

TEACHING THE LOWER SECONDARY SYLLABUS: WHAT MATTERS MOST?

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The teacher of Form One pupils in the lower secondary school — at least the average school — is usually faced with a dilemma: on the one hand, a lengthy syllabus of grammatical items which need to be taught or retaught; and classes of pupils (whether streamed or unstreamed) who may have been taught the primary school English syllabus but who certainly haven't learnt much of it: indeed many of them are still virtual beginners in English.

One solution which certain teachers have been known to adopt, is to divide up the year's work in the Record Book according to the chapters of the textbook the school uses; then to push and pull the children through the programme, probably using a great deal of translation so as to 'finish' the textbook by the end of the year. Well, formally speaking, a teacher who does this is safe from criticism: the children have 'done' the book. But, much more seriously, how much English have they learned in the process? Are they not even more convinced that English is an impossibly difficult language, which they will never be able to speak or understand, and that it is better to concentrate on other subjects where they have some chance of success?

Let us look again at the Year One English syllabus in terms of our pupils' abilities to learn. The Teacher's Handbook contains much sound advice for the teacher; but neither the Teacher's Handbook or the Syllabus itself gives any advice about which items of the syllabus are most important; nor is this always reflected in the textbooks.

Most teachers of English would agree that the biggest headache for Malaysian learners centres on the English verb system (with pronouns and prepositions in second and third place). The lower secondary school syllabus covers a wide variety of tenses in Year One. Of these, two are absolutely crucial: the Simple Present Tense and the Simple Past Tense. (Both occur in Unit 2.) Year One also prescribes: the Present Continuous Tense; the Present Perfect; the Present Perfect Continuous; the Past Continuous and five different ways of expressing future time.

My suggestion is that, with weak pupils at least, only two of these tenses are worth concentrating on: the Simple Present and the Simple Past. Why? For four reasons: **Frequency**; **Reading Power**; **Communicative Needs** and **Examination Requirements**. Let me explain what I mean by each of these four headings.

Frequency. Linguists who have made word counts of the frequency of English tenses have shown without doubt that the Simple Present and Simple Past tenses are much more often used than any of the others. The Simple Present tense is in fact difficult to demonstrate in the classroom, while the Present Continuous tense is easy to demonstrate. Many teachers are therefore tempted by convenience to spend more time on 'What is he doing?' than: 'What does he do?', which is more difficult to represent. Nevertheless, this may be a wrong emphasis.

Reading Power. This is really an argument for teaching the Simple Past tense early and for spending a lot of time practising it. The reason is that most reading materials, especially simplified readers, are written in the narrative or 'story' form. Stories told in the 'present' time tend to be aimed at very young children and are (quite rightly) rejected by secondary school pupils. Simple readers on appropriate subject matter and at the right

level of linguistic difficulty are a marvellous opportunity for extending contact with English outside the classroom. There is plenty of evidence that Malaysian pupils will read avidly in English and in their free time, if suitably simple, and attractive, reading material is available to them. But, as most reading is in narrative form, they have to understand the Simple Past tense!

Communicative Needs. Here we are dealing with what a child wants to express, when his or her command of the language is still very limited. In Pidgin English one can use the Simple Present and nothing else: eg 'I go, I come back'. If we want our pupils to do better than this, they must be able to refer to past time. One can manage without the future, eg 'Tomorrow I go to Melaka'; and also without the Present Perfect tense: 'I already did it' is almost standard usage in the United States. On the other hand, 'I go already' or: 'I do it already' do not make the speaker's meaning really clear.

Examination Requirements. The shadow of the SRP exam looms over the curriculum of the lower secondary school. In many schools, pupils in Year One are already being trained in examination techniques of answering multiple-choice questions etc. I certainly don't wish to overemphasize the importance of examination requirements; Year One seems rather early to be focusing on this. Nevertheless I thought it would be interesting to see what the Examination Syndicate required of Form III pupils in terms of verb tenses, by analysing parts of the examination for the years 1977–1979. The findings are given below.

Paper II (Bahasa Inggeris Bahagian II) is divided into three parts, all compulsory. In 1978 the candidate was told that there would be 10 marks for each part (or question) and was advised to divide his time equally among the three; in 1977 and 1979 these instructions however did not appear.

Question 1. Write, 'in not fewer than 100 words':

- a letter of regret and explanation as to why the writer is unable to attend a friend's wedding (1979).
- a reply to a letter from a friend in which the writer is required to congratulate him on his new home and suggest how he might decorate his (study) bedroom (1977).
- a narrative description based on a sketch map with timings of how the writer spent a day in the country with two friends. (1978).

Conclusion. The questions in 1977 and 1979 probably require a mixture of tenses, with the Simple Present tense prevailing; the 1978 question would inescapably require the Simple Past.

Question 2 of the paper consists of a piece of expository prose which has to be summarized 'in not more than 75 words'. In 1977, the passage — on rural-urban migration — is entirely in the Simple Present, except for two verbs in the Simple Past. In 1978 the count is reversed: in a passage on the formation of tribes and clans, 17 verbs are in the Simple Past, 2 in the Simple Present and there are 9 modal verb phrases (6 using **would** with habitual meaning; 3 using **might**).

In 1979 the passage dealt with soil erosion: every single verb is in the Simple Present (including passives) except one: a **will** Future form.

Conclusion

The Simple Present and Simple Past tenses between them predominate by as much as 90% in this type of question.

Question 3 in each paper requires the candidate to 'write a story of about 100 words' based on the framework provided. In all three cases the framework incorporates the Simple Past tense and it would be impossible to answer the question in any other way.

Conclusion. A command of the Simple Past tense is essential for answering this question, which represents one third of the exam paper.

Paper I of the SRP exam consists of 70 multiple-choice items: items 1–20 are based on 'grammar and usage'; items 20–40 (ie 2/7 of the whole paper) concentrate exclusively on the verb phrases (or parts of them) occurring as gaps in a piece of narrative or expository writing. The coverage of items tested is heavily influenced by the type of passage selected. Over the three years the Simple Past is tested 16 times and the Simple Present 13 times; the Present Continuous twice; the **will** Future once; and the Present Perfect not at all. (There is also one verb form which defeats my analysis: **was gone**.) The analysis is set out in full at the end of this article.

Overall Conclusion. Because of their communicative power; high frequency in speech and writing; and because of the content of the SRP exam over the last three years, the most important tenses both for recognition and production are the Simple Present and the Simple Past. We should therefore give maximum attention to these two tenses in our schemes of work in the lower secondary school, even if this means that we don't give so much time to certain other items on the Syllabus.

SRP Paper II Items 21 – 40 (1977–1979)

TENSE FORMS	1977	1978	1979	TOTAL
SIMPLE PAST	9	2	1	12
Simple Past Emphatic	1	—	—	1
Simple Past Passive	1	2	—	3
SIMPLE PRESENT	1	5	6	12
Simple Present Passive	—	—	1	1
PAST CONTINUOUS	2	1	—	3
PRESENT CONTINUOUS	—	—	1	1
Present Continuous Passive	—	1	—	1
PAST PERFECT	1	1	—	2
'WILL' FUTURE	—	1	—	1
MODALS				
Can + infinitive	—	1	4	5
Could + infinitive	—	2	—	2
Must + infinitive	—	—	1	1
Had + infinitive	—	1	—	1
Might + infinitive	—	—	1	1
Would + infinitive (Conditional)	1	—	—	1
OTHERS				
PRESENT PARTICIPLE	2	2	1	5
PAST PARTICIPLE	—	1	1	2
GERUND (-ING after verbs)	1	—	2	3
Infinitive of Purpose	—	—	1	1
'was gone'	1	—	—	1
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	20	20	20	60