

The Aims of the General Paper

Report of the Four Group Discussions held during the Seminar

MRS WEE CHENG SEM

Bukit Bintang Boys' Secondary School, Petaling Jaya

Group One

There was general agreement that unless the GP teacher is enthusiastic, students will regard the Paper as a drag. Questions were posed as to whether the teacher should cover what students are interested in or what the teacher is most enthusiastic about and hence is more knowledge-

able in. The possibility of covering all subjects was questioned. Some of the solutions offered were:

1. getting guest speakers or a rotating panel of teachers who specialise in different fields to talk to the class

2. assigning students to look up various topics in the library
3. the Faculty of Education should provide training facilities for GP teachers.

The group felt that the GP should aim at developing critical thinking in students, to help them weigh and evaluate facts (including statistical data) and arrive at conclusions on their own. They should learn to distinguish levels of meaning, tone, and be encouraged to form their own opinions.

A question arose as to whether it is more important to get students to write correct prose or to teach them correct grasp of concepts: the ability to translate symbols, figures, and the special jargon of the experts into comprehensible form. There was general agreement that both aspects were important though some members stressed the importance of teaching students to grasp concepts since examiners tend to judge the maturity of the students at the pre-University level. All members, however, agreed that the inability to convey meaning could be due to 'wooly thinking'. On the whole the group felt that the scope of the GP was wide and that a single GP teacher would not be able to do justice to the scope of the Paper without relying on guest speakers and specially selected material to cover the wide range of subjects.

Group Two

The Group asked whether it was normal for students to expect to know everything and felt that if the teacher knows enough of certain subjects and a bit of others, there should be an atmosphere of mutual learning.

The members of the group observed, that generally, students in the Science stream tend to prefer questions on statistics rather than on comprehension. There was a suggestion that students in the Arts stream who are weak in English, should also be encouraged to attempt the statistics question, although comprehension exercises should not be neglected. The teacher himself should not shy away from the teaching of statistics questions. It was felt that there was insufficient source material for this aspect of the GP and it was suggested that the Ministry of Education be asked to compile suitable data for use in the classes.

Other practical suggestions made by the group were:

1. Team Teaching: A number of teachers, specialists in their own subject, should take over the GP classes in turn with co-ordination done by a 'chief' GP teacher. By this team approach, it was suggested that a biased approach would be eliminated in that the students

will get teachers teaching subjects in which they are really interested. There were one or two dissenters to the approach. The main objection was that too many teachers in one class may mean the loss of morale among the students and a consequent failure to attain the 'maturity' expected of the students.

2. Certain amount of remedial work will have to be emphasised in cases where students are weak in English. It was felt that generally, the Science students fell in this category.
3. That GP classes should not be segregated into Arts and Science streams. It was felt a useful purpose would be served if schools organised their GP classes in such a way that students in both streams came together for this Paper.
4. SELTA should organise occasional meetings for GP teachers.

Group Three

The group observed that students in the Science stream tend to regard the GP as an unnecessary evil. The question was posed as to why this should be so. Certain observations were offered. It was perhaps the Science students looked upon the GP as an Arts subject and was therefore unrelated to the discipline they intend to pursue. Moreover, those from the Chinese-medium schools feel incompetent to do the paper which in their view is mainly verbal and linguistic in nature.

On the other hand it was mentioned that Arts students tended to feel inferior, since in most schools the better students were streamed into Science classes. The GP teacher therefore has the role of correcting these attitudes by bridging the groups of students through the choice of topics that reflect life as a whole. It was felt that GP teachers, most of whom are Arts graduates, should be urged to take a keener interest in science subjects to offset the prejudice that may exist. It was suggested that speakers on Science topics be invited occasionally to meet the students in Arts streams.

Some members wanted to know how pupils could be made to speak and respond more actively in class. The problem, it was felt, was the lack of confidence in the pupils themselves to give expression to their thought and ideas. A solution offered was that pupils should be asked to prepare a topic for discussion in the class. They should then be given the responsibility to clarify to their fellow-students any points that may arise as a result of their talk.

The teaching of grammar was raised. Members said that students in the pre-University classes still found it difficult to write correctly. A suggestion was forth-

coming, and which received good support, that 'clause analysis' could be used to great advantage with the specific aim of helping the students to think analytically. The use of terminology in clause analysis should, however, be avoided. It was also observed that Malaysian children are poor in analytical skills, particularly the Arts students, and this probably impairs clear, critical thinking, and expression. The paucity of analytical skills could stem from cultural heritage (authoritarian parents/elders) and/or the system of education (much spoon-feeding and little of the discovery method and asking 'why?')

Some of the possible solutions offered were:

1. The teacher can create interest by introducing topics from the various disciplines and stimulate the students into wanting to find out for themselves and later to contribute to class discussions.
2. By necessity – forcing pupils to do assignments
3. Forming a Sixth Form library and the provision of a reading list.

Group Four

The group concerned itself with the two main aims of the GP – maturity and ability in expression. Members

felt that students are generally mature but debated the definition of 'maturity', and finally suggested two criteria:

- (a) Having critical views
- (b) Having arrived at conclusions based on your own thinking and observations.

A common problem which the GP teacher faces is the insufficient reading done by pupils and their inability to evaluate critically.

Members of the group felt that more attention should be given to language and expression as it appears that the general competency of English has ebbed somewhat of late.

Members of the group felt that some other aims, from those stated in the GP should be incorporated. It was suggested that the GP should also teach pupils to develop a sense of morality, of civic consciousness, and social responsibility. In this connection it was desirable to educate the emotions by heightening or lessening them. Passages should be chosen to show sensitivity, sadness, alienation, personal suffering, humanity, etc., to combat students' lack of experience of the real and adult world.