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Going back to the basics of effective English-language teaching

■ **By CAI HAOXIANG**

CALL it another swing of the pendulum. The latest move by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to improve oral communication skills and grammar marks a return to what was taught in English syllabuses in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1966, a bilingual education policy introduced by the Government required all schools to teach English either as a first or second language.

The 1971 English language syllabus emphasised both grammar and oral language skills.

Where grammar was concerned, primary school pupils had to master 129 sentence patterns over six years.

There was also a focus on oral language development. As the 1971 lower primary syllabus put it: "Unless your pupils can be trained to ask questions, make suggestions, express

opinions and take part in a constant exchange of ideas, they will remain passive absorbers of second-hand information."

The teaching of grammar, for example, was combined with speech drills, with 56 sentence patterns taught to students orally. Repetition, drill and reinforcement were the order of the day. Yet the syllabus was also clear about how literary enrichment can enhance oral communication skills.

Enrichment activities such as storytelling, choral speaking and educational drama were set in motion.

The way English was taught changed in 1981, in the wake of policy changes that streamed pupils into different courses according to their language abilities.

The 1981 syllabus was described as a "reductive" one compared with previous syllabuses. The comparison was made by academic and writer Suchen Christine Lim in an article in

the 2002 Asia-Pacific Journal of Education.

Grammar was still a focus. But speech activities and literary enrichment aspects of the 1971 syllabus were taken out. The aim was functional literacy – minimum core skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking – meant to develop an English-literate workforce for a growing Singapore economy.

An MOE spokesman said that changes to the syllabus were made to cater to the wide range of students learning English as vernacular schools were converting to English as a medium of instruction.

In 1987, it became compulsory for all schools in Singapore to teach English as the first language.

Developments in reading research and language pedagogy led to a 1991 syllabus that moved away from functional literacy and made it compulsory for students to read

children's fiction in the classroom.

Grammar was still an important component of the syllabus. However, it was no longer on a prescribed list of items teachers had to teach.

The open-endedness by which grammar could be taught made teaching difficult for English-language teachers, many of whom did not undergo formal grammar training, according to a 1995 symposium paper by academic Shirley Lim and others.

A need to clarify the place of grammar in the curriculum led to the publication of two booklets by MOE in 1995 on how and when to teach grammar.

The next landmark date was 1999. MOE released a report blaming falling English standards on the widespread use of Singlish as a result of Singaporean children growing up in a mixed-language environment, and Singlish became a controversial national issue.

In 2000, the Speak Good English Movement was launched by then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.

In the wake of the Singlish debate, English-language education saw a re-emphasis on effective communication and grammar.

The 2001 syllabus made it clear that "pupils need to know how to communicate fluently, appropriately and effectively in internationally acceptable English".

This September, Education Minister Ng Eng Hen remarked that teachers and stakeholders have been telling him that "the standards of English can be raised and we ought to be speaking better...we do want the majority of our students to be able to speak proper English, express themselves clearly and be understood".

Next year, the syllabuses for Primary 1 and Primary 2, as well as Secondary 1, students will focus on listening and speaking skills and "systematic and explicit instruction of grammar".