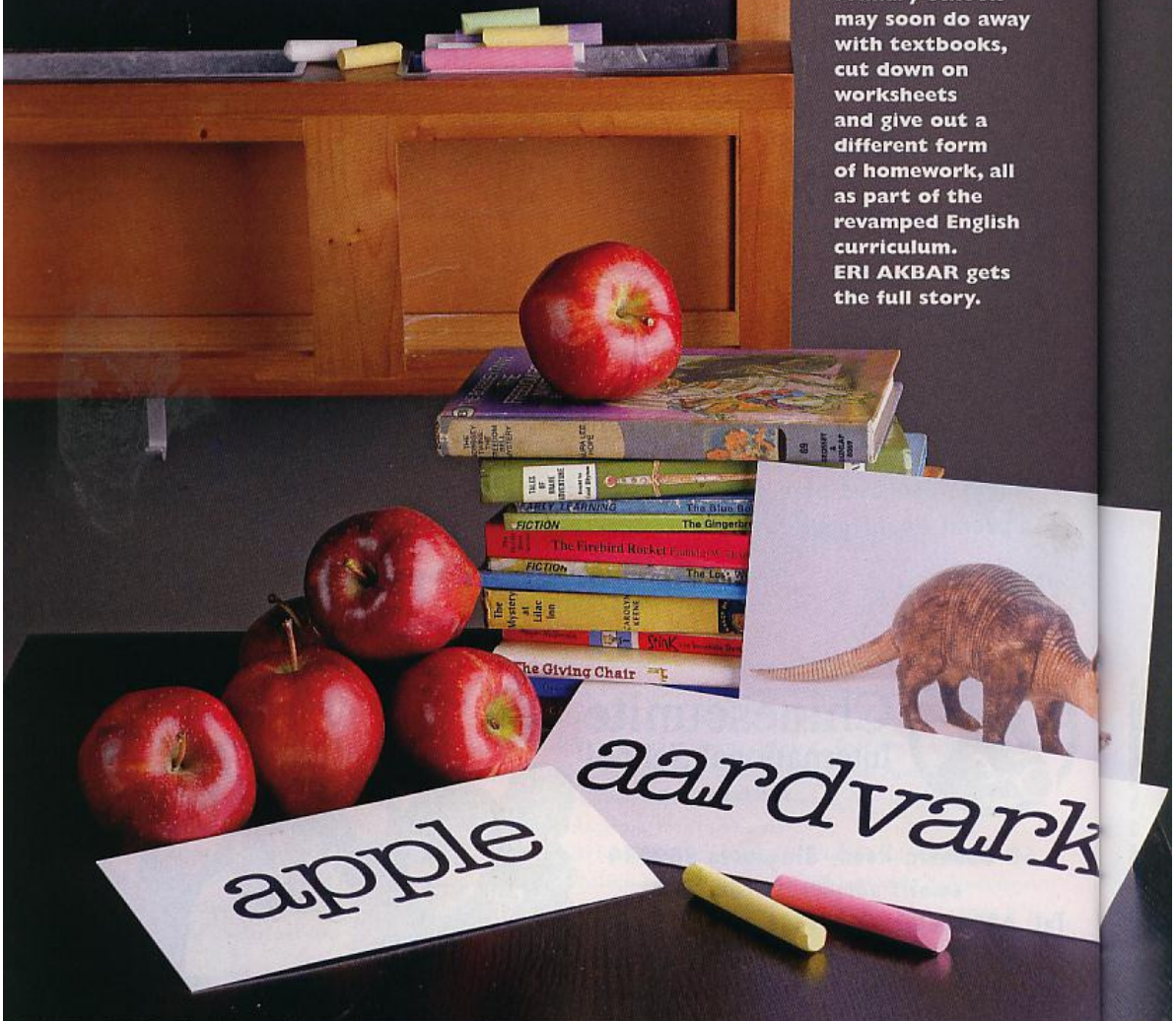
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Journalist :	Eri Akbar
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a new groove to primary school english

Primary schools may soon do away with textbooks, cut down on worksheets and give out a different form of homework, all as part of the revamped English curriculum. ERI AKBAR gets the full story.



It's English lesson time and the children are gathered around their teacher, who's reading from a big storybook about the Hungry Giant. During the session, the teacher stops to ask questions based on the book and answer queries from the curious children. The teacher also points out nouns, verbs and other grammatical rules to the little learners.

Next, the children work in groups, then individually, to write their own stories – inspired by the book, of course. Not only do they get a chance to discuss their tales after that, they also edit one another's work and polish their language skills with support from their teacher.

But there's a lot more. The children get a chance to work on planned activities, such as making a real sandwich to "feed the giant". Through these exercises, they pick up new words, learn to read instructions and practise their verbal skills, while completing a few worksheets to reinforce their newfound knowledge. Finally, they make their way to the learning centre, where they can look at storybooks, listen to tapes and do other independent activities.

Lessons revolving around a single storybook can stretch anywhere from a week up to a month. As such, your child's school may decide to do away with the traditional textbook.

This scenario is played out every day during English lessons at Woodlands Primary, which is one of the 30 pilot schools involved in the latest Strategies for Effective and Engaged Development in English Language (SEED-EL) initiative. If the programme takes off, other primary schools across the island will follow suit as early as next year.

As these lessons revolving around a single storybook can stretch anywhere from a week up to a month, your child's school will probably do away with the traditional textbook. This arrangement doesn't simply lighten the load of your kid's school bag, but also lights up his or her day.

BETTER ORAL SKILLS * Ms Sharon Biswas, English teacher and SEED-EL coordinator of Woodlands Primary School, observes: "We notice the children are now more involved in the lessons. They have become more vocal and expressive."

The SEED-EL programme has made an effect on the students of Princess Elizabeth Primary too. The school's English level head, Madam Dalvinder Kaur, reports: "We just had our oral examinations, and the children appear to fare better now. They are able to easily read a passage, answer questions and even discuss the picture component of the examinations."

It is still too early to predict if there will be marked improvements in the students' overall grades at the end of the year. But the teachers are confident that this new way of learning English will benefit them in the long run.

LEARNING THROUGH CONTEXT * This new spin on English lessons is scoring points because children learn through the whole language approach, in which students pick up English skills through the context of reading actual texts rather than learning via the traditional phonics-based approach.

Madam Kaur elaborates: "For example, when students learn a new word from a storybook, they will understand how the word should be used. As such, they will be able to apply it to their own writing as they know how to construct sentences using the word."

A deeper understanding means students will be able to use the English language effectively in their daily speech and writing. Their learning is then reinforced by worksheets made

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up of sentence constructions, cloze passages and other relevant exercises that also appear in the traditional textbook.

So, although the revamped primary school English curriculum does not emphasise spelling, drilling and learning by rote, it doesn't mean the children are losing out. Through added activities like the sandwich-making session, children are instead encouraged to be active learners and to pick up English in an interactive manner.

The fun factor in these activities can't be brushed aside, because kids will be more engaged in lessons that they enjoy and can go home to tell you about. Talking about making a sandwich for an imaginary giant certainly sounds more exciting than talking about learning the rules of grammar.

Ms Biswas shares: "Even teachers are excited about coming to class to conduct English lessons now, because they get to interact with the children and forge a stronger bond with them."

English homework also takes on a different form. Be prepared for your child to ask you for help in his research on a certain topic that he has to present in class the next day.

Ms Biswas says: "The role of teachers will become that of a facilitator, who encourages the children to take charge of their own learning and become independent learners."

SMOOTH TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL * The SEED-EL programme also ensures children will have a smoother transition from preschool to primary school. The book reading, language experiences and learning centre are common in preschool centres here.

When the preschool curriculum was revised to focus on this "play" approach years ago, many parents were worried about their kids being unable to adjust to primary school, which



Reading storybooks not only allows children to pick up new words, but also helps them understand how to fit these words into their speech or writing.

previously focused on deskbound activities. Fearing that their kids would not be able to catch up on writing skills, they requested for

more worksheets. But parents don't actually have to sweat over the lack of writing assignments at the preschool level, as children pick up the skill quickly in primary school.

Madam Kaur says: "They are more ready to write at seven years old and they learn fast. We see this trend even among the slower learners."

She adds that group work and independent activities at the learning centre – where teachers can give more one-on-one attention – have the added advantage of helping the slower learners to acquire English language skills. So, even learning gaps will be bridged.

The SEED-EL programme is not a new concept. Primary schools have been carrying it out for years, though the extent varies among schools. What has changed is that the Ministry of Education (MOE) has



called for primary schools to adopt the programme as the heart and soul of the English curriculum, as pointed out by Dr Ruth Yap, an associate professor at the English Language and Literature department of NIE, and a committee member on the SEED-EL board.

Dr Yap adds: "The SEED-EL approach is far more catered to social interaction and multiple intelligences." Multiple intelligences, credited to psychologist Howard Gardner, is a term describing up to seven possible traits children are born with that affect their learning style: Linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal.

In response to queries, MOE says: "Research suggests that the greatest impact on early literacy is achieved when children below the age of six are exposed to the enjoyment of reading. From our work with kindergartens and primary schools, we have found that children who are most ready for school are those who can understand explanations in spoken English, and are confident in using English to participate in activities."

The importance of reading cannot be emphasised more in the learning of any language. It teaches children to match sounds to printed words, hence building up their oral, listening and writing skills.

Dr Yap says: "Any effective English user will tell you that he or she got started on reading during childhood." And this remains true, no matter what approach your child's primary school takes. **YP**

TACKLING SINGLISH * Princess Elizabeth Primary's motto for English is spelt out clearly: Speak English, not Singlish. Its teachers will point out their students' lapses whenever they do not speak standard English in the classroom.

The school's English level head, Madam Dalvinder Kaur, says: "We'll ask the children how they can better phrase the sentence. That way, they will learn to differentiate between standard and non-standard English."

The reason for discouraging Singlish in the classroom is that children may get too comfortable using the colloquial language, which they are probably already using in their daily lives.

Woodlands Primary's English teacher Sharon Biswas echoes the same sentiment. The school's vision for English is to nurture "cultured and effective communicators with a passion for the language".

Ms Biswas explains: "Singlish expressions can come across as impolite, and may not even be understood by those who are not familiar with it. We want the children to express themselves clearly in a way that shows good values. For example, they should say: 'May I go to the toilet?' instead of 'Can go toilet or not?'"

The popularity of Singlish has come under intense scrutiny in light of the recent Speak Good English Movement. To keep their competitive edge as effective bilingual speakers, Singaporeans have been called upon to speak standard English. However, some have stood up for Singlish, saying it should be preserved as it gives the nation a uniquely Singaporean identity.

Whichever side of the fence you're on, it's comforting to know that children are able to know when they should switch from Singlish to standard English, says Julia Gabriel, the pioneer of a local group of speech and drama centres.

"At our centres, whenever our teachers speak to the children in standard English, they will reply in standard English. But they switch to Singlish when they talk to their parents. Children can adapt their speech to the situation," she says.

The American educator brushes off the notion that hiring native English speakers from abroad would raise the standard of English here, as she says she has met many proficient English speakers who are Singaporeans.

The ability to switch between English and other languages, including the mother tongue, can work for – rather than against – speakers.

Dr Ruth Yap of NIE says: "Let them formulate their thoughts in their stronger language, so that they can understand concepts better. The most important issue is that they must know how to express their ideas in standard English."

One good way of encouraging children to speak standard English is through reading storybooks aloud, Dr Yap says. And according to her, while phonics classes can be helpful, children pick up standard English better through everyday use – which is probably a relief to your child too!