

# **ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE: DISCOURSE AS AN ANSWER TO WHAT TO TEACH & HOW TO TEACH IT**

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## **Introduction**

Interest in English as a Global or International Language (EGL/EIL) has often tended to focus on the question of varieties, that is, the Englishes which are used by different communities in the Inner, Outer and Expanding Circles described by Krachru (1989). Discussions on the pedagogical implications, especially for countries in the Outer and Expanding Circles, have also often consequently centered on which variety to teach or accept, and to what extent. Should ESL and EFL teachers stress so-called native speaker varieties of Inner Circle countries (e.g. British, American or Australian English), or allow for (and even highlight) the newer or emerging local varieties (e.g. any one of the Asian Englishes, such as Singapore or Malaysian English)?

As suggested by McKay (2002), such questions have been motivated by competing concerns such as standards, intelligibility and comprehensibility across borders, status and image, and assertion of social or cultural identity. In deciding what to teach and how to teach EIL, however, they are not very necessary or helpful, if the main aim of learning English is to enable its *use* in communication.

To begin with, varieties of English are often defined by de-contextualised comparison of linguistic features at the levels of phonology, lexis and syntax, and these, in the larger picture of real discourse, do not necessarily pose big problems for communication. This is because the context of the discourse (with the interactants' implicit shared understandings, for instance, of the topic being discussed or of each others' purposes) helps to overcome what temporary difficulties there might be. Users of one variety can also make use of (and be taught) communication strategies to overcome problems posed by these differences in linguistic features when interacting with users of another variety. Thus, if intelligibility and comprehensibility for effective communication is the chief concern, the choice of a

particular variety (usually a ‘native speaker’ variety) is not critical.

Furthermore, even if it were, as McKay and others argue, constant interaction between users of different varieties due to globalization will tend to lead towards convergence of norms. This is especially true of what Swales (1990) calls *discourse* communities (e.g. the international scientific and business communities) which are geographically borderless (as opposed to *speech* communities, which are generally localized). The norms of scientific English, for instance, can be shown to be fairly universal.

Moreover, choosing particular varieties inevitably privilege them over others. This in turn would raise thorny political questions related to social status and identity, which could be avoided if the question of which variety to teach were not foregrounded. Returning to Swales’ distinction between discourse and speech communities, it would perhaps be in order to insist on the norms of international discourse communities, where the issue of varieties is far less salient because the norms are less subject to variation. On the other hand, to select the English of a particular speech community as a desired ‘standard’ to attain would be less easy to justify in most instances because of the problems it would raise, and because it discounts linguistic variation as an inevitable sociolinguistic reality.

In short, which variety to teach or approve is neither crucial nor useful to pedagogical and curricular decisions. Indeed, addressing the question is highly problematic. The only thing that seems clear is that since language teaching usually occurs in educational contexts, what may be broadly considered as educated varieties (or *acrolects*, as some sociolinguists call them) should be the focus. Apart from this, if there needs to be an answer, perhaps the simplest one would be to emphasize exposure and teach sensitivity to different varieties and their appropriacy in varying contexts and domains. Perhaps only in the limited cases where there is the specific purpose of entering a particular speech community, that community’s specific variety might be emphasized – for instance, in the case of a special preparatory class for Japanese students going to the US to study. (Even then, the US does not have a “standard” English – so developing the ability to cope with varieties is still critical!)

So given English as an International Language, how then do we decide what to teach

and how to teach? A good answer would ideally be one that can apply to all contexts where English is used – whether in the Inner, Outer or Expanding Circle. One persuasive answer that would meet this criterion is that choices should be based on decisions at the level of discourse.

### **Discourse and Genres as Basis for Pedagogical Decisions**

As already argued, discourse is the level of language that enables mutual comprehension in communication in spite of differences between varieties at the phonological, lexical and syntactical levels. Speakers of other varieties of English visiting Singapore, for instance, have little trouble understanding very quickly that Singaporeans mean “Yes” when they say “Can!” in response to requests such as “May I use your phone?” This is clearly because semantically, a “Yes/No” answer is expected in the normal pattern of this discourse. For learners to use EIL effectively therefore, it is discourse that is critical, and that should hence be at the heart of pedagogical decisions.

More importantly, discourse-based decisions help to keep the purposes for learning English in the specific situation firmly in mind, as well as to define these purposes more clearly. Discourse, after all, is about achieving purposes with language: hence, putting discourse at the centre of choices about what to teach and how to teach directly addresses the goals of learning English, whatever the situation may be.

McKay’s (2002) argues that because of the growing number of bi- or multilingual users of English (indeed, some suggest that they now form the majority of users of English now), “a productive theory of EIL teaching and learning must recognize the various ways in which English is used within multilingual communities”, since bilingual users would typically have specific purposes for learning English. Such a theory must necessarily have a strong discourse focus almost by definition, since discourse is language in use.

Moreover, McKay’s argument, in reminding us about users’ or learners’ specific purposes for English, provides yet another important reason for discourse-based approaches to answering the question of what to teach and how to teach. Decisions based on the discourses for which English is to be used necessitate clear thinking about the role of English vis-à-vis other languages in such multilingual societies: this

would go a long way towards ensuring that the teaching and learning of English is congruent with the overall language policies of such societies.

Derewianka (forthcoming) notes that genre-based approaches have become increasingly influential in English language teaching, and have been adopted in primary, secondary, tertiary, professional and community teaching contexts in programs for native speakers of English as well as ESL and EFL learners. She observes further that such approaches have been used in developing syllabuses, materials and curricula in countries as diverse as Singapore, South Africa, the USA, Italy, Hong Kong, Australia, the UK, China, Canada, Sweden and Thailand. This current trend, it would be argued, reflects an increasing understanding that discourse provides the most unifying vision for teaching and learning English across all contexts.

Genres may be defined as “social practices that have evolved to enable us to achieve our goals” through “predictable and recurring patterns of language use” whose purposes are understood by members of the social group or culture (Derewianka, forthcoming). Genre-based approaches to teaching involve asking what genres are to be taught: English for Specific Purposes would be one particular early manifestation. Such genre identification in pedagogical decision-making both compels and aids definition of the discourses and purposes to which English is put in the specific situation.

Within many genre-based approaches, the teaching of discrete linguistic features such as vocabulary or word and sentence level grammar is ideally done in terms of how particular features help specific genres achieve their purposes. Thus, learning is consistently directed to clear meaningful ends, with the ultimate goals of using English always firmly in mind. Moreover, understanding and tolerance of variations at these levels in different Englishes would be promoted, since the focus would be on their use for effective discourse.

To illustrate how discourse and genres might drive what to teach and how to teach, Singapore’s latest English Language syllabus for primary and secondary schools, introduced in 2001 and henceforth referred to as Syllabus 2001, will be described. First, however, a brief background about the use of English and the general linguistic situation in Singapore is necessary.

## **The status of English and the linguistic situation in Singapore**

Although English is only one of the four official languages of Singapore (the others being Mandarin, Malay and Tamil), it fills a very special role. It is *the* primary language for public administration, education, commerce, science and technology. Letters from government departments are written in English (although generic letters such as annual income tax notices do come with translations into the other three languages); workplace documents in government departments and major businesses are in English; business contracts are in English; public signs are in English. Most saliently, since 1979, English has been the medium of instruction for all subjects except the mother tongues (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil languages) at every level of education. Clearly, English is of central importance in Singapore, for as can be seen, it serves many important functions. This is both a result of Singapore's British colonial heritage, as well as deliberate government policy, which sees it as a key to economic survival and success through being plugged-in to the international community.

However, although English is also a lingua franca for communication between Singaporeans from different ethnic and language backgrounds, and, given its prominence in education and public life, is becoming increasingly an important language of the home, it is still not the first or main language used by *individual* Singaporeans. The majority of the population does not speak it at home: the 2000 census reported that only 23% of Singaporeans regard English as the language most frequently used at home (Leow 2000). Even where it is used outside of work and school, the English used for informal communication is often not the English found in school textbooks or of the sort that can be used for work or business purposes, especially in the international or multi-national context so crucial for Singapore. It is often a local variety, suitable for the speech communities of Singapore, but not the international discourse communities vital to Singapore's survival and success.

Given the central importance of English in Singapore on the one hand, and the realities of the home language background of the majority of Singaporeans, how has Singapore answered the question of what to teach and how to teach it?

Lin (forthcoming) traces how until 1991, the answers were based on a structuralist

approach, with strong emphasis on grammatical accuracy in the national syllabuses for schools. This implied emphasis on teaching a native speaker variety, defined in phonological, lexical and grammatical terms, and most Singaporeans teaching or learning English in that period would recall an overt focus on “British Standard English”.

The influence of communicative language teaching philosophies, however, led to a major paradigm shift in 1991, with a syllabus based loosely on themes and topics such as ‘The World of Personal Relationships’ and ‘The World of the Imagination’ and touting “an integrated approach in the teaching of language”. Guidance on what to teach and how to teach was provided in the form of extensive inventories and lists of language skills, communicative functions, grammar items, and tasks. However, essentially the answer was that decisions should be left to individual schools and teachers, so long as the general aim, to “help pupils develop their linguistic and communicative competence to meet both their present and future needs in the personal, educational, vocational, social and cultural spheres”, could be met. Significantly, the syllabus no longer prescribed any particular variety of English “standard”, but instead aimed for pupils to be able to “be aware of different varieties” and “recognize and distinguish between Standard and non-Standard English, and use them appropriately”.

There are suggestions that both answers have been inadequate in serving Singapore’s language policy where the use of English is concerned. Lin (forthcoming) observes that many are not fully effective in using English for the further academic or real-life purposes dictated by policy after they leave secondary school, in spite of the fact that English has been the sole medium of instruction (except in the teaching of other languages) since 1979. For instance:

- Employers have complained in the national press that many new graduates are not able to write effective workplace documents, such as reports and minutes;
- A fair number of first-year undergraduates at our universities need ‘remedial’ English courses or special courses in academic writing – a few have poorer levels of competence in this after twelve years of education in English than foreign students from EFL countries such as the People's Republic of China;
- It is also not uncommon to find many who have completed secondary education and above in English needing help in simple everyday tasks like writing simple

letters to government agencies or banks in English.

Lin (forthcoming) presents an analysis of how these previous approaches fell short because they failed to address clearly and directly the purposes for learning English in Singapore. This overall shortcoming of previous answers concerning what to teach and how to teach is a very important motivation for Syllabus 2001. Its genre-based approach must be seen therefore as an attempt to provide a more cogent answer.

## **Syllabus 2001**

### *Rationale and Aims*

Syllabus 2001 sees English as vital to Singapore because it is “the medium by which most Singaporeans gain access to information and knowledge *from around the world*”. It recognizes a context where pupils are “exposed to the cultures in Singapore as well as to other cultures outside Singapore, and to the *different standard varieties of English spoken in other parts of the world*” (p. 2: all italics this author’s). It could be said therefore that it is very much an EIL syllabus.

Its stated aims following from this are that at the end of primary and secondary education, pupils will be able to:

- listen to, read and view with understanding, accuracy and critical appreciation, a wide range of fiction and non-fiction *texts* from print, non-print and electronic sources.
- speak, write and make presentations in internationally acceptable English that is grammatical, fluent *and appropriate for purpose, audience, context and culture*, (and at) higher levels of proficiency, ... speak and write for academic purposes and creative expression, using language that is inventive and imaginative;
- think through, interpret and evaluate fiction and non-fiction *texts* from print and electronic sources *to analyse how language is used to evoke responses and construct meaning; how information is presented; and how different modes of presentation create impact*;
- *interact effectively* with people from their own or different cultures.

(p. 3: italics this author's)

The italicized features in the statement clearly reflect an emphasis on discourse and its related concerns of context, purpose, meaning and effect, as well as a more critical and enterprising attitude towards language – themes that recur at every point of the syllabus and reflect larger societal and educational concerns.

### *Philosophy and Principles*

The syllabus makes explicit statements about its linguistic philosophy and pedagogical principles. To begin with, it is clearly informed and influenced by recent linguistic theories, in particular those connected with discourse and with the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) of Michael Halliday and his associates. It states:

The following insights into the nature of language have shaped the syllabus:

- Language is a system for making meaning.
- It is a means of communication and expression.
- Language use is determined by purpose, audience, context and culture.
- Language has a grammar and linguistic structures and patterns, which can be used to create various discourse forms or text types depending on the linguistic choices made. Learners have to be taught how to make these linguistic choices to suit purpose, audience, context and culture.

(p. 3)

Those familiar with Hallidayan linguistics will recognise the very first statement as one of its central axioms, while the third and fourth statements echo very strongly its emphasis on the relationship of language to context and culture, as well as on language as a system. In essence, “(t)he EL Syllabus 2001 is a *language use syllabus*” which seeks to teach pupils to “communicate fluently, appropriately and effectively” as well as “to understand how the language system works and how language conventions vary according to purpose, audience, context and culture” (Lim 2000).

In terms of teaching and learning, the syllabus sees ideal instruction as consisting of



the following features:

- *Learner Centredness*, i.e. teaching and materials are “differentiated according to learners’ needs and abilities”;
- *Process Orientation*, i.e. a focus on process skills rather than learning products;
- *Integration*, not just of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, but of materials and lessons with real life use;
- *Contextualization* of all language work in terms of real life purposes, audiences, and situations;
- *Spiral Progression*, i.e. constant revisiting of what has been taught at increasing levels of difficulty and sophistication; and
- *Interaction*, referring to learners’ active participation in activities and discussions with one another and with the teacher.

(p. 4)

These pedagogic principles and approaches are, in fact, not new to Syllabus 2001 but were “first introduced in the EL Syllabus 1991” (Lim 2001).

### *Main Features of the Syllabus*

To realize its philosophy and principles, Syllabus 2001 uses as its organizational framework *Areas of Language Use*, as opposed to a set of themes or an inventory of grammatical items or sentence structures. Three broad *Areas of Language Use* are specified (p. 5):

- Language for Information
- Language for Literary Response and Expression
- Language for Social Interaction

Under each of these broad areas, the objectives are stated in terms of expected attainment targets at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> years of primary school, and at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> year of secondary school, under ten *Learning Outcomes*. These attainment targets are stated in terms of language skills, strategies and attitudes. These form one level of answers to the question of what to teach.

For example, for ‘Language for Information’, under the Learning Outcome that pupils will be able to “Listen to / Read / View a variety of texts and demonstrate

understanding of content in oral or written form”, the attainment target at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> year is that pupils can “Make predictions about content and development of ideas using title, headings, sub-headings, captions, key words, visuals” (p. 30). Here, what to teach is defined in terms of a *strategy* to use when reading in English (which, it must be added, can be adopted for reading in *any* language).

To provide even more explicit guidance, Syllabus 2001, in what is perhaps its most distinctive feature, then specifies the kinds of texts used for different purposes with different audiences in real life contexts that should be taught. These texts are classified under the following categories of *Text Types*:

- ‘Recounts’: texts which re-tell events;
- ‘Narratives’: texts which construct fiction to entertain and, possibly, teach;
- ‘Instructions’: texts which tell what to do
- ‘Information Reports’: texts which record or present factual information
- ‘Explanations’: texts which explain how something works or why something happens: and
- ‘Expositions’: texts which take a position and persuade.

Again, for each two-year period, the specific genres<sup>1</sup> that should or may be taught for each area of language use are suggested. A distinction is also made between those that should be taught only for receptive (listening and reading) purposes, and those that should be taught for productive (speaking and writing) purposes as well. For example, for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year of secondary school, ‘historical accounts’ as an instance of ‘Language for Information’ is listed as one kind of ‘Recounts’ that should be taught, for reading as well as writing purposes (pp. 60-61).

Table 1 (overleaf) summarizes the text types and specific genres for the primary and secondary levels, as synthesized from the ‘Scope and Sequence of Skills, Strategies and Attitudes across the Year Levels’ in the Appendices to the *Guide to the English*

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<sup>1</sup> As Derewianka (forthcoming) suggests, the terms ‘genre’ and ‘text type’ are used interchangeably by some, but often have quite distinct meanings among academics. This distinction is made here, where ‘text types’ refers to six prototypes (‘Recounts’, ‘Narratives’, etc) listed in the syllabus, while ‘genres’ refers to more specific kinds of text (e.g. written news reports, poetic ballads, science experiment reports) which realise one prototype or embed a combination.

*Language Syllabus 2001 Lower Secondary*. The genres in italics are those which the syllabus suggests should be taught for both receptive and productive purposes, while those not in italics it suggests should be taught only for receptive purposes.

The syllabus finally further lists the *Grammatical Features of Text Types*, i.e. the grammar items often used with each particular text type to help it achieve its purposes. For example, connectors to do with time or cause-and-effect, the passive voice, the simple present tense are grammatical features identified as typically used in 'Explanations' (p. 62).

In brief, the syllabus specifies quite clearly what to teach in terms of the following:

- what skills, strategies and attitudes to adopt for different uses of English;
- what kinds of real life texts or discourses the learners need to know how to listen to, read, speak or write in English; and
- what they need to know about the linguistic features of English in order to understand or produce each type of text in real discourse.

It needs to be noted that among the text types listed in the syllabus are genres which would become increasingly salient at higher levels of learning. For example, almost all academic writing at the tertiary level would be forms of 'Information Reports', 'Explanations' or 'Expositions'. Without going into detail, the syllabus places increasing emphasis on these types at higher levels. Hence, the syllabus might be said to have been constructed to prepare pupils for use of English at the tertiary level, so that pupils would be prepared to enter the international discourse communities represented at that level.

#### **TEXT TYPES & GENRES IN THE SINGAPORE SYLLABUS**

<b><u>TEXT TYPE</u></b>	<b><u>SPECIFIC GENRES</u></b> (Examples)
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<i>NARRATIVES</i>	<p><u>Primary:</u> Fairy tales, rhymes, riddles, <i>stories, myths &amp; legends</i>, narrative poems, songs that tell a story, <i>descriptions of people</i>.</p> <p><u>Secondary:</u> <i>Stories</i>, ballads, myths &amp; legends, narrative poems.</p>
<i>PERSONAL RECOUNTS</i>	<p><u>Primary:</u> <i>Oral anecdotes, diary entries, autobiographies</i></p> <p><u>Secondary:</u> <i>Oral anecdotes, journal entries, biographies, autobiographies</i></p>
<i>FACTUAL RECOUNTS</i>	<p><u>Primary:</u> <i>News stories, how animals are fed, news reports, eye-witness accounts</i></p> <p><u>Secondary:</u> <i>Eye-witness accounts, historical accounts</i></p>
<i>INSTRUCTIONS/ PROCEDURES</i>	<p><u>Primary:</u> Recipes, instructions from craft books &amp; computer programmes, <i>"to-do" lists</i> instructions for science experiments &amp; computer programmes, rules of games, <i>rules for group work, how-to-do kits</i></p> <p><u>Secondary:</u> <i>How to carry out a task</i></p>
<i>EXPLANATIONS</i>	<p><u>Primary:</u> <i>General knowledge texts (simple non-fiction, children's encyclopedia)</i>, reference books, dictionaries, <i>explaining how things work</i></p> <p><u>Secondary:</u> Reference books, encyclopedia entries about how or why things work or happen, <i>explaining how or why things work or happen</i></p>
<i>INFORMATION REPORTS</i>	<p><u>Primary:</u> <i>Lists (shopping, word banks, catalogues)</i>, reports of science experiments, brochures, advertisements, documentaries.</p> <p><u>Secondary:</u> <i>Brochures, documentaries, encyclopedia entries, newspaper or magazine reports, flyers, factsheets, compare-contrast reports</i></p>
<i>EXPOSITIONS</i>	<p><u>Primary:</u> <i>Review of books, TV programmes &amp; films</i>, debates</p> <p><u>Secondary:</u> <i>Debates, reviews of documentaries, books &amp; films, discussion on an issue, sales talk, a talk persuading others to take part in a CCA, editorials, speeches</i></p>

**Table 1: Text Types and Genres in Syllabus 2001**

**OTHER GENRES:**

1. CONVERSATIONS:

Primary: Making arrangements, giving information about self, making enquiries, giving information about family, making requests, explaining, giving information about community, conversing with familiar adults on a formal occasion

Secondary: Making suggestions, giving information about self, family and community, giving directions

2. SHORT FUNCTIONAL TEXTS:

Primary: Thank you notes, messages, greeting cards, invitations, informal letters, postcards, e-mail, formal letters, notices

Secondary: Formal and informal letters, postcards, e-mail, notices

### **Syllabus 2001 as EIL Syllabus**

So how does Syllabus 2001 serve as an EIL syllabus, and how might a similar genre-based approach apply to countries in other situations, especially traditionally EFL countries in the Expanding Circle such as Japan and Korea?

In terms of *what* to teach, it is an EIL syllabus in that it selects genres according to its needs both for international discourse – especially for participation in the wider economic, scientific, technological and intellectual community of the English-speaking world – as well as for local discourse. Its broad ranging nature in terms of genres and types of discourse covered must be seen in terms of Singapore's closeness to Inner Circle countries in its needs for English. Interestingly, its emphasis on Language for Literary Response and Expression, seen in the prominent place it gives to literary genres, suggests that English is also desired for affective, cultural and aesthetic purposes.

Other countries may not have the same wide ranging needs and agendas for English, but still can adopt a similar approach. Genre theory has enabled the identification of the text types and genres described above, together with their typical linguistic features. Such an inventory enables countries such as Japan and Korea to identify by genre what types of discourse they need or desire to participate in, and hence decide what to teach on this basis. This is, of course, not an entirely new notion: English for Specific Purposes, as has been noted, is essentially based on similar premises. What is suggested is that the approach can be applied, for instance, to a national curriculum for all levels. However, it must first entail hard questions about, for

instance, why and for what exact purposes all Japanese schools should teach English.

As to *how* to teach, Syllabus 2001's pedagogical principles can be said to emphasize constructivist practices that necessitate observing and thinking about how language is used, as a foundation for effective, intelligent and creative use. Thus, language learning goes beyond passive learning of prescribed or described rules, or mere communicative practice without critical cognitive processing.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe particular methods and techniques. For those interested McCarthy and Carter (1994), Derewianaka (1999) and Butt et al (2000) describe some practices that would demonstrate the principles, and many activities associated with communicative language teaching would continue to be useful. In general, however, the activities that would be promoted are those that encourage:

- awareness of cultural and situational contexts of language use;
- understanding of the purposes to which language is put;
- noticing forms and patterns; and
- interrogating the purposes and functions of such forms and patterns.

Actual practice and application is also very strongly emphasized. All these seek to bring about the more culturally and socially aware, intelligent, adaptable use of language that would be vital in using EIL.

### **Conclusion**

It has not been the intention of this article to present genre-based approaches as a panacea for teaching EIL, or Singapore's Syllabus 2001 as an ideal model to follow. Like all new approaches and syllabuses, only time will reveal whether in practice, they provide useful and effective answers. How well the syllabus is implemented is also another matter. Indeed, Derewianka (forthcoming) and Lin (forthcoming) discuss some issues and difficulties that have already arisen with respect to both the genre approach in general as well as Syllabus 2001 and its implementation in particular. Many of these, however, have tended to be practical difficulties associated, for instance, with teachers trying to grasp a new approach and way of thinking. Luke (1996) and others have also expressed theoretical reservations about genre theory.

Nevertheless, it is hoped that this article has provided a useful alternative vision for the teaching of EIL for those not already familiar with it. Varieties in EIL may be intrinsically interesting and fascinating for linguists and other scholars to investigate, and for learners to be aware of, but deciding what to teach and how to teach based on the question of linguistic variation misses the point. Learners' concerns are not linguists' concerns: they learn English if or because they want to or can do something useful with it. Far better, then, to base our answers on their purposes for knowing English, and few answers seem more convincing than a discourse- or genre-based approach.

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