

# ENGLISH IS MORE THAN JUST A LANGUAGE

## A Report on English Teaching

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English is the official language of Singapore. In our visit, we tried to explore ways in which students are motivated to study the language and how the language competence and proficiency is enhanced. As IT has been applied to their English lessons, another focus is how IT has been used to enhance the English language teaching and learning.

### Background

A favorable English learning environment is set in this country. Basically, the only medium of instruction in schools and the official language of Singapore is English. Although Singapore is a multi-racial and multi-dialectical country, English is the major communication medium among Singaporeans. Besides, English is used in most of the mass media which in turn provide a great exposure and chances for students to practise English.

### Curriculum

The schools mainly adopted the text-types approach. Since last year, the Ministry of Education has laid down that grammar should be taught in addition. It is based on the idea that the study of grammatical features and lexicon is closely related to the study of text types. It is supposed that students would get a clearer picture of how grammar is used in different contexts for different functions. Great exposure of the articles of the same genre is given to each student to consolidate their knowledge on a particular text-type.

Students are always exposed to good samples of different genres. As they have gained knowledge of grammar and genres in a systematic and organised approach, they could develop a better foundation of writing ability as they have a better idea of what grammatical structures should be adopted in a certain text.

### Promotion of Reading Interests and Skills

Besides the allocation of one reading lesson to each week, there are other kinds of reading programmes and activities adopted in the Singaporean schools to foster the love and life-long skills of reading within and outside class.

A reading programme, 'ERIL' (Extensive Reading and Information Literacy) is introduced to the Secondary 4 students. Under this programme, the students have to subscribe to periodicals such as Readers' Digest and the National Geographic. Students are asked to finish a group project in which they have to conduct a research for information on selected topics and then present it creatively. In order to help polish reading skills and develop confidence, students have to present the report orally in class.

Another reading programme called USSR (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading) scheme is adopted in one school. Every morning, after the morning assembly, students are assigned 20 minutes to 30 minutes to read story books, newspapers or magazines with teachers' monitoring in the playground or classroom according to their own pace silently. Afterwards, they have to do an oral presentation or written task related to the material. Through this scheme, teachers can set a good model to students of what a good reader is like and conduct individual or group conference with students.

With the whole-school participation in developing students' reading habits, students' reading skills and habits are developed and in addition to that, some extended and manageable tasks are also assigned. They included journal entries, oral book reports, written book reports and 10-minute continuous writing tasks. Through these activities, students' speaking and writing skills can be further enhanced.

### **Enrichment Programmes and Activities**

Secondary schools in Singapore arrange courses to promote students' language competence and proficiency in the four skills. Firstly, Enrichment Programmes are held for students of different levels after class. These are courses run by external agencies. There are courses training students' different skills, including Public Speaking, Oral Communication, Story-telling, Drama and Debate. The IPW (Inter-disciplinary Project Work) is carried out to promote vocabulary building and oral presentation skills. Students are involved in tasks related to their reading material such as discussion on the topic related. There are also workshops to promote speed reading for weaker ability groups.

As an extension to the enrichment programmes, in one school, students have to deliver a speech in front of the public during the assembly period to boost their confidence. Besides, students have to do oral presentation during class every day.

Other activities are arranged to enhance students' English abilities. Exchange programmes with other schools in other English speaking countries are introduced. It aims to expose students to another culture, and to reinforce and improve students' proficiency in English language learning. There is also the English Literacy and Debating Society which arranges various exciting projects including a radio broadcast on folktales.

### **Thinking Skills**

Thinking skills are incorporated into the curriculum. These include comparing, contrasting, analyzing, generating and abstracting. They are explicitly taught in Secondary 1 and 2.

## **IT Teaching**

Teachers are supposed to have 10% to 15% of I.T. elements in the curriculum. However, the message is very clear that teachers should not use IT for the sake of IT. It is advisable to adopt the existing CD ROMs once they are suitable during lessons. Or students are guided to conduct a project or a research by means of the Internet.

## **Our Reflection**

After the visit, surely there are areas in which we can put in more thoughts. They include setting a clear target for each level, incorporation of thinking skills into the curriculum, development of public speaking and oral presentation skills, establishment of interactive language learning atmosphere within the classroom and the adoption of text-type curriculum in English language teaching.

After all, we are still proud that our teachers in Hong Kong are also creative in developing different activities and teaching strategies in teaching English. In fact, we should be open-minded to adopt different approaches in different schools to cater for their students' needs and standard. We should also consider the need of training in the teaching of thinking skills to be incorporated into our syllabus. For the use of IT, we should give students meaningful and manageable tasks in which they should search for information from the Internet. However, we should instead evaluate the usefulness of IT in the teaching of the language and not use IT for the sake of having it.

All in all, our mode of teaching should be shifted from teacher-centred to student-centred and the mode of assignment can be project-based. More opportunities should be given to students to present their ideas in written and oral forms. Teachers should be facilitators and encourage students to work on their own or get involved in group work in which they could learn from one another. This enhances co-operative learning, self-access learning and individual language development.

