

## THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE SYLLABUS FOR THE YEAR 2000 AND BEYOND

### Lessons from the Views of Teachers

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the results of a study conducted to assess the attitudes of English (ESL) secondary school teachers in the state of Selangor towards the different aspects of the KBSM English Language syllabus. The purpose of this study was to determine which aspects of the syllabus the teachers favour and which they do not, so that suggestions could be made for the improvement of the English language programme.

The subjects for this study were randomly selected from a complete and current listing of all the English teachers teaching in the state of Selangor, and a self-developed questionnaire was used to assess their views towards the different aspects of the KBSM English Syllabus. Of the 600 questionnaires sent, 435 were returned but only 419 were usable for the study, representing a return rate of 70%.

This paper discusses the views of the teachers and the issues they raised. It also raises several questions as to what should be the most important focus for the Malaysian English language syllabus in view of the importance of English for the acquisition of knowledge. The implications of the study are discussed and several recommendations for policy makers made.

When a language syllabus is adopted for the purposes of implementation, the assumption is that it will influence what happens in the classroom. Whether this influence, in fact, takes place, depends on whether or not teachers' beliefs pertaining to the subject they teach match the assumptions inherent in the new syllabi. (Richardson, 1990; Hollingsworth, 1989). Attempts at syllabus implementation must thus take into account teachers' beliefs and attitudes concerning aspects of the subject to be taught. If teachers' views as to what constitutes effective teaching were contrary to that which is embodied in a syllabus, it would be unlikely that they would implement the innovation with enthusiasm, thoroughness, and persistence (Clark & Peterson, 1986).

This paper discusses the results of a study that was conducted primarily to assess the views of ESL teachers in Selangor towards the KBSM English Language Secondary School Syllabus. The purpose of this study was to determine which aspects of the syllabus the teachers favour and which they do not, so that suggestions could be made for the improvement of the English language programme for Malaysian schools.

## **The Theoretical Bases for Language Teaching**

To provide a backdrop for understanding the perceptions of the English teachers towards the KBSM English Language Syllabus, it would be useful to enter into a discussion of some of the most widely discussed issues in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) and review some methodological trends over the past thirty years.

## **The Role of Grammar in Language Teaching**

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). Indeed, the role of grammar in language teaching has been the subject of intense debate; and the major approaches to language teaching have greatly differed regarding whether explicit grammar instruction has a role to play in the second or foreign language classroom.

The role of grammar in language teaching, however, has not always been a source of controversy. In fact, for almost 2,500 years of recorded language teaching (Rutherford, 1978) and right up to about three decades ago (Celce-Murcia, 1991), it was grammar that was the central focus of language teaching. This had been the thrust of several approaches to language teaching such as the Oral approach, developed by British applied linguists such as Hornby and Palmer, which placed emphasis on carefully selecting grammatical structures from the basic to the more complex and the audio-lingual approach - more popular in America - whose primary teaching methodology involved the use of language drills and the memorization of dialogues. This was also the position of those who were inspired by the writings of Chomsky (1957; 1959; 1965) who viewed language learning as hypothesis formation and rule acquisition. Grammar was considered important, and grammar rules were taught. In the mid-1970's, however, with the emergence of the Communicative Approach to language teaching, questions regarding the extent to which grammar should occupy a place in language teaching began to be raised. Those who subscribe to this approach are of the view that communication is the goal of second or foreign language teaching.

The developments in the past thirty years reflect the changes in views regarding grammar and the emphasis to be given to grammar in language teaching. From being the center of the pedagogic plan (Rutherford, 1978), grammar assumed a secondary, and sometimes even nonexistent, role.

The changes in views regarding the role in grammar in language teaching have brought about changes in language teaching and syllabus design. Language syllabi reflected a shift from concern over the formal properties of language to a view of language as primarily, a vehicle of communication.

Language syllabus development in Malaysia also seems to have followed the developments in the field. The older syllabi that stressed rules of grammar gave way to the communicational Syllabus that dealt with the situational or communicative use of language, and finally, to the KBSM English Language Syllabus that is currently being implemented.

The response of language teachers to a change in syllabus from a more traditional, grammar-based syllabus to a communicative one has not always been favourable (Etherton, 1979; Nayar, 1984; Mountford, 1981, as quoted in Young, 1984). This is also quite evident from our experience with the Communicational Syllabus, implemented in the 1970's, which many teachers were unhappy with (Etherton, 1979; Gaudart, 1986).

One of the reasons why many teachers were dissatisfied with the Communicational Syllabus was that it didn't make explicit references to grammar. The only "content" specified throughout the syllabus were the situations according to which language activities were to be planned. This made the teachers feel that "the students were not learning anything", that they were merely involved in role-plays upon role plays, and that those who were responsible for adopting the syllabus were merely "jumping on the bandwagon" (Mohd Asraf, 1995). Indeed, according to Rodgers (1984), the earlier Communicational Syllabus intentionally downplayed the role of grammar, and this was justified by the designers as "releasing teachers and students from their structural chains" (Rodgers, 1984, p. 6).

### **The KBSM English Language Syllabus**

The Communicational Syllabus has since been replaced by our present syllabus, the KBSM English Language Secondary School Syllabus. The KBSM English Language Secondary School Syllabus, which can be referred to as a notional-functional syllabus, has its theoretical base in the communicative approach. Its intent is to equip students with communicational ability and a competency to perform language functions, using correct language forms and structures. While the "Communicational Syllabus" did not explicitly mention any grammatical items to be highlighted, the KBSM English Language Syllabus lists an inventory of grammatical items, vocabulary, punctuation, and aspects of the sound system that the teacher may highlight should the topic being covered lend its elf to it.

Unlike a grammar-based syllabus, which arranges syllabus content according to grammatical items, the KBSM English Language Syllabus is arranged according to themes which are drawn from familiar contexts; for example, the contexts of the home and school, the community, and so on. These themes provide the context through which the language skills and language content are to be taught in an integrated manner.

### **The Teachers' Perceptions Towards the KBSM English Language Syllabus**

While reactions towards the Communicational Syl]abus have been amply documented (Etherton, 1979; Gaudart, 1986; Rodgers, 1984) little is known as to how teachers feel about the different aspects of the KBSM English Language Syllabus. The study thus set about to assess their views. Due to limitations of time and space, only a part of the study will be presented in this paper. The issues that the teachers were asked to give their opinions on reflect some of the major concerns regarding the teaching of language in general and language syllabi in particular:

#### **1. The Teaching of Grammar in Context**

While the Communicational Syllabus did not specify the grammar items to be taught, the KBSM syllabus does specify that Grammar should be taught - but preferably, in context. Hence, grammar is not the main focus of the teaching activity, but rather, a tool for language use. The teachers were asked if they feel that the teaching of grammar in context would enable the learner to learn English effectively.

## 2. The Organization of Syllabus Content According to Themes

Another area of major concern regarding language syllabi is the organization of syllabus content. Indeed, the issue of the organization of syllabus content according to functions has been a subject of intense debate in the field of ESL. While the traditional, grammar-based syllabus was organized according to grammar items, the Notional-Functional syllabus is organized according to functions, which can be understood as what one wants to do with language. Among those who are opposed to a notional/functional approach is Paulston (1981) who argued that:

language forms are generative while notions are not, and since one cannot in fact divorce function from form in language, it makes more sense...to organize a syllabus along linguistic forms which can generate infinite meanings and many functions, rather than to organize the content along a finite list of functions. (p. 42).

Rutherford (1978) and Brumfit (1984) point out that the organization of syllabus content along a list of functions results in the lack of systematicity in the teaching of form, thus making it difficult for the learner to form generalizations that can help him or her to progress from one stage to the next. Brumfit (1981) argues that "we learn by systematizing...that we are more likely to learn effectively what can be perceived as a system than what can only be perceived as unrelated items" (pp. 90-91),

The study thus set about to determine whether or not the teachers feel the organization of the KBSM English Language syllabus according to themes would enable the learner to learn the language effectively.

## 3. Aims of Teaching the Language

The third issue which the teachers were asked to give their opinions on, pertained to their perception of syllabus aims. Do they consider the aims of the syllabus to be suitable for the needs of the students? What do they consider to be the appropriate aims of teaching English in Malaysia?

The goal of the present English syllabus, the KBSM English Language Syllabus, is "to equip them [the students] with the skills and knowledge of English to communicate in certain everyday activities and certain job situations; and also to provide points of take-off for various post-secondary school needs" (KBSM English Language syllabus, Form 3, p.1). No mention is made, however, as to what is meant by "certain everyday activities", "certain job situations", and "various post-secondary school needs". The goal of the syllabus has been left vague.

The goals of teaching the language, have to be clearly stated in the syllabus. It is from these aims that objectives are derived, and activities subsequently planned. A lack of clarity in the statement of aims makes it difficult to determine the level of proficiency expected of the learners. It would also result in the lack of direction in teaching activities. It is for this reason that I decided to include items on the

aims of the syllabus in the questionnaire. The teachers were asked what they feel the appropriate aims of teaching English in Malaysia should be.

#### **4. Efficiency of the syllabus**

The final major issue which the teachers were asked to give their opinions on, pertained to the efficiency of the syllabus. Brumfit (1984), for example, mentions that in designing a syllabus, the designer actually organizes and specifies what is to be taught in a body of materials to enable the learning of a language to be as effective as possible. He states that a syllabus must be goal-directed to achieve certain objectives. The teachers were also asked if they consider the syllabus to be effective in helping the students increase their proficiency in the language.

#### **Methodology**

This study utilized a self-developed questionnaire to assess the teachers' perceptions towards the Malaysian English Language Secondary School Syllabus. The teachers' responses to the open-ended questions were also used in the description of their views. The purpose of including these open-ended questions was to allow the teachers to voice their views about the syllabus; views that may not have been captured by any of the items. It was also aimed at allowing the teachers to expand on and to clarify their responses to any of the items in the questionnaire. Including the teachers' written responses to the statements would thus enable the reader to hear the "voices of the teachers" themselves.

#### **Reliability and Validity**

To ensure the validity of the teachers' responses, careful attention was paid to questionnaire construction and questionnaire administration. The validity of the teachers' responses also depended very much on the extent to which they reflect the teachers' honest opinions. Here it is stressed that the questionnaire had assured the respondents of anonymity, and thus was used in a situation in which the teachers could be expected to tell the truth about their opinions. Reliability of the questionnaire was established by test-retest reliability.

#### **Population and Sample**

The population to which the results were generalized is the responses of all ESL secondary school teachers in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. The subjects that provided the sample of teacher responses were randomly selected from a complete and current list of names of all the teachers teaching English in all the secondary schools in the state of Selangor by the simple random sampling technique.

#### **Confidence Intervals**

To address the question, "What are the teachers' perceptions towards the different aspects of the KBSM English Language Secondary School Syllabus?", 95% confidence intervals were calculated on the true proportion of teachers who agreed (that is, those who strongly agreed and those who agreed) with each item on the questionnaire. The calculation of confidence intervals will allow the reader to infer, from the results, the proportion (and hence, the percentage) of ESL teachers in the state of Selangor who agreed to the statements.

### **Minimum sample size**

Although a minimum sample size of 384 is required to calculate confidence intervals for this study, and a minimum sample size of 419 is required to test hypotheses, a total of 600 subjects were selected to take into account the generally low rate of return of mail questionnaires. Of the 600 questionnaires sent, 419 were returned. The 419 completed questionnaires that were used in the study represents a return rate of 70%.

### **Summary of Results**

The teachers were asked their views regarding several aspects of the K.BSM syllabus. The issues which they were asked to give their opinions on are based on several major issues in the field.

Below is a summary of the results of the study. The teachers' responses on the questionnaire and their responses to the open-ended questions, of whom 246 teachers chose to respond, were used in the discussion and interpretation of the results. These responses represent the unedited comments of the teachers, and were selected based on how much they have captured the essence of the teachers' views.

#### **The value placed on the teaching and learning of grammar.**

One of the most persistent findings of this study is the value that the teachers placed on the teaching and learning of grammar. Analysis of the items on the questionnaire and the voluntary written responses showed that this was the view of the majority of the teachers. 96% of the teachers were of the view that it is important for the students to learn grammar, and 90% of the teachers who wrote their comments urged that the syllabus places greater emphasis on grammar. The teachers were of the view that it is important to teach grammar because grammar is a fundamental aspect of language.

#### **The teaching of grammar in context.**

Regarding the teaching of grammar in context, 92% of the teachers felt that it is sometimes necessary to spend an entire period on grammar, and only a relatively low percentage (31%) felt that grammar should be taught in context. Many teachers commented:

"I suggest that grammar be taught straightforward, not indirectly (as it is currently suggested), because students sometimes cannot see what you want them to see, or take a very long time to see it."

"I feel that grammar should not be integrated while teaching the language because by doing so it may confuse students. Grammar must be taught separately so that students are confident to use the language."

"Grammar should be taught in isolation as well as integrated into the lesson. Students must have a reference point, an overall concept. Sometimes grammar has to be learned and not just acquired."

"Grammar items shouldn't only be taught incidentally. Students should be taught what are nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, etc. so that they can learn how to construct a sentence."

### **The Teachers' Views Regarding the Organization of the Syllabus according to Topics or Themes.**

57% of the teachers agreed to item 12, "The organization of the syllabus into themes and functions makes it difficult to teach language items (that is, grammar, etc.) systematically". Item 12 goes to the heart of the difference between the grammar-based syllabus and the notional-functional syllabus and the controversy surrounding the organization of their contents (see Paulston, 1981; Rutherford, 1978; Brumfit, 1984). It was argued that the organization of the syllabus according to functions would result in the lack of systematicity in the teaching of form, thus making it difficult for the learner to form generalizations that would help him or her in the learning of language forms.

Regarding the issue of organizing the syllabus according to themes and functions, some teachers commented:

"The syllabus today focuses more on themes and functions. It says that we should teach grammar indirectly. However, I found this not effective in many cases. I think we should focus on grammar. This way, students can master the English grammar easier."

"I feel that the syllabus should not be organized into themes as we are not teaching history or geography. I believe we should emphasize the teaching of grammar and its rules."

"A big disadvantage of having a syllabus organized according to themes is that we can only cover grammar superficially. There is not enough room for repetition and reinforcement. In the old days, students were given more opportunities to practise and thus, many were able to become grammatically proficient."

### **The Teachers' Views Regarding the Aims of Teaching English.**

Many teachers felt that the syllabus, in stressing the communicative aspect of the language, does not enable the student to become proficient in the language.

"The primary focus should be to extend the proficiency of the students from the present rather myopic communicative objectives. Being able to communicate in everyday situations does not provide the impetus for our students to learn the language effectively."

"Teaching English merely as a means of communicating with other people has resulted in the poor standard of English that we see in Malaysian schools today. Equal emphasis should be placed on grammar units and being able to speak and write grammatically. And this should start right from the first day the child is in school." Indeed, the majority of the teachers who voluntarily responded to the open-ended questions stated, in strong terms, that they view grammatical proficiency as being the most appropriate aims of the syllabus:

"Being an international language, English should be regarded as one of the most desirable languages to be mastered. In view of its importance in international trade and relations, it should be learnt seriously. Grammatical proficiency should be an ultimate goal in English learning as it lends clarity to expression."

"English should be a strong second language in this country. Language cannot be learned without its grammar. Therefore, the primary focus for teaching English should be towards grammatical proficiency. Ask the old-timers. They had grammar. They have confidence in speaking in English. I feel that if there is emphasis on grammar, our students will be able to use the language confidently."

"I feel that the teaching of grammar should be given importance. The current syllabus stresses only on communication and not on grammar. Trying to teach English without teaching grammar is like trying to erect a building without its foundation. One day it will collapse."

Many teachers felt that English should be viewed as an important tool for acquiring knowledge, and that reading should form the primary focus of the syllabus:

"Reading should be the primary focus as our students do not need to speak English in order to 'survive'."

"The primary focus for teaching English should be as a means of acquiring knowledge. The lackadaisical attitude of aiming for the spoken [form] and just for the purposes of communication only tends to induce a negative attitude towards learning of the language."

"1. Students should be able to use the language to express themselves in speech and in writing; not just in its pidginised form but accurately. They need it at work later.

2. Students should be able to read effectively to attain knowledge.

3. The syllabus should not cater just for the general populace but also for those who will need it desperately for tertiary education if Malaysia is to stay competitive in a global sense."



## Teachers' Views Regarding the Effectiveness of the Syllabus

The majority of the teachers surveyed (69.4%) felt that the syllabus will enable the pupils to achieve at least a minimum competency in English. A lower percentage (41.5%) agreed that the syllabus is successful in helping pupils communicate in English in informal, everyday situations, and even fewer (27.9%) agreed that the syllabus will enable the pupils to have a good command of English.

**Table 1:  
Teachers' Views as to Whether the Syllabus  
Is Successful In Achieving its Aims**

Item	% undecided	% who agreed	95% C.I. on P
33. The syllabus is successful in helping pupils communicate in English in informal, everyday situations.	16.0	41.5	(36.5, 46.5)
34. The syllabus will enable the pupils to achieve a minimum competency in English.	11.2	69.4	(64.4, 74.4)
35. The syllabus will enable the pupils to have a good command of English.	20.8	27.9	(22.9, 33.9)

As Table 1 indicates, a substantially high number of teachers were undecided on these items. Analysis of the written responses indicates that the majority of those who were undecided were of the opinion that the syllabus is not the only factor that contributes toward a student's language proficiency. Below is the voice of one of the teachers who subscribed to this view:

"The syllabus is not the only thing that lets a student to have a good command of the language. Students' background and environment, and their attitudes toward learning the language are major factors in helping students have a good command of the language."

However, the majority of the teachers felt that the syllabus is not successful in achieving its aims. These teachers were of the view that the syllabus is a major factor in contributing towards a student's language proficiency. In response to the item, "The syllabus is successful in helping pupils communicate in English in informal, everyday situations", these teachers said:

"The aims of the 'former' communicative syllabus, have been achieved. However, being able to communicate (in this case being able to be understood) should not be our only terminal objective (I believe we should strive for proficiency). From this point of view the syllabus has failed miserably." "In my five years of teaching this subject I find that generally a student can communicate in informal situations. But when it comes to

written work or reading, the same student does not produce the work that is expected of a person who can speak the language quite well."

Most of the teachers who provided written feedback were of the view that if the syllabus is merely aimed at enabling the students to communicate with one another in English (where they defined communication as being able to be understood), then the syllabus is successful in achieving its aims. However, when it comes to enabling the student to achieve grammatical proficiency, many were of the view that the syllabus has failed. In response to statement 35, "The syllabus will enable the students to have a good command of the language", these teachers said:

"The students are not exposed to the grammar rules at all. They are expected to learn the rules as they use the language. It would be better if the students are exposed to the basic rules of grammar and the different parts of speech. Consequently, they would be able to use the language more freely." "The creole form of English that is used is giving students the impression that they are good when they are not. When they join the work force - both private or government sector - they face the monumental task of learning the proper form. This is the feedback I get from all my students, in schools, in local and foreign universities and those who are at work." "Command of the language can only be achieved through systematic exposure to the rules of grammar."

### **Other Issues Raised by the Teachers.**

One of the major issues that the teachers raised through their written responses was the issue of how the students, in general, lack proficiency in the language, despite having been taught under the syllabus for many years. The teachers also stated that many ESL teachers themselves are not proficient in the language, and emphasized the importance of having proficient teachers. Finally, the teachers also pointed out how the examination system still primarily tests for grammatical proficiency when the syllabus is aimed at developing communicational ability in the learner.

### **What Should the Malaysian English Language Syllabus Look Like in the Year 2000 and Beyond?**

The views voiced by the teachers present perceptive and insightful arguments as to what "works" with regard to the teaching of English and what doesn't. The issues they have raised need to be looked into, and should be regarded as feedback regarding the syllabus. Our current English syllabus is based on a certain approach to language teaching that is currently favoured in the field of ESL. But is it the most suitable approach for the needs of Malaysian students"? Are there changes that could be made to improve the English Language Programme for Malaysian schools? What should the syllabus focus on? What should it look like in the future?

First, we need to ask ourselves what we are aiming for. What is our aim of teaching English? Do we want to teach English so that our students will be able to converse with one another in English? Do we want to teach English so that our students will eventually be able to converse with the tourists that come into our country? Or do we want to teach English as a means for acquiring knowledge?

One does not have to read the newspapers too closely to realize that there seems to be overwhelming concern from many quarters regarding the declining standard of English among young Malaysians. Even with Malay as the National Language and medium of instruction in schools, English still seems to play a very important role in the country. In the work sector, for instance, there is a need for people who are proficient in English; even writing a simple business letter requires one to have a certain degree of grammatical proficiency. Many other situations call for proficiency in English. However, it is in tertiary institutions, perhaps, that the need for English proficiency is most greatly felt. Sources of references are still only widely available in English, and many current materials are written in English. Therefore, in view of the importance of English as a means of acquiring knowledge and in view of English as a world language, we should gear our syllabus towards enabling our students to become proficient in the language.

But how do we go about it? Perhaps we should be asking ourselves if we should be directing the teaching of English towards communicative ability. As Eskey points (1983, p. 319) out, "We used to believe that if students learned the form, communication would somehow take care of itself. Now we seem to believe that if students somehow learn to communicate, mastery of the forms will take care of itself." But will it? Will the indirect teaching of grammar help students master the language forms? Would it help our students become proficient in the language?

One of the main things that has to be emphasized is that language cannot be learnt without its grammar. Learners can and do benefit from deliberately learning grammar. It is true that the KBSM syllabus does mention that grammar is to be taught, but it is to be taught in context, as far as possible. And, as many teachers seem to feel, the teaching of grammar in context and the sequencing of the syllabus according to themes does not seem to help students learn the language effectively.

The writer acknowledges the fact that the language syllabus is not the only factor that contributes to a student's language proficiency. However, in countries that implement syllabi on a national level, it is a major factor affecting decisions about what to teach, and ultimately, what goes on in the classroom (Corder, 1973; Das, 1984). All language syllabi are based on the assumption that language can be learnt. And in the Malaysian situation, where, in most cases, the classroom represents about the only time the student will ever use English, and where English is taught for only five periods per week, the effectiveness of the syllabus in bringing about language learning (Brumfit, 1984) becomes a crucial issue. Keeping these points in mind, I wish to propose the following:

1. Grammar should be given greater emphasis. It should also be taught more systematically. More emphasis should be placed on the "direct" teaching of grammar. To achieve these ends, perhaps the syllabus should be organized around grammar items, around which activities can be grouped. This should not be thought of as moving back the clock, but we need to seriously question whether organizing the syllabus according to themes and teaching grammar incidentally, i.e. in context, would enable our learners to master the language forms.
2. Greater emphasis should be given to literature and reading programs. Through literature, the students will be exposed to examples of good writing. Extensive reading should also be encouraged through reading programmes. Through extensive reading, the student will develop greater familiarity with how English is used. Reading programmes will go a long way towards helping students become more proficient in the language.
3. As far as possible, only teachers who have had formal training in ESL and who are proficient in the language should be asked to teach English. The Ministry should do away with the system of requiring all teachers to teach a second subject for which they may not be qualified.

4. Teachers who are undergoing training in TESL should not only be equipped with the theoretical foundations for language teaching and courses on language pedagogy but should also be asked to undergo courses that would help them increase their English proficiency.

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