

Headline	Revamping how English is taught		
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Description:	New English language syllabus to focus on developing oral confidence and grammar knowledge. To cultivate the interest in EL learning, it will also focus on oral communication using show-and-tell, debates, speech and drama and emphasis on systematic and explicit instruction of grammar.		

Various steps are being taken in schools, but some still feel standards have slipped

Shull Sudderuddin

English language lessons need not be boring, if pupils can be hooked from young.

Teachers can use an array of tools to teach it, including riddles, poems and stories.

And, from next year, there will be more "explicit instruction of grammar" from Primary 1.

In its response to questions from The Sunday Times, the Ministry of Education (MOE) said it aims to get pupils to communicate effectively in English at the end of their primary and secondary studies.

Education Minister Ng Eng Hen had said last month that, from next year, there will be a curriculum change at Primary 1 and 2, and at Secondary 1 Express and Normal (Academic).

"The new English Language (EL) syllabus will focus on developing oral confidence, grammar knowledge and a love for reading to anchor EL learning especially in the early years," an MOE spokesman said.

Its key elements will include a greater focus on oral communication using show-and-tell, debates, speech and drama and oral presentations, and emphasis on systematic and explicit instruction of grammar.

In 1981, the EL syllabus departed from rigidly

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taught grammar, while from 1991, grammar was introduced in a more contextual way.

A review in 2001 saw the return of more explicit teaching of grammar, though not with the depth of the new syllabus for next year.

Now, primary and secondary school teachers are given a list of grammar conventions and starter words for pupils to learn.

While this list states at what level each convention must be explicitly taught, and at what stage it must be revised and reinforced, teachers have the flexibility to teach the conventions when they feel their pupils are ready.

For example, at Primary 2, pupils are expected to use the stress patterns and rhythms of English appropriately and pronounce words clearly.

At Primary 6, EM1 and EM2 pupils will need to know and use connectors to show cause-and-effect, reason or choice and adjectives, adjectival phrases and clauses.

Associate Professor Lubna Alsagoff, head of English language and literature at the National

Institute of Education (NIE), which trains teachers, said those who apply to teach English will have their qualifications taken into account when assigning English Language as one of their teaching subjects.

She added: "We have different programmes of study. Depending on the programme they enrol in, the pre-service preparation can be between one and four years.

"They take English Language as a teaching subject, and must complete courses to fulfil this requirement."

Beyond the classrooms, the Speak Good English Movement was launched in 2000 to encourage Singaporeans to recognise the importance of speaking Standard English.

Mr Goh Eck Kheng, chairman of the movement, said: "There was an increase in the use of English as the language most frequently spoken at home in 2005, compared with 2000."

But despite the various steps taken inside and outside the schools, some people feel that the standard of English in Singapore has deteriorated.

Retired English teacher Ellen Toh, who is in her early 50s and was a teacher for more than 20 years, applauds the return to explicit grammar instruction.

"The standard of English has greatly deteriorated. One reason is that there is next to no firm grounding in grammar," she said.

Dr Wu Siew Mei, director of the Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore, noted that other varieties besides the standard variety of English have evolved.

She said: "The nature of digital and Internet communication encourages quick responses and the conveying of key information.

"This has affected the shape of language, specifically spelling and sentences that are incomplete or ungrammatical."

However, there are others who say English has not deteriorated but merely evolved.

Mr Yee Tong, 35, director of tuition centre School of Thought, which coaches about 800 students a year, in English and the General Paper, said: "I don't feel it has deteriorated.

"Instead, students now use an Internet-based lan-

Impact of the digital age

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guage which works in that context but which others may not understand or may misunderstand as bad English.

"If students are taught more complex thoughts and content at a younger age, their language abilities will also be elevated," he said.

Many schools have taken the initiative to tailor their own English programmes outside the set curriculum.

Canossa Convent principal Christina Teo and her team of teachers have created an oral skills programme that includes drama skills.

She also gets her pupils to read Little Red Dot, a children's news magazine published by The Straits Times.

Mrs Clara Lim-Tan, principal of CHIJ (Kellock), said its annual Speak Good English Fortnight makes pupils aware of such "taboo" phrases as "pass up your books". (It should be "hand in your books".)

She said: "We have achieved a commendable record of 100 per cent passes for PSLE English Language for more than 10 years."

Teachers and experts agreed that the education system plays only a part – albeit an important one – in inculcating good English.

Said Ms Toh: "I think the school is only a small part of it. In this generation, students have few role models – even the music they listen to may not contain good English.

"Parents should reinforce what is taught by speaking Standard Singapore English with their children at the right time. They should also show their children that the ability to code-switch is admirable. There is nothing shameful about Singlish."

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