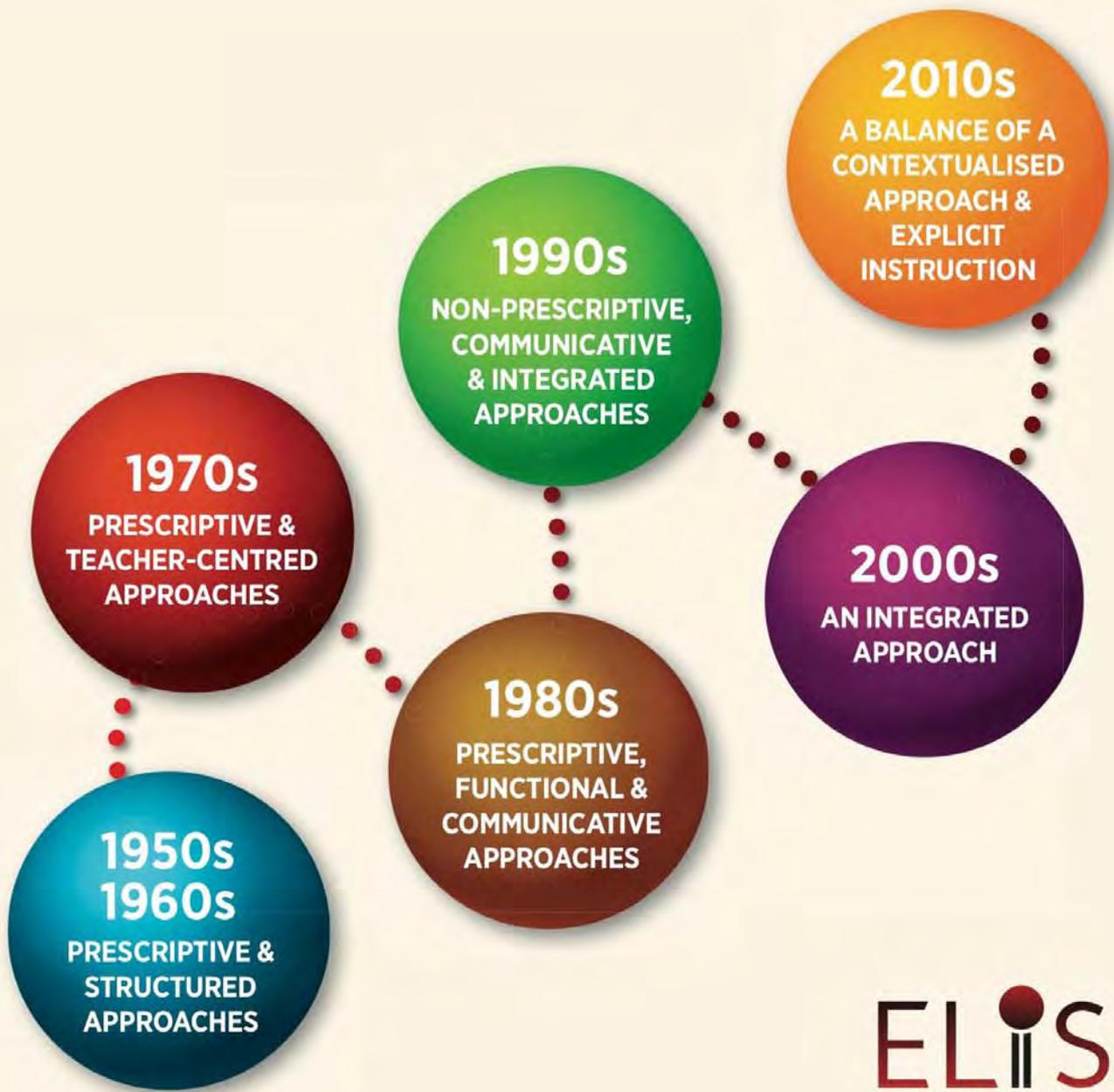


50

Years of Developments in English Language Teaching and Learning in Singapore



Monograph on 50 Years of Developments in English Language Teaching and Learning in Singapore

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Preamble

This monograph, which documents developments in English Language (EL) teaching and learning from the 1950's to the present, is written specially for:

- i) EL teachers, teacher leaders, curriculum developers, language educators and school leaders to have contextual awareness and understanding about EL teaching and learning in Singapore,
- ii) EL curriculum developers to be guided in decision-making about EL curriculum design and development at the national level,
- iii) EL key personnel, teacher leaders and teachers to be guided in school-based curriculum customisation, and
- iv) EL teacher leaders and language educators to plan for and shape teacher professional learning.

OVERVIEW

The aims, approaches and emphases of EL teaching and learning have evolved over the last 50 years. Continuity and change are evident in the evolution of the EL syllabuses. The design and development of the syllabuses have taken into account global and national considerations; the changing role of English in Singapore and the world, the needs of Singaporean pupils; the profile and needs of teachers; and research in language and language pedagogy. In the 1950's and 1960's, the EL syllabus was prescriptive and the emphasis was on oral work, grammar and penmanship. This approach, which focused on form and accuracy, continued into the 1970's and mid-1980's. In the early 1990's, there was an evident move towards a focus on function and fluency as the EL syllabus was non-prescriptive, emphasising meaningful and purposeful language learning. In the 2000's, the 2001 and 2010 EL syllabuses aimed at developing pupils into effective language users and to do this, a balance between form and function, and accuracy and fluency has been advocated.

The aims, approaches and emphases of EL teaching and learning are discussed according to the various decades.

1950's – 1960's

AIM

Singapore's education system in these years was in the survival-driven phase. After Singapore gained self-governance in 1959 and independence in 1965, the People's Action Party (PAP) government was faced with the twin problems of building national cohesion and preparing the country for economic survival. The government put in place a national education system and instituted the bilingual policy. The then Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew felt that Singapore was a polyglot community under colonial rule and that while Malay was the national language to prepare the way for merger with Malaya, English had to be the language of the workplace and the common language. He introduced the teaching of three mother tongue languages, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil in English schools and to balance this, he introduced the teaching of English in Chinese, Malay and Tamil schools. English had the role of equipping the workforce with reasonable proficiency to meet the needs of an industrialising and modernising economy (Yip & Sim, 1990).

There were separate syllabuses for teaching EL in English-medium schools and the vernacular schools in which Malay, Chinese or Tamil was the medium of instruction. English was not widely used. The main aim of EL teaching was to equip the workforce to meet the needs of an industrialising and modernising economy. EL teaching had a distinctly instrumental function. The aims of the EL syllabus were to develop pupils' ability to carry on a simple conversation in grammatical English; read and understand simple English prose; write simple connected English prose at the primary level and express themselves in spoken or written speech at the secondary level.

APPROACH AND EMPHASIS

The approach to the teaching of EL was prescriptive and highly structured. Repetition and drill practice in the teaching of grammar, syntax, reading and writing was the norm. Oral work and grammar were considered essential for correct speech, and the emphasis was on the formation of good speech habits in the first year of primary school. The primary schools also emphasised vocabulary teaching and penmanship practice. Reading lessons began with the reading of words and sentences to learn the correct intonation and expression. Poetry, drama, storytelling, choral recitation and the reading of stories by teachers supported language teaching.

EL teachers taught a common and uniform curriculum and used textbooks which were commercially available. EL teaching was influenced by the structural approach and classical tradition which emphasised the written text, translation from one language to another, a set of approved literary texts of high status, and a procedure which was predominantly instructional (Chew in Yeon & Spolsky, 2007).

The primary syllabus for English made known its assumption that “no child has any knowledge of English on entering Primary One and no opportunity of hearing the language spoken outside the classroom” (Ministry of Education, 1961). The emphasis on grammar and literary appreciation advocated in the primary syllabus was extended to the EL syllabus for secondary English schools. Grammar and literature were given equal importance in the EL syllabus. The syllabus consisted of three components: Language Structure, Appreciation and Communication. Grammar was taught as a subject to be learnt and the teaching of rules was advocated (Chew in Yeon & Spolsky, 2007). Grammatical correctness was emphasised with the objective of achieving correctness in writing and the approach to teaching grammar was highly prescriptive and structured.

The textbooks used in schools were adaptations of those from the United Kingdom because all the secondary school subjects were tied to the requirements of the external examination conducted by the Cambridge Examinations Syndicate (Lim, 2002). The main textbook series used at the elementary and secondary school levels up to 1965 was The Oxford English Course for Malaya. These books stressed the mastery of the English sound system and the basic patterns of English grammar. The textbooks focused on reading and writing with little or no systematic attention given to speaking and listening. They usually contained units with comprehension passages, followed by vocabulary, grammar exercises and advice on composition. Vocabulary was based on the reading texts used and words were taught through a word list, dictionary study and rote-learning (Chew in Yeon & Spolsky, 2007).

1970's

AIM

The phase of survival-driven education continued into the 1970's. English had an even more important role in society and at work. The learning of English was seen as the key to knowledge and technology. This perception was reflected in the steady movement of pupils from the vernacular schools to English-medium schools. The majority of pupils entering primary one in English - medium schools came from non-English speaking homes.

New syllabuses for EL were published in 1971. There were separate syllabuses for the teaching of English in English - medium schools and the teaching of English as a 2nd language in the vernacular schools. The expected entry behaviour stated in the 1971 Syllabus for English (Primary) was that most pupils in English-medium primary schools are learners of English as a second language. On the other hand, the Syllabus for English as a 2nd Language, was written for pupils with very little knowledge of English and who hardly had any opportunity to use it.

APPROACH AND EMPHASIS

The approach to teaching remained prescriptive and teacher-centred. Grammar items and structures were taught in a graded sequence at word and sentence levels. Grammar lessons involved the teaching of one grammatical item at a time through sentence pattern drills and repeated practice.

The teacher was to be a model of good speech in class. Correct intonation and pronunciation in oral work was emphasised. There was also phonics training. Other lessons included regular speech training, penmanship practice, poetry, drama, storytelling, extensive reading and creative writing.

1980's

AIM

The aim of language teaching had by the 1980's changed to enabling pupils to acquire the basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Pupils were to achieve functional literacy for the study of content area subjects and to reach a proficiency level for effective communication (Ang, 2000 & Lim, 2002). This aim was in line with the New Education System of 1979 which introduced key policy changes in the 1980's, the most significant of which was streaming. Streaming was introduced at the primary and secondary levels to "provide an opportunity for less capable pupils to develop at a pace slower than for the more capable pupils" and "allow a child every opportunity to go as far as he can" (Goh, 1979 cited in Yip & Sim, 1990, p. 16). With such a policy, Singapore's education system was propelled into the efficiency-driven phase.

New EL syllabuses at the primary and secondary levels were published in 1981, in line with the New Education System. The syllabuses were written for pupils who were placed in different streams at the primary level and different courses at the secondary level. The English Syllabus for the New Education System (Primary 1 - 6 Normal Course, Primary 4 - 8 Extended Course, and Primary 4 - 8 English Monolingual Course) was published as a single document (Lim, 2002, p. 84). At the secondary level, there was a syllabus each for the Special/ Express and Normal courses. The EL Syllabus (1981) "consisted of four areas: Language items, Reading, Handwriting and Written Expression. Listening skills were listed in a separate syllabus" (Lim, 2002, p. 85).

APPROACH AND EMPHASIS

The approach of the syllabuses continued to retain the features of the structural syllabuses of the past. The syllabuses and teaching approaches remained prescriptive. The underlying emphasis was on good oral mastery of language items before pupils could proceed to apply them in reading and writing. The syllabuses contained an inventory of grammar items and functions. Pupils at the primary level had to master a core of grammatical items and structures. Grammar was to be taught at the word and sentence levels and through sentence pattern drill and repeated practice. Similarly, at the secondary level, grammar items were to be taught sequentially and mastered before new items were taught. The course content listed in the EL syllabuses was listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, and a list of grammar items and vocabulary/ dictionary skills.

Reading was taught at the word and sentence levels for the most part before proceeding to brief functional passages. Pupils read aloud so that teachers could focus on correcting their pronunciation, stress and intonation. Teachers also taught word recognition skills, phonics and spelling at the primary level. Other lessons included penmanship practice, dictation, extensive reading and creative writing.

The textbook *Course in Learning and Using English* (CLUE) for secondary schools, published in 1983 by the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS), was the first locally-produced communicative language textbook. It was distinctive because each unit was integrated thematically and grammatically. Rather than containing only grammar exercises like the textbooks of the previous decades, CLUE “included language games, mind engaging tasks, role-play, retrieving text order, and group/ pair work” (Chew in Yeon & Spolsky, 2007, p. 153).

CDIS was established in June 1980 to improve the quality of teaching in schools through the provision of multimedia curriculum packages. The setting up of CDIS “...marked the full indigenisation of EL materials...” (Lim, 2002, p. 87) because several EL packages were specially produced for the primary and secondary levels.

In the mid-1980's, EL teaching in the primary schools changed significantly. The Reading and English Acquisition Programme (REAP) was implemented at Primary 1 to 3 while the Active Communicative Teaching (ACT) programme was implemented at Primary 4 to 6. The changes in teaching materials and approaches introduced by these two programmes added a new emphasis on fluency and meaning as compared to the traditional emphasis on form and accuracy in EL teaching, which was evident in the previous decades.

The REAP and ACT programmes complemented one another. Both emphasised the importance of language acquisition and immersing learners in a print-rich and stimulating environment in which English was used to convey meaning. Reading was the starting point for a new experience in both programmes and extensive reading was an important component of the EL curriculum. Language was taught in a meaningful context so that pupils could understand the meaning of the words they heard and read. At the upper primary levels, teachers used authentic materials. Pupil interaction and participation was encouraged to give them opportunities to develop their command of the language and become fluent users of English.

1990's

AIM

The EL Syllabus 1991 was clearly a departure from the earlier syllabuses. The aim of the EL syllabus was no longer for pupils to achieve functional literacy. Instead, the aim was to develop pupils' linguistic and communicative competence to meet both their present and future needs in the personal, educational, vocational, social and cultural spheres. According to Lim (2002), “the aims of the 1991 syllabus showed that it had taken into account the growing importance of English as the language of administration, technology, commerce, and industry in Singapore” (p. 88).

Both the primary and secondary syllabuses, which were published in 2 separate documents, stated that “English has the status of a first language in the national school curriculum”. This signified a change in the status of English to a first language rather than a second language, which was the case in the previous decades. The change was a result of the growing “importance of English as a premier official language of Singapore” and thus it became “imbued with status and power, and gained speakers who use it a first language” (Ho & Wong, 2004, p. 287).

APPROACH AND EMPHASIS

The approach of the 1991 syllabuses was unlike the previous syllabuses. The syllabuses were no longer prescriptive and structured. They did not specify that pupils had to attain mastery of any specified language items, structures and skills. There was no differentiation between the year levels since the syllabuses presented the language skills, communicative functions and grammatical units in the form of lists or inventories. Teacher autonomy and choice were encouraged. The decision of what to teach was to be based on EL teachers’ choice, textbook writers’ selections, and pupils’ needs, abilities and interests. Teachers were expected to determine their own attainment targets to meet the different needs, abilities and interests of their pupils. They were to select from several inventories and lists of language skills, communicative functions, grammar items, tasks and activities given in the various chapters of the syllabus and use a theme/ topic to draw up an integrated lesson sequence.

The principles of communicative language teaching were incorporated into the 1991 syllabus and an integrated, thematic and process-based curriculum was introduced. The primary and secondary syllabuses adopted an integrated approach to the teaching of EL. A theme/ topic was the organising framework for language learning. 6 principles of language teaching were advocated: i) focus on skills and process, ii) contextualisation, iii) differentiation, iv) interaction, v) integration, and vi) spiral progression. Fluency and function were emphasised rather than accuracy and form, which were the emphases in the earlier decades. The emphasis was that language should be taught in an integrated, contextualised and interactive manner so that language learning would be meaningful, purposeful and interesting for learners.

Grammar and vocabulary were taught in the context of themes/ topics. Grammar lessons often took the form of focus lessons. Pupils’ learning of grammar was dependent on teachers’ skills in identifying and teaching the appropriate grammar items and structures within a meaningful context. This resulted in the incidental teaching of grammar.

Apart from developing the major language skills, the syllabus included three new domains not found in the earlier syllabuses: Thinking Skills, Learning How to Learn, and Language and Culture (Ang, 2000, p. 7). Besides global and national considerations, developments in research in reading and language pedagogy such as whole language learning, the Shared Book Approach and communicative language teaching also shaped the EL Syllabus 1991.

2000's

AIM

The aim of the EL Syllabus 2001 was language use for effective communication so that pupils become independent lifelong learners, creative thinkers and problem solvers who can communicate effectively in English. Pupils were expected to be able to listen to, read and view with understanding; speak, write and make presentations in internationally acceptable English; think through, interpret and evaluate fiction and non-fiction texts from print and electronic sources; and interact effectively with people from their own and different cultures. They were to be taught how to make linguistic choices to suit purpose, audience, context and culture. The emphasis of the syllabus was, therefore, on both accuracy and fluency, and on both form and function.

The syllabus for primary and secondary levels was conceptualised as a single document to give teachers a macro overview of language learning from Primary 1 to Secondary 4. It was also meant to signal to EL teachers at the primary and secondary levels that EL teaching and learning should be viewed as a continuum and that each teacher has a role in contributing to and maintaining continuity in language teaching from the primary to the secondary levels. There were 2 syllabuses, one for the Express/ Normal Academic courses and another for the EM3 stream and the Normal Technical course.

APPROACH AND EMPHASIS

When the EL curriculum was reviewed in the late 1990's, which was the beginning of the ability-driven education (ADE) phase in Singapore's education system, it took into consideration the emerging local and global trends of economic globalisation and developments in information, communication and scientific technology. The national initiatives of National Education (NE), Thinking Skills and Information Technology (IT) were incorporated into the syllabus. The insights which shaped the design of EL Syllabus 2001 were that language is a system for making meaning; language is a means of communication and expression; language use is determined by Purpose, Audience, Context and Culture (PACC); and language has grammar and linguistic structures and patterns which can be used to create various text types depending on the linguistic choices made.

The 3 key features of the EL Syllabus 2001 are i) Language Use, ii) Learning Outcomes, Skills and Learner Strategies, and iii) Text Types and Grammar. The 6 principles advocated in EL Syllabus 1991 continued to be emphasised in the 2001 syllabus. They were modified and made more specific. These principles are: i) Learner Centredness, ii) Process Orientation, iii) Integration, iv) Contextualisation, v) Spiral Progression, and vi) Interaction.

The EL Syllabus 2001 was different from the 1991 syllabus for it stated explicitly the Learning Outcomes expected of pupils at the end of Primary Six, Secondary Two and Secondary Four. The 10 Learning Outcomes, which specified the language skills, learner strategies, and attitudes which were to be developed in pupils, were set out in two-year periods to give teachers time and flexibility to cater to the different learning needs and abilities of their pupils.

Instead of themes, the syllabus used 'Areas of Language Use' as the organisational framework for EL learning. The 3 Areas of Language Use are: i) Language for Information, ii) Language for Literary Response and Expression, and iii) Language for Social Interaction. The emphasis on language use focused the teaching of EL on the learning of language skills, language functions and grammar rather than on thematic content. It also made for a more systematic approach to teaching language skills and grammatical items instead of leaving the choice and decision of what and when to teach entirely to teachers.

The EL Syllabus 2001 also made explicit the place of grammar in EL teaching and learning. There is an explicit statement in the syllabus that the study of the grammar of English, and its structures and language conventions, including spelling and punctuation are important aspects in the learning of EL. Therefore, pupils have to be explicitly taught grammar at the discourse/ text, sentence and word levels. They also have to learn how the appropriate use of grammar in the various types of texts contributes to effective language use. The implication of this expectation is that teachers must be role models of appropriate language use.

2010's

AIM

In 2006, a major review was done on the teaching and learning of English in Singapore. The review took into account the realities of learning English in Singapore and the changing profile of EL learners, which had resulted in unevenness in the pupils' proficiency in English. The review also recognised that the Singapore economy and Singaporeans' interactions with the rest of the world were highly dependent on the ability to use internationally acceptable English in various contexts. To teach English to Singaporean pupils so that they can use the language effectively, the realities of learning English in multicultural and multilingual Singapore had to be acknowledged. The EL syllabus had to take into account these changing circumstances and, at the same time, continue to be in line with the ability-driven phase of Singapore's education system.

Hence, the aim of language use for effective communication in EL Syllabus 2001 remained unchanged in the EL Syllabus 2010. The EL Syllabus 2010 was developed on the basis that teachers will enable pupils to communicate effectively in English through a two-pronged approach: firstly, to build a "Strong Foundation" in the skills, learner strategies, attitudes, behaviour and knowledge that will enable them to make informed and appropriate choices when using the language; and secondly, through "Rich Language" to provide pupils with many encounters with language in authentic materials that reflect the many uses of language and the ways in which communicative intents are achieved through various modes of representation. The emphasis of the EL Syllabus 2010 continued to be on both accuracy and fluency, and on both form and function.

APPROACH AND EMPHASIS

The guiding principles for the EL Syllabus 2010 were similar to those of the 2001 syllabus. The first principle recognises language as a means of making meaning, and of representing those meanings to others in communication. When communicating with others, our use of language will be guided by our awareness of why we are communicating; whom we are speaking, writing or representing to; the context in which we are communicating; and the cultural norms and values that influence how appropriately and effectively we are communicating our intentions.

The second principle, which is that of building on the EL Syllabus 2001, provides for continuity in language teaching and learning. The EL Syllabus 2010 builds on the key features of EL Syllabus 2001 in the following ways: i) it remains a Language Use syllabus, ii) it assesses pupils' proficiency in language use via the Learning Outcomes, iii) pupils will learn how to communicate effectively, taking into account PACC, through many encounters with various types of texts and many opportunities to produce them, and iv) they will need to learn the grammar of the language in the contexts of the various types of texts.

A "Strong Foundation" will be built in a number of ways. First, through teachers placing a greater focus on the teaching of listening and speaking at all levels through, for example, show-and-tell, debates, speech and drama, and oral presentations. Second, through teachers focusing on enjoyment of language at the lower to middle primary levels before the learning of meta-language and grammatical items associated with texts. Third, through teachers paying attention to early literacy skills to lay the foundation for acquiring reading fluency, comprehension and viewing skills and learner strategies at all levels. Fourth, through teachers developing word study skills in pupils to enable them to build and apply vocabulary knowledge and learner strategies at all levels. Fifth, through teachers developing writing skills and learner strategies for idea generation, selection, development, organisation and revision.

The second of the two-pronged approach is to provide pupils with a rich environment for learning English. "Rich Language" is provided through a variety of ways. The first is using a variety of print and non-print resources that provide authentic contexts for incorporating the development of visual, information and media literacy skills in the teaching of listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and representing. The second is giving pupils exposure to literature and informational/ functional texts with rich content, which allow teachers and pupils to engage in discussion on various issues and themes, and to promote the appreciation and use of the language. The third is promoting extensive reading and viewing through various means. The fourth is giving pupils exposure to authentic, reading-age-appropriate and creative texts. The fifth is engaging pupils in producing a wide variety of texts, including multimodal texts, to include exploration of the interplay of sounds, visuals and texts in making and shaping meaning. All these mean that teachers will adopt a contextualised and holistic approach to learning that will provide a rich language environment for developing language skills, grammar and vocabulary. Teachers will adopt a principled approach to balance these 2 approaches in order to cater to the specific profile of their pupils and enable them to achieve effective use of English.

To re-focus attention on the development of language skills, the syllabus is organised around 6 Areas of Language Learning. They comprise the receptive skills of Listening, Reading and Viewing; the productive skills of Speaking, Writing and Representing; and Knowledge about Language, which are the basic language resources of grammar and vocabulary that pupils need to be able to develop the receptive and the productive skills. The Skills, Learner Strategies, Attitudes and Behaviour (SSAB), language items and structures are deliberately made explicit and detailed so that there are clear statements about what is involved in teaching and learning the various skills and knowledge of grammar. This, in turn, is aimed at enabling teachers to customise and differentiate their teaching by selecting and combining SSAB, Items and Structures appropriate to pupils' different needs and abilities.

To develop pupils' ability in the Areas of Language Learning, teachers continue to be guided by the 6 principles of EL teaching and learning present in the EL Syllabus 2001. To draw attention to the use of interaction in language learning (such as through group work and presentations), the principle of 'Interaction' was specified more clearly as 'Learning-focused Interaction' to reflect the primary purpose of Interaction in the language classroom. The acronym CLLIPS is used to enable EL teachers to more easily recall the principles of EL teaching and learning, namely Contextualisation, Learner-Centredness, Learning-focused Interaction, Integration, Process Orientation, and Spiral Progression.

In addition to CLLIPS, EL teachers are to take into account 6 Teaching Processes, ACoLADE. The acronym refers to Raising Awareness (A), Structuring Consolidation (Co), facilitating Assessment for Learning (L), Enabling Application (A), Guiding Discovery (D), and Instructing Explicitly (E). The Teaching Processes are meant to guide teachers in making decisions about teaching for learning and when teaching in any phase of their EL lessons - the pre-, during- and post- phases.

At the primary level, the Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading (STELLAR) programme, which is based on the aim, approach and emphases of the EL Syllabus 2010, was piloted in 2006. It aims to strengthen children's language and literacy skills as well as promote a positive attitude towards learning in the foundational years. The programme uses research-based teaching strategies and age-appropriate materials to engage children in the learning of English. English is taught through stories and texts which appeal to children. At the same time, there is explicit language instruction. Pupils are provided with opportunities to express themselves in an environment where language learning can be enjoyable yet purposeful. Through the reading of engaging stories in class, pupils get to speak extensively, discussing and sharing their views with the teacher and their peers. The main purpose is to build pupils' confidence in speech and writing, and enhance their learning of the language.

IN SUMMARY

The continuity and change in the aims, approaches and emphases of the EL Syllabuses over the decades are summarised in the table below.

Decade	Focus	Approach to EL Teaching & Learning
1950's	Form & Accuracy	Structural
1960's	Form & Accuracy	Structural
1970's	Form & Accuracy	Structural
1980's	Form & Accuracy	Structural
Mid-1980's (REAP & ACT)	Function & Fluency	Communicative Language Teaching
1990's	Function & Fluency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicative Language Teaching • Skills-based • Task-based
2000's	Language Use: Form & Function, Accuracy & Fluency	
2010's		

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