

## TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL: WHAT MATTERS MOST?

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English is usually the most unpopular subject among lower secondary school pupils. It is also the subject in which more pupils do badly than in any other in the SRP exam. Why should this be? Pupils say that English is 'too difficult'. Teachers say that most pupils are not interested in learning English – or 'lack motivation', if we use the jargon of the profession. Clearly something is wrong, when we all start blaming one another.

My sympathy lies more with the children than with the teachers in this situation. Part of the professional duty of the teacher is to create a liking for the subject he or she teaches, if none has existed before. This requires some extra effort and some imagination but is not otherwise difficult.

Many English teachers in Malaysia base their teaching on a number of false assumptions, some of which I shall attempt to list:

**False Assumption No. 1:** *'We must teach every item in the Syllabus – if not, the Inspectors will find fault with us and so will our headmaster.'* This is a complete myth: I have not yet met an inspector who recommends this, though perhaps some headmasters do. In the published LSS Syllabus, on page 2 there is a clear instruction to adjust one's teaching to what any class of children is capable of learning.

**False Assumption No. 2:** *'If we don't teach every item of the Syllabus, the children will fail the SRP English examination.'* Not so. The Syllabus is a grammatical one but the grammatical items tested in the SRP examination (at least during the last five years) are restricted in number. The SRP English examination is much more a test of skills, of which reading is the most important. The grammar component requires recognition only and the ability to answer this section is better acquired through a vigorous reading programme than through the teaching of a vast number of grammatical structures. An analysis of past papers reveals that the most frequent grammatical items in the language are those which are most frequent-

ly tested: the simple present and simple past tenses; the use of the definite and indefinite articles; prepositions; conjunctions or clause connectors; question words and question forms. It is not surprising either that these are the most important grammatical elements required in the guided writing tasks set in Paper 2, though for this paper we should also add to our list the pronouns (*I, he, she, etc.*) and the possessive adjectives (*my, his, her, etc.*).

**False Assumption No. 3:** *'The Syllabus does not tell us what vocabulary to teach, so we don't need to emphasize vocabulary in our scheme of work.'* Totally wrong. Vocabulary expansion is a major requirement, if learners are to communicate at all in English, or to understand what they hear and read. Anyone who has tried to speak or understand a foreign language (whether spoken or written), as a near beginner, knows that isolated understood words act as signposts in the message given or being received. We neglect vocabulary teaching at our peril! Remember that the dialogue:

T : I Tarzan.  
J : Me Jane.

results in perfect communication although the grammar is minimal – and incorrect!

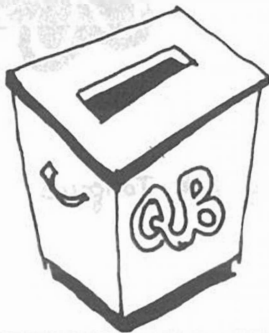
**False Assumption No. 4:** *'We can best prepare pupils for the SRP by giving them plenty of practice in 'mock exams'.'* Wrong again. Learners quite naturally expect to be taught how to *speak* the language they are learning. Whatever teachers may think, the surveys of learners' expectations (world-wide) show that speaking is one of the skills they expect to achieve from their course. Too many multiple-choice-type tests produce passivity, boredom and (of course) random guessing. The 'search for meaning' is not strictly necessary. Teachers must give pupils a sense of achievement in communicating orally and in understanding what they hear. All language begins with speaking and listening, or oral interchange, and if the *only* require-

ment is to read passages and to complete written exercises, then it immediately becomes dead. There is plenty of time in Year 3 for 'mock' SRP examinations, (when they are in fact most necessary). In the first and second years teachers should enjoy the freedom not yet imposed by the examination formats.

**False Assumption No. 5:** *'If the pupils don't know all the words and all the grammar already, the reading text will be too difficult.'* Wrong once more. We must teach the children the *skills* of reading in a foreign language: i.e. guessing the meaning of unknown words; understanding what the reference words (*who, it, the same, etc.*) refer to; understanding discourse markers e.g. *such as* (= this is an example); *thus* (= as a result); *finally* (= this is the last important point or event). There are many other skills — too many to list here; and they vary, depending on the purpose of one's reading. But we must not assume that every word a child has to read must be pretaught.

**False Assumption No. 6:** *'It's too late.'* This usually means that the learner is so far behind in what he or she should know that it is better to treat the pupil as a 'drop-out'. Well, it's never too late. What is lacking as a rule is a set of materials (i.e. reading and writing tasks) which are *individualized* and which cover a sufficient range of ability or proficiency within a class. If we try to teach every child the same thing at the same moment and expect that all will learn equally well, *of course* we shall be disappointed with the results. Human beings learn at different speeds and in different ways. Even if some pupils will obviously never pass the SRP examination, we teachers have a responsibility to help them to progress a little further in the learning process. In reality it's *never* 'too late' — provided we can get the learner to keep trying, which means to keep succeeding, however humble the level.

If you have any queries or problems on the teaching of English write to:



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