

5 | ELT Curriculum Innovations and Strategies for Implementation in Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

Recent changes in the world scenario have compelled many governments and educators to examine current educational practices and programs. Education can enhance the individual in undertaking specific tasks. Education can also contribute to personal and social development by nurturing the desired skills and attitudes that enable the individual to participate effectively in society.

In view of the changes at the national and global levels, many countries including Malaysia has become preoccupied with reviewing the curriculum with a view of equipping students with the basic knowledge and skills needed in an increasingly globalized society. The new economic environment is highly competitive and technology becomes the focus of many curriculum reviews devoted to designing educational programs that would enable young people to be more ready for the job market and at the same time develop the human resources required in ensuring sustainable national development.

With curriculum reviews, there is also a focus on developing new delivery systems. New approaches have been incorporated in these delivery systems and they include Multiple Intelligences (MI), Contextualism, Constructivism, Learning How to Learn, Futures Studies, and Thinking Skills. These approaches appeal to the different abilities, competencies and reasoning abilities of individuals and equip them with the different demands of the globalized workplace.

In this respect, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in its efforts to improve the standards of English is constantly introducing new innovations and teaching learning strategies to meet these challenges. Hence, a special committee spear-headed by the Director General himself was formed to look into the methods of implementing these innovations. The committee comprises all the heads of the various divisions of the MOE. Each division

has been assigned specific tasks to carry out to set objectives.

This paper will also delineate the changes that have taken place in English language teaching (ELT) over the years in Malaysia. It will also examine the forces that entail changes in educational practices and provide examples of policies and programs introduced to address the changes taking place. This paper traces the development of the teaching of the English language in relation to the curriculum and syllabus developments in Malaysia for both primary and secondary schools. It will highlight the various shifts in curriculum emphases over the last few years and support programs introduced to facilitate these changes.

A language teaching syllabus involves the integration of subject matter (what to talk about) and linguistic matter (how to talk about it); that is, the actual matter that makes up teaching. To design a syllabus the trends, visions, needs of the nation, and the theory of language explicitly or implicitly underlying the language teaching method play a major role in determining what syllabus is adopted. In keeping with these developments, the English language syllabus has changed over the years. Before 1975, it was a grammar-based syllabus. In 1975, it was replaced by a communication based syllabus. The skills-based syllabus was then introduced in 1988 before the curriculum was once again reviewed in 2003 where the English syllabus is now a language uses syllabus.

Structural Syllabus (Post-1970)

The period from 1970 to 1990 saw the implementation of the National Education Policy, which led to the conversion of the national type English schools to the national schools, beginning in Grade (Year) 1. Then, it was the government's policy to phase out the English language as the medium of instruction (Foo & Richards, 2004). Also, there was a content syllabus for English for the primary and secondary schools in the country, therefore resulting in a common examination paper for the country. An ad hoc committee was set up (Richards, 1979) to draw up a common content syllabus for the ELT in the national primary schools. This structural syllabus was called *The English Syllabus for Use Standard One to Standard Six of the Post 1970 National Primary Schools* (1971). It was the first common ELT syllabus for use in the schools system in West Malaysia. The same syllabus was also implemented in the national type Chinese and Tamil primary schools. However, in these schools English was introduced only in Standard Three.

The following sets of terminal competencies were expected of students at

the end their primary education during the post-1970.

1. To have oral and aural skills of a level where simple English may be used correctly in a variety of situations.
2. To understand and be able to enjoy simple written English, once given an adequate vocabulary and a range of structures.
3. To write legibly and effectively for simple and informal written communication.

The goal of language teaching was to understand how sentences are used to create different kinds of meaning (Richards, 2002) to master the underlying rules forming sentences from lower-level grammatical units as phrases and clauses, and to practice using them as the basis for written and spoken communication. Practice was viewed as the key to learning, embedded within a methodology with the following features.

1. A specific grammatical feature is isolated or given focused attention.
2. The learners are required to produce sentences containing the targeted feature.
3. The learners will be provided with opportunities for repetition of the targeted feature.
4. There is an expectancy that the learners will perform the grammatical feature correctly, therefore practice activities are success oriented.
5. The learners receive feedback on whether their performance of the grammatical structure is correct or not. This feedback may be immediate or delayed. (Ellis, 2002, p. 168)

The English syllabus for the lower secondary was called *The English Syllabus for Tingkatan/Form I-III of the Secondary Schools in Malaysia* (Kementerian Pelajaran, 1973a). It was also the structural syllabus advocating the use of the structural situational approach to language teaching. At the end of the lower secondary education, students were required to acquire the following competencies.

1. To display oral and aural skills containing a large number of patterns and an extended vocabulary in a variety of situations.
2. To extract the gist of a passage, the stated and inferable details, cause and effect relationships, comparisons and character traits; to classify, outline and sequence ideas and to predict outcomes.
3. To be able to produce a unified piece of writing that displayed structural correctness and a sense of purpose as well as the development of a theme

or idea; to record accurately and correctly notes on what is read and heard.

Students were expected to demonstrate receptive and productive control of the structural items without necessarily being expected to define or name the grammatical terms.

This syllabus was basically a task-oriented, situational syllabus. Although English was now only a second language, the Third Malaysian Plan 1976-1980 recognized the role of English in international trade and commerce as well as the language used in science and technology (Foo & Richards, 2004).

Communicational Syllabus (1975)

From practicing the structural syllabus, the focus changed to the communicational syllabus in the early seventies in order to consolidate changes made in the West, especially in the United Kingdom.

The earlier structural syllabus saw grammatical structures as the underlying units of the language system, whereby they are basically rule-governed. However, the communicational syllabus practiced in Malaysia redefined the focus so that:

1. Meaning or function is emphasized;
2. Contextualization is given due importance;
3. Language learning is learning to communicate;
4. Language is created through repeated trials and errors; and
5. Fluency is primary, whereas accuracy is secondary.

Brown (2001) stated that the distinguishing characteristics of the communicative syllabus were its attention to function as the organizing elements of the English language curriculum, and its contrast with the structural syllabus in which sequenced grammatical structures served as the organizers. In the communicational syllabus, the starting point was communication, and forms are then selected for carrying out the particular act of communication, which is realized in terms of function.

This idea of “releasing teachers and students from their structural chains” (Rodgers, 1984, p. 65) was an act of downplaying the role of grammar where the communicational syllabus did not explicitly mention any grammar items that were required to be highlighted during the English lessons. The expected outcome was more to an ‘embedded understanding’ of the existence of grammar rules.

It was evident that the communicational syllabus was the beginning of a

“probing of the nature of social, cultural, and pragmatic features of language” (Brown, 2001, p. 121). Brown (2001) stated that this syllabus was more to ‘exploring real life communication in the classroom by exposing our students with tools for generating unrehearsed language performance’.

In this communicational based syllabus, the organizational schema saw three broad communicative objectives broken down into twenty-four more specific objectives. These objectives were organized into learning areas, for each of which were specified with a number of outcome goals or products.

These products were defined as a piece of comprehensible information, written, spoken, or presented in a non-linguistic form. For example, a letter, an instruction, a message, or a report, are products produced through information gleaned through language (*The English Language Syllabus in Malaysian Schools*, 1975).

For each product a number of proposed situations are suggested. These situations consist of a set of specifications for learner interactions, the stimuli, communicative context, participants, desired outcomes and constraints. These situations constitute the means by which learner interaction and communicative skills are realized (*The English Language Syllabus in Malaysian Schools*, 1975).

The principal idea behind the development of the 1975 English Language Syllabus was the ability of the students to communicate accurately and effectively in the most common English Language activities that they may have been involved in.

Based on this syllabus, the ability to communicate accurately and effectively was developed in schools by looking at the three entry behaviors. Firstly, the *Low English Proficiency Group* (LEP) underwent compensatory language training to improve grammatical and linguistic competence to enable them to achieve accuracy of communication. The LEP students participated in situations with very simple stimuli and came up with simple products.

Secondly, the *Some English Proficiency Group* (SEP) underwent additional language training to improve grammatical and linguistic competence. They participated in situations with slightly complex stimuli and came up with slightly sophisticated products.

Finally, the third group, the *English Proficiency Group* (EP) was exposed to real situations involving a wide range of communication tasks. This group of students participated in new situations with complex stimuli and came up with sophisticated products that indicated their mastery of extended vocabulary and subtleties of the English language.

Skill-Based Syllabus (1983)

In line with the National Education Policy which focuses on the spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual development of our students, the *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah – KBSR* (Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools) and the *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah – KBSM* (Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools) were implemented in 1983 and 1987, respectively.

For the English language, the communicational syllabus was replaced by one, which can be referred to as a thematic syllabus, where emphasis was placed on the teaching of oracy skills (listening and speaking) and literacy skills (reading and writing) within a specified scope of themes ranging from what is immediate and familiar to the students' knowledge and experience, to what is remote and unfamiliar, in order to prepare students for life and living.

At primary school level, this syllabus aimed to equip students with basic skills and knowledge of the English language so as to enable them to communicate, both orally and in writing, in and out of school. They should have been able to listen to and understand simple spoken English, and respond clearly and appropriately. They should also have been able to read and understand different kinds of texts for enjoyment and information, and write for different purposes and forms using simple language.

As they progressed into secondary school, the syllabus aimed to build upon and extend the proficiency of the students from the primary school, so as to equip them with the skills and knowledge of English to communicate in certain everyday activities and job situations, as well as to provide them with the language needs and requirement of post secondary school, primarily at tertiary level.

By the end of this stage and level, students should have been able to listen to and understand spoken English in any situation, speak effectively on a variety of topics; read, understand and enjoy literature, and write effectively for different purposes.

Most important, they should have been equipped with the communicational ability and the competency to perform language functions. And they should have become more engaged as learners, better prepared for further studies, and better equipped to enter the work world.

The scope for the selection of topics was specified by themes ranging from what is immediate and familiar to the students' knowledge and experience, such as the things we see around us, the family, community and country to what is remote and unfamiliar, such as the region and the world beyond. These themes provide the context through which the language

skills and language content were to be taught in an integrated manner.

The skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing were outlined with scopes of sub-skills and focus in which to concentrate the instilling and building of these 4 main language skills. Teachers were encouraged to integrate the skills needed to complete a given task in accordance with the appropriate scopes in the teaching-learning process; language skills and sub-skills are integrated in a progression that reflects their use in natural contexts.

This syllabus made allowances for students to assume a dominant participatory role in the learning process and in the acquiring of the 4 main language skills. Provisions for this was to create opportunities for individual, paired, group and class work where the students were able to use more than one of the four language skills whether consciously or sub-consciously.

The rationale for adopting the integrated or multi-skills approach is that this approach reflects authentic language use, where more than one skill is employed. Also, it leads to more effective learning because it is conducive to the inclusion of variety in language teaching. Moreover, it facilitates the reinforcement of learning since a particular sub-skill can be taught by using more than one mode.

Among the issues in English language teaching that has generated the most discussion in the past thirty years has been that concerning the extent to which grammar should be made explicit to language learners (Halliday, 1973). This was also the stand of those who were inspired by the writings of Chomsky (1957, 1959, 1965) who viewed language learning as hypothesis formation and rule acquisition.

The KBSR/KBSM English Language Syllabus, however, is contradictory to this in that it specified that grammar should be taught in context. From being the center of the pedagogic plan, grammar assumed a secondary role. This is so, that learning grammar becomes more meaningful and relevant to students, and thus, would make its implementation and usage more effective (Rutherford, 1978).

Hence, grammar was not the main focus of the teaching-learning activities, but rather, it was used as a tool for the acquisition of language skills. In the KBSR/KBSM English Language Syllabus, grammar items were not taught in isolation or as discrete items. In a thematic organization, a particular topic would be selected, and items from the lists of grammar and functions would then be matched to the topic (Pillay & North, 1997). Hence, the sound system and word list which forms part of the content of this English language syllabus is taught through words taken from the context of the topics that were determined and these are then interwoven

into the lesson, so that they are seen as being part of a picture and not parts of a jigsaw puzzle.

Language Use Syllabus (2003)

With changes and challenges occurring in areas of communication, technology, higher education, commerce and industry, the English language curriculum in Malaysian schools has to be changed in tandem. The most recent revision of the English language curriculum was in year 2003 with the introduction of the language use syllabus. The differences between the 1983 syllabus and that of 2003, for secondary schools are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Comparison of the 1983 and 2003 Syllabus

<i>1983 Syllabus</i>	<i>2003 Syllabus</i>
The 1983 syllabus focuses on 4 learning skills – listening, speaking, reading, writing.	The 2003 syllabus focuses on 3 domains – interpersonal, informational and aesthetic.
The syllabus has 11 themes.	The syllabus has 5 themes – more in line with 21st century needs (people, environment, social issues, health, science and technology).
The word list given is based on themes.	A running word list is introduced.
There was no compulsory literature component.	Compulsory literature component forms part of the syllabus.

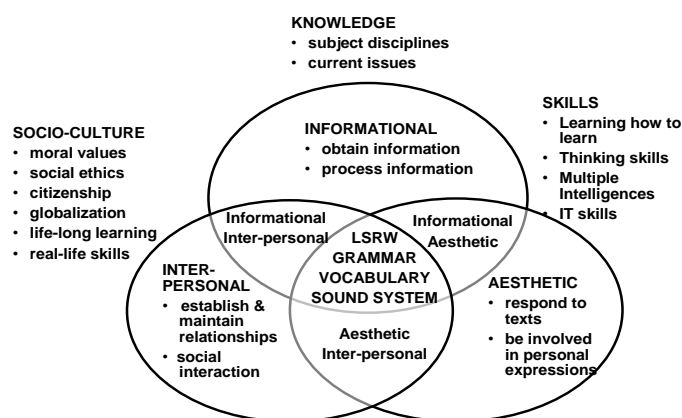
Other salient features of the 2003 syllabus are:

- grammar is taught in context;
- there are 3 levels of skills in the Syllabus Specification. Learners have to master the first level of skill before moving on to the next; and
- new education emphases are included such as Information Communication Technology (ICT), thinking skills, etc.

Figure 1 depicts how the current syllabus is portrayed inline with the current trends and approaches introduced for the teaching and learning of English in Malaysia.

The domain of using language for Interpersonal purposes therefore, requires learners to learn to establish and maintain relationships with one another as well as use the language to solve problems with others, make

FIGURE 1



decisions with others, and to transact for services, goods, etc. Interpersonal skills are defined as the ability to interact with others, understand them, and interpret their behaviors in particular changes in modes, motivation and intentions. On the other hand, using language in the domain of Informational purposes, requires learners to gather information from a variety of sources, process the information, and present the information to a variety of audiences.

The Aesthetic purposes domain requires learners to appreciate and respond to literary texts and express their ideas, thoughts beliefs and feelings creatively and imaginatively.

These three domains will help make up a wholesome student and it is hoped with an expansion of these domains. Similar experiences can be taken into the workplace to be expanded and adapted to suit the needs of the environment.

The inclusion of learning outcomes in the curriculum is crucial. Learning outcomes are actual statements to guide teachers in teaching and are based on the objectives of the syllabus. The learning outcomes take into account how language is used in the everyday life of the society; for the purposes of interacting with people, of getting information and enjoying a good book or film. Thus, it is based on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

In using the language to achieve these purposes, the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are brought into play and these are inter-related and integrated. In oral communication, international intelligibility is the target to strive for and the use of correct grammar is emphasized both in speech and in writing.

The Language Content of the curriculum comprises the grammar of the English language, the sound system and the word list to guide teachers. The grammar forms part of the language content in the syllabus. The grammar items listed in the syllabus specifications are taught over five years of secondary schooling. These items need to be taught in context and in a meaningful way. This can be done through a selection of the items required to teach language for Interpersonal, Informational and Aesthetic purposes. The grammar items should not be taught in isolation or as discrete items as far as possible.

The English sound system forms part of the Language Contents of the syllabus. The items listed in the syllabus specifications are taught over five years of secondary schooling to help students pronounce words correctly, with correct word stress and at the same time to speak with correct intonation and rhythm. In this respect, the words chosen must be appropriate to the context and topic of the lesson.

The word list forms part of the language contents of the syllabus. The word list for primary school takes off from the suggested word list which includes some key words that must be mastered by all learners according to their stages of development. In the Curriculum Specifications for Year 1 to Year 6, words to be learnt are categorized under the different areas of interest/topic to facilitate teaching and learning. However, the words specified in the suggested word list represent the minimum core of words to be learnt and teachers are greatly encouraged to expand upon the list according to the level and ability of their learners. These are spelt out in detail in the Curriculum Specifications for Form 1 through to Form 5.

The current developments in education require that learners prepare themselves for the real world. In line with globalization and the ICT age, skills relating to ICT are incorporated to prepare learners for the work place and social life. Thus, educational emphases such as Thinking skills, Learning How to Learn skills, Multiple Intelligences, Knowledge Acquisition and Preparation for the Real World are embedded in the curriculum.

Support programs were introduced by the MOE of Malaysia to enhance the teaching and learning of English. The demand for change in education is to ensure that the system accomplishes the goals of educating students in

various academic or cognitive skills, acquaint them with various fields of knowledge, and educate them in the development of the individual by providing them with the social skills necessary to function as a good citizen and as a productive worker in society.

In this respect, the MOE in its efforts to improve the standards of English is constantly introducing new innovations and teaching learning strategies to meet these challenges. Hence, a special committee spear-headed by the Director General himself was formed to look into the methods of implementing these innovations. The committee comprises all the heads of the various divisions of the MOE. Each division has been assigned specific tasks to carry out to set the set objectives.

The Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), MOE, for example, designed programs to support the English language curriculum, such as the reading programs, the introduction of literature in English, the production of teaching courseware, and the native speaker project.

As for co-curricular activities to enhance students' proficiency in the English language the Schools Division too conducts numerous activities which include debates, choral speaking, and drama.

In addition, the government also pilots testing a program called ELiTE to tackle the problem of acquiring maths and science in English at the grassroot level which is Year 1. Students under this program are taught early literacy skills using the content of maths and science for the first six months in Year 1. This again requires maths, science and English teachers to work together.

By sending more English language teachers to remote schools and providing opportunities for teachers in these schools to participate in professional development courses, it is hoped that the gap between the urban and rural schools will be narrowed. With this it is evident that the demand for English teachers will always be there.

CONCLUSION

Consolidating these needs, the MOE is aware that the schooling experience needs to prepare students for the real world. In order to do this, students need to be equipped with thinking skills, ICT knowledge, knowledge acquisition techniques and values. To design a curriculum that entails these elements, the CDC has too also take into consideration the socio-culture, knowledge and skills that are already out there.

The future English language curriculum may need to look into complex

thinking and the growth of the brain. Teachers must design learning around student interests and make learning contextual. We must look for new ways of seeing and new benchmarks which will enable us to appreciate both the global issues facing humanity and the local environments in which we live, and to combine the two.

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