

# THE SRP ENGLISH PAPER I: THE PROBLEM OF VOCABULARY

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The SRP Syllabus, and by derivation the textbooks, offer no 'common core' of vocabulary apart from the lists provided in the Primary School Syllabus. The SRP Paper I shows the same lack of restraint as the textbooks in its vocabulary load and spread. It can be argued that:

- (a) many of the questions can be answered even when not all the words in a text are known;
- (b) part of the reading skill consists of giving unknown words and expressions an approximate meaning derived from the overall context — 'intelligent guessing', in fact. But when the language of the question itself reads: 'The main factor that has encouraged the cultivation of the oil palm is ..... A, B, C, D', one feels that the average to weak candidate is likely to be in trouble. 'Intelligent guessing' after all requires above all intelligence and, in any school population, intelligent pupils can only form a small percentage.

Having no scientific yardstick to apply, I decided to go through the 1980 Paper I, section by section, listing the vocabulary items one would not expect an average SRP candidate to know — assuming a fairly wide recognition vocabulary on the candidate's part. For example, I have assumed that he or she would know words such as *proudly*, *result*, *nest*, *encourage*, *government*, *poisonous*, etc. by the end of Form III, if well taught. Below are given the items one might not expect the average candidate to know. As will be seen, there is a sharp increase in these from the third section onwards.

## Section 1 (Items 1 – 20) 'Grammar and Usage'

*Nouns:* junction flying saucer  
*Verbs:* are facing (difficulties)  
*Adj., Adv. etc.:* —

## Section 2 (Items 21 – 40) 'Verb Forms'

*Nouns:* shelter suffering saying moral  
*Verbs:* have got to do with  
*Adj. Adv. etc.:* senseless

## Section 3 (Items 41 – 50) Reading Comprehension 1

*Nouns:* demand acreage trunk stalk  
leaf axils flesh pulp kernel shortage  
factor suitability period cultivation  
*Verbs:* doubled is made up of is obtained  
processed use up speeding  
*Adj. Adv. etc.:* commercial upland loamy  
coastal alluvial deep violet fibrous  
locally

## Section 4 (Items 51 – 60) Reading Comprehension 2

*Nouns:* timber swivel guns oars thatch  
stock relative party (= group) rudder  
junk (= boat) cannon rifle shots pirates  
proverb grasshoppers fish-traps cargo  
fowls fathoms statement  
*Verbs:* proceeding mount (guns)  
look out (= beware) set sail  
had upset (= unnerved) drifted  
passed out (= fainted) were around (= nearby)  
rented fainted  
*Adj. Adv. etc.:* ashore waterproof up-river

## Section 5 (Items 61 – 70) Reading Comprehension 3

*Nouns:* waste materials concrete jungle  
rural areas dawn timber rate  
calls (of birds) generations overcrowding  
pollution

*Verbs:* is in (= at home) stinks  
move out (= vacate) have levelled logging  
curse wasted away taking steps  
put (things) right bury give out (= emit)  
smoothened (sic).

*Adj. Adv. etc:* all the same day in, day out  
smelly tropical overcooked

### Conclusions to be Drawn

Most teachers would agree that all but the best candidates are likely to be unnerved by the number of unfamiliar words occurring in sections 3-5. Equally, teachers may feel unnerved by the apparent impossibility of anticipating which vocabulary items will crop up in any given paper! Many of the above are highly specific and of low frequency. However, the topics chosen in the papers of the last few years are an indicator of sorts.

### 1977

*Section 3:* Conversation with pupil confined to bed as a result of a football injury.

*Section 4:* The disappearance of the North American buffalo.

*Section 5:* Siege of a desert fortress.

### 1978

*Section 3:* Conversation with a pupil about to do Rukun Tetangga duty for the first time.

*Section 4:* Characteristics of the giraffe.

*Section 5:* Attack on a Malaysian rajah's stockade.

### 1979

*Section 3:* Conversation between pupils about food purchases for a class party.

*Section 4:* Malaysian village and a historical incident connected with it.

*Section 5:* Primitive man's use of fire.

### 1980

*Section 3:* The nature of the oil palm and its economic importance.

*Section 4:* A Malaysian historical incident concerning the risk of pirates.

*Section 5:* A conversation between pupils about the social problems caused by pollution.

It will be seen that they always include:

- (a) a dialogue between children;
- (b) a piece of historical narrative;
- (c) a piece of expository prose on (usually) natural history or a similar field. Increasingly, the subject matter is related to Malaysia.

Three — perhaps four — strategies suggest themselves for the teacher to follow:

1 One cannot hope to teach the full range of vocabulary required by formal means in class. The answer must lie in providing pupils with a great deal of extensive reading.

2 The nature of this reading should not be limited to 'stories', i.e. folk tales or incidents of family or school life. Newspaper material — adapted if necessary — on current local issues, and also historical material, must form a necessary part of the reading programme.

3 The average to slow learner must be shown the techniques of reading more difficult material (e.g. coping with unknown vocabulary) and be given plenty of practice.

4 Finally, we must be sure to teach the 'metalanguage' of examination questions: words and phrases like *statement, paragraph, replaced, the following* occur with some regularity.

The solution lies therefore in:

- (a) providing copious material for extensive reading, which becomes gradually less and less simplified;
- (b) including in this a sizeable amount of formal expository writing on topical or historical themes;
- (c) training pupils not to panic when faced with unknown vocabulary but to deduce the unknown from the known as far as possible.

At least as far as Paper I of the SRP is concerned, it is the vocabulary rather than the grammar which is likely to cause candidates to fail and it is necessary to make provision for this in the ways suggested at least from the beginning of Year Two.