

## THE COMMUNICATIONAL SYLLABUS: THREE YEARS LATER

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I would like to start my discussion by briefly reiterating the contents of the Primary, Remove and Lower Secondary Syllabuses in Malaysia. As I am sure you are all aware, these syllabuses are primarily structural in content. Teachers are guided by Handbooks which contain suggestions for teaching the lists of vocabulary and isolated grammatical items in the syllabuses. However, the Lower Secondary English Syllabus differs somewhat from the others in that the structures are grouped around situations or contexts and because of this teachers are urged not to teach structures in isolation but to teach groups of compatible structures around a common context.

The Upper Secondary Syllabus (or the Communicational Syllabus as it is more commonly called) is only three years old. It came into effect at the beginning of 1976. It is the first syllabus that is not grouped around grammatical structures and vocabulary. Rather, it is organised around 'communication tasks'. You might ask: 'What is the difference between a situation and a communication task?' Language 'situations' are limited to a context, for example shopping or describing an event. The teacher is not so much concerned with who is listening or who is talking or whether the communication that is taking place is in real time or is taking place over a period of time, or whether the participants are equal or inferior/superior, etc. In the communication syllabus teachers are concerned with such things. They are not only concerned with the ideal discourse that could take place in a given situation but they are also interested in all the different kinds of discourse that take place depending on who the participants are. Thus, the Communicational Syllabus is arranged around 'areas'. These are really modes of communication or language-using contexts; for example, everything from relaying messages on a telephone to arguing against a point of view in a formal debate. The syllabus itself is very brief; it merely contains two pages of context suggestions. Sixteen areas are listed; thirteen of these are suggested for teaching in Form IV and whatever has not been covered in Form IV, plus the remaining two areas, is suggested for teaching in Form V. Another point is that the teacher is not expected to deal with the areas in sequence; he is free to start with any area although some areas do, in fact, form compatible groups. For example, describing a picture or some other graphic representation matches very well with its reverse area – listening to a description and drawing a graph or map or diagram from that input. Every area has some kind of input or stimulus and it demands some kind of output or product.

Before going on to discuss the Communicational Syllabus in more detail, I would like to talk a little about designing a language syllabus. In actual fact there are very few options open to syllabus designers when choosing the most appropriate type of syllabus for a given situation. There are six options in all:

1. A syllabus can specify what is taught in terms of translation; that is, a pupil must be able to take a piece of Malay, for example, and convert it into English, or vice versa.

2. A syllabus can be descriptive or explanatory. This type of syllabus consists of talking about language, analysing it, learning the parts of speech, learning conjugations and declensions, etc. Many teachers were taught this way and many believe it is the only way to learn a language.

3. A syllabus can be structural. Here, pupils do not talk about language, they use it, but usually only at the sentence level. Such syllabuses do teach pupils all the important structures of a language but pupils are not expected to do analysis of the language.

4. A syllabus can also be situational. We have a little of this in the Lower Secondary English Syllabus, but there are better examples in other parts of the world; for example, the Australians teach their immigrants using the situational method. Such syllabuses start with common, familiar situations like shopping, introductions and then pupils are drilled in the language common to a situation without any particular regard for grammar.

5. A syllabus can be communicational as described earlier.

6. A syllabus can be notional. This is probably the newest option open to syllabus planners. This type of syllabus starts with meanings or notions. The appropriate notions are arrived at after considering questions like: What is it that people are most likely to want to say in a foreign or second language? What do they need to express?

Thus, there are only six ways to specify a syllabus and this applies to the teaching of general English or of special English, such as English for scientists or English for TV repairmen. It was with these options in mind, also, that the syllabus planners in Malaysia arrived at the idea of introducing the Communicational type syllabus at the Upper Secondary level.

Now I would like to discuss five issues regarding the implementation and the working of the Communicational Syllabus in Malaysia:

#### **1. Why was the Communicational Syllabus necessary in Malaysia?**

This was seen as necessary because the old system whereby you had a separate English stream and a separate Malay stream with separate examinations was coming to an end by policy. Something had to be done so that same examination could be given to all students who were going through Malay medium schools, including both former Malay medium students and former English medium students. As of 1976 most of the form IV students would be having an education almost entirely in Malay. At the same time it was realized that there was a vast difference between the English competence of pupils from Sekolah-Sekolah Kebangsaan and the other schools, and this difference was sometimes expressed in terms of rural and urban. People reasoned that the English of rural pupils was poor because they lived in the country and did not have exposure to much English whereas the English of urban pupils was good because they were surrounded by people who spoke English and they also enjoyed the benefits of the mass media.

At the same time another question was raised: Why are some urban schools better than others? Quite often the schools that are good in English are good in other subjects, including Malay, and vice versa. On the basis of such questions it was obvious that the old system could not go on. A special case could not be made for having a separate English syllabus for some schools and a different one for others.

Another reason put pressure on this change. The previous system was geared to higher education – Form VI and university – here and overseas. With such a small percentage going on to higher studies (2%) it is unrealistic to build a whole educational system around these people. Furthermore, with the policy in universities of completely converting to Malay by 1983, it can no longer be said that English is necessary for higher studies in Malaysia. Of course it is still necessary as a resource language, as it is with any non-English university the world over. So the real question facing educators at this point was whether they should go on with the old type of English geared towards the elite or should they change the kind of syllabus to make it more responsive to the needs of the majority of students. The decision was made in terms of the latter. It seemed to be the right decision at the time and time will probably show that it was indeed the right decision.

## **2. Why was the Communicational Syllabus not tried out before being implemented nation-wide?**

To absorb a syllabus properly, or any change of curriculum, requires ten years. This is because there are several stages to the implementation including pilot schools, limited experimental try-outs, evaluation and revision (which would take five years), followed by in-service and pre-service training of teachers, the release of guidelines to publishers, so that they can come up with the kinds of textbooks you need, further try-outs, evaluation and, finally, implementation. At the time the Ministry made the decision to introduce a new syllabus there were only three years left before the complete changeover to Bahasa Malaysia in all schools, and not ten. Thus the decision had been made to go ahead and there was no possibility of a trial implementation in 1975/76.

There was also the question of examinations. It was necessary to implement a nation-wide examination but this could not be carried out until the new syllabus had been implemented. It was impossible, for instance, to have half the country subject to the new examination and half subject to the old. So one of the advantages of going ahead with the new syllabus nation-wide was that the examination could be developed at the same time. As it turned out, the examination proved to be one of the problem areas but it is only fair to say that any new syllabus, not just the Communicational Syllabus, that was installed so rapidly would have run into problems with examinations.

## **3. What are some of the criticisms of the Communicational Syllabus?**

The criticisms below are those most commonly debated in newspapers:

(a) The Communicational Syllabus is all oral.

Anyone who has taught the syllabus knows that this is wrong. At least half of it has to do with reading and writing. Because the first areas is concerned with 'Passing on messages' many people assume that the whole syllabus is like this.

(b) It won't be of any use overseas.

This criticism refers to the fact that with the old 121 paper there was recognition from the United Kingdom regarding the standard of the paper. But because this recognition may apply to only about 2% of all the students in Malaysia it does not seem like something to base a whole syllabus on. The future acceptance of paper 121 overseas may be doomed anyway.

In another sense, the Communicational Syllabus will stand students in good stead for any reason they happen to go overseas. If a student has been in a situation where a teacher is really doing communication tasks he will have done many of the things in English that he will have to do overseas. If people think only in terms of qualifications and credits, then the 122 paper is not doing much good but if they think in terms of preparation for life overseas then it should be doing a lot of good. This applies not only to Malaysians going abroad as students but those going as tourists as well.

(c) There is no grammar in the Communicational Syllabus.

As pointed out earlier, there are only a limited number of options open when developing a syllabus and grammar is only one of them. The critics should realize that a teacher has to teach structures in the course of teaching communication. Possibly there are teachers who tend to overlook mistakes in the course of teaching communication and this could give rise to the above criticism.

(d) The low pass rate among Sekolah Kebangsaan is proof that the syllabus is a failure.

The presumption here seems to be that if people fail examinations, what we are teaching is wrong. However, if one looks at all the students and not just those in Sekolah Kebangsaan, it can be seen that the pass rate is almost the same as it has always been. People forget that last year was the first time that Sek. Kebangsaan students sat for the same paper as English medium students, and the 3% that passed represents a 3% gain over the former situation because nobody knows if any Sek. Kebangsaan students would have passed if they had had to sit for the old 121 paper. I am fairly confident that in the next examination the 3% pass rate will go up considerably.

(e) The Communicational Syllabus is too easy.

The main criticism from the urban schools is that the syllabus is not hard – there is no difficult essay or precis or comprehension – and that the children will be bored with it. This is probably true if the teacher does not respond to good students. There is room in the syllabus for all sorts of extra, more difficult tasks and an enterprising teacher should be able to make class work interesting even for the very best English students.

(f) The syllabus is too hard.

This criticism usually comes from the rural schools. All I can say is that in the long run, the syllabus is neither too hard nor too easy for anyone. It will take a long time for teachers to adjust to what they can do with a particular group of students. The syllabus need not be anything more than just challenging.

**4. What are the real problems?**

I do not think that any of the criticisms listed above are real problems in the long run, although undeniably problems do exist.

(a) Lack of motivation.

One of the real problems is reconciling the fact that it is compulsory for all students to sit for the examination but it does not matter if they do not pass. If a pass in English is not compulsory what motivation is there for students to learn English? If students know that their futures do not depend on their knowing English and they already know that they do not use English outside the classroom, what reason do they have for learning it?

(b) The examination format.

When the syllabus was first introduced the Examination Syndicate felt it was easy enough to develop an examination around the Syllabus. However, the first examination paper in 1977 revealed that while half of it really tried to measure the teaching of the Communicational Syllabus, the other half was straight comprehension and no different from former 121 papers.

Moreover, teachers were told that marks would be awarded for the way in which pupils communicated their ideas but in the part of the paper where pupils have to write something communicatively, grammatical errors were in fact counted.

Also, the original idea was to have 40% of the paper oral. The Examination Syndicate said they could do this if they worked up to it gradually – 10% the first year, 20% the second year and so on, up to 40% – but last year none of the paper was oral. All of it was written and some of it was even multiple-choice! In reality it is hard to test students on a mass basis without interviews which simulate real situations, but a communication syllabus cannot really be tested by a written paper containing essays and multiple-choice items.

(c) Teachers have had insufficient time to adjust to the new syllabus.

This is a major problem particularly as there were no textbooks for the first year of the syllabus implementation. Some teachers find it very difficult to teach the Syllabus and some, quite naturally, are resisting it in favour of a return to the old syllabus. Some teachers, though, are down-grading or denigrating the ability of their students too much. They cannot see the progress that is being made. When a teacher says, 'My students can't even write their own names', it is hardly likely that this will apply to more than a handful of students in a class, especially as pupils have had, for many years, to write their names on the tops of other subject papers. Possibly some psychology comes in here; if a teacher admits that his students are good when he gets them, he cannot take credit for what they accomplish. In a recent exercise, two tests were admitted to ten students in each of 51 classes in Selangor and, in addition, teachers were asked to record their impressions of the language ability of each of the student's on a ten-point scale (1 being the highest assessment and 10 the lowest). The student who scored top in both papers was only given an assessment of five by her teacher!

5. **What are the bright spots?**

(a) Students are making progress.

Students are learning something in spite of what teachers say and in spite of the low pass rate in the first examination. They are beginning to show progress in English, especially in rural areas as well as in parts of Kuala Lumpur. A good teacher can make them see that what little they do learn will be of use to them some day even if they are not required to pass. It is my belief that English will eventually take a hold in many of the rural schools.

(b) The possibility of a graded paper-type examination.

There is the possibility of having, in the future, this type of examination paper. Pupils will still sit for the same paper but it will be divided into three or four parts with the first part being very easy and the subsequent parts increasing in difficulty. The poor students may only pass the first part but even if they fail the whole paper they can see that they have made a certain amount of progress. If the paper like this will still allow good students to show that they are good. The Examination Syndicate has already indicated its willingness to accept the idea of such a paper.

(c) The future of English in the region.

English has a much brighter future in Malaysia than most people realize. Most people take a very short-range view that with the relegation of English to a second language in schools and universities, the language is forever doomed. This is by no means true. If we look at the countries in the Common Market, for example, we see the English is thriving, not because people like the British but because English is a viable means of communication. As countries in Asia develop and as more people travel within and outside of Asia, English will once more be considered a necessary piece of equipment. It is unlikely, too, that all Asean countries will accept Malay as a regional language and for this reason, English is likely to remain an important and realistic means of communicating.