

# An Evaluation of the Communicative Approach for the Teaching of the General Paper in Singapore

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## Abstract

This article examines the communicative approach that is adopted in the teaching of the General Paper in Singapore. While the General Paper is a subject which tests students on their command of the English language, it also requires students to be well-read and well-versed in a broad range of current issues. By highlighting the shortcomings of the communicative approach adopted by teachers, this paper suggests some ways to remedy the problems so that students could benefit more from the lessons. Specifically, what is needed is for teachers of the General Paper to be more discerning in their use of the communicative approach by being cognizant of its limitations, and implement appropriate communicative activities judiciously to meet the learning styles and needs of their students in the Singapore context.

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## Introduction

The Communicative Approach has been adopted for the teaching of the General Paper in Singapore since the beginning. This is due to the nature of the paper which requires junior college students aged between seventeen and nineteen to communicate effectively on a wide range of topics, from the humanities and culture to science and technology. This paper evaluates the communicative approach in the teaching of the General Paper in Singapore with particular attention on the weaknesses of such an approach. By highlighting the shortcomings of the communicative approach adopted by teachers, this paper suggests some ways to remedy the problems so that students could benefit more in the subject. As the exam syllabus for the General Paper has been recently revised, and is unique to Singapore, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of what the General Paper is about.

## The General Paper in Singapore

While the General Paper is a subject which tests students on their command of the English language, it is more than just a language paper. As the name implies, it is a general paper that aims to help students "understand better the world in which they live by fostering a critical awareness of continuity and change in the human experience", demonstrate "their understanding of the nature of knowledge by appreciating the inter-relationship of ideas from across disciplines", and broaden "their global outlook while remaining mindful of shared historical and social experiences both within Singapore and regionally" (MOE, 2001). Besides the above emphasis on content, a number of skills are also underscored - "critical reading and creative thinking skills", "skills of clear, accurate and effective communication", and "skills of evaluation of arguments and opinions" (ibid.). The above is achieved by exposing students to extensive and independent reading and research.

In terms of assessment, students are tested in three areas, the first being the ability to understand and critique on a myriad of issues from areas such as politics, environment and ecology, and the mass media. This is tested in Paper 1 where students have to write an essay between 500 and 800 words and give their personal responses to the essay question. Secondly, they need to possess the skills in comprehension, interpretation and application of a range of subject matter. In Paper 2, students are given one long passage or two short passages and answer comprehension questions on inference, vocabulary, summary and application. Finally, the language component is tested in both Paper 1 and Paper 2, where students need to write use the accepted conventions of spelling, punctuation and grammar, use different linguistic styles and expressions appropriate to the context, task and audience. The exam syllabus was revised recently to emphasise higher-order thinking skills. A document from the Ministry of Education

to teachers explains the objective:

The revision was done with a view to preparing students for the communication demands in a changing world in which the need to read extensively and think critically will be even more important. Students will need, to a greater degree, to bring the higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and application to their reading and writing. (MOE, 1999)

## The Communicative Approach for the General Paper

In view of the exam requirement to prepare students for the communicative demands in the world today, the communicative approach has been unanimously adopted in junior colleges where the General Paper is offered. By relying on communicative methods such as pair-work, group discussions and role-play, the objective is to provide ample opportunities for students to articulate their views, reflect on the various (usually controversial) issues, and direct their own learning. The role of the teacher is mainly that of a facilitator to introduce the topics, guide the discussions, and ensure that the class activities are carried out smoothly. Any form of direct and focused teaching on language items and explicit teaching of skills is kept to a minimum. To illustrate this, it is useful to examine the course materials for one junior college in Singapore. Out of about 16 junior colleges in Singapore, St Andrew's Junior College (SAJC) is catered for students with average abilities. Hence it is an appropriate choice for our examination of its adoption of the communicative approach in the General Paper. The approach adopted by SAJC is representative of the approach used by most other junior colleges in Singapore.

All junior colleges in Singapore provide a 2-year pre-university course for students, with a total of 8 terms throughout the 2 years. As the last term for students in their second year is devoted to exam revision, there are only 7 terms for the teaching of subjects. The syllabus for the General Paper is generally divided into 7 main topics, as seen in the term handouts for SAJC for a two-year course in a junior college:

Year / Term	Topic
(1) Year 1, Term 1	(1) Mass Media, Work and Leisure
(2) Year 1, Term 2	(2) Education
(3) Year 1, Term 3	(3) Social Issues
(4) Year 1, Term 4	(4) Culture and the Arts
(5) Year 2, Term 1	(5) Development and the Environment
(6) Year 2, Term 2	(6) Science and Technology
(7) Year 2, Term 3	(7) Politics

Using a thematic approach, students are introduced to the various issues and concerns in the topics, through a variety of communicative activities. A typical set of handouts introduce the topic either by providing thought-provoking quotations or bubbles with key words for students to brainstorm ideas. Excerpts or full-length articles are selected for students to read, with each accompanied by student-centred activities. Take for example, the handout on the topic of the Mass Media. To get students to think about accuracy in reporting, they are asked to do the following:

Divide up in pairs. You will take turns playing reporter and interviewee. Choose a topic that you like, eg. "orientation", "JC Life", "My first crush" etc. Take turns interviewing one another. Follow the steps below:

- Step 1 Write down a list of questions
- Step 2 Tape-record a 10-minute interview
- Step 3 Take a 20 minutes to write a story on a separate sheet of paper
- Step 4 Partners take turns to review the article
- Step 5 Give a 5-min oral presentation to your class on your experience

Other activities in the handout on the Mass Media include having group discussions, conducting a class survey, conducting a moot court by having students role-playing different characters, and library research. Other term handouts follow the same pattern. For instance, the handout on Education asks students to brainstorm on words, ideas, images and things that are related to education, as well as stating their views on the quotations printed in the handout on education. This is followed by activities like pair-work, group discussion, writing a letter to someone, and individual research.

Although each handout includes some skills component, these are not emphasised, and do not follow a structured syllabus. For example, out of the 7 handouts listed in the table above, only the first set of handout on the Mass Media, Work and Leisure refers directly to some important skills students need for the General Paper - paragraph development, paragraphing using topic sentences, answering comprehension paper using contextual clues, reading for

contextual meanings for vocabulary, sentence construction, and summary. The reason is that the first set of handouts for Year 1 students are meant for students fresh from the secondary schools after their GCE'O' Level exams. Hence junior colleges usually furnish more materials to introduce the skills needed for the General Paper which is a new subject to the students. Even then, each skill is only sketchily covered in few pages each in the handout, with some examples and few exercises. Other handouts do not even state the skills students need to acquire explicitly; instead the approach is for students to learn the various skills indirectly. For example, the handout on Education asks students to read an article with missing paragraphs and match the correct paragraphs to the gaps. As students will be given authentic texts in their comprehension exam paper, students are often given authentic texts extracted from newspaper, articles and books. Although not overtly stated, students will learn to improve their actively reading skills through the activity. Likewise, it is hoped that other writing and higher-order thinking skills will be acquired by the students through a host of communicative activities like debates, pair-work and class discussion.

## An Evaluation

There are obvious advantages for the adoption of the communicative approach for the General Paper. Littlewood notes that communicative activities are helpful in providing whole-task practice where various types of communicative activity are structured to suit the learners' level of ability (1981, 17). For example, by engaging students in the activity of interviewing one another, followed by writing about a report and representing it in class, the students' speaking, listening, writing and thinking skills are developed at the same time. Communicative activities also improve natural learning when the learner is involved in using the language for communication, and create a context which supports learning where positive personal relationships are developed among the learners, and between the learners and teachers (Littlewood, 17-18). Rivers (1992) has also pointed out the importance of creating a non-threatening class atmosphere for students to interact freely with one another. In particular, it is important for the teacher to meet the social needs of the students by creating warm and accepting class groups where students readily support one another (Senior, 2000, 398). Indeed, the lessons for the General Paper are usually conducted in a relaxed environment where students exchange ideas freely with one another, and with the tutor. By frequently communicating their ideas with one another through activities like pair-work and group-work, students in Singapore who are non-native speakers are given ample opportunities to communicate in the English language.

However, there are a number of reasons why the communicative approach adopted for the General Paper in Singapore is inadequate. The first reason is that the approach adopted by General Paper teachers does not sufficiently recognise the role of culture in the classroom. McGroarty and Galvan have noted the fact that culture shapes one's views of language and education in profound ways, and these views influence one's expectations regarding the nature of language teaching and learning in the classroom (1985, 82). In a more specific study, Nayar (1997) asserts that sociocultural and affective domains of language learning makes the simplistic adoption of pedagogical practices impossible. In general, the pedagogical practices influenced by Chinese Confucianism tend to be teacher-centred (Ellis, 1996, 217). Students in Asia tend to look up to their teachers as the repositories of knowledge and they the recipients who respond to the questions set by the teachers. The Asian culture here values collectivism, deference to authority, restraint and propriety; in fact, a recent newspaper article confirms that Singaporeans are not warm and spontaneous, but tend to be restrained and correct in our behaviour (Quek, 2003, 8). Confucianist teaching does not endorse the student's right to question, challenge and demand anything. This does not mean that no respect is given to the students as persons; rather, adherents in such a society interpret the respect for the students in their traditional way. For instance, a more authoritative and didactic teaching style, rather than a confrontational one, is preferred in Asian societies like Japan, China and Taiwan (Stevenson and Stigler, 1992). Teachers in these societies may place a greater emphasis on the student's willingness to learn than for them to question, challenge and demand. This stems directly from the Confucian value of filial piety to one's parents and by extension, one's superiors, where the focus is on what the children owe the parents and teachers, and not the other way round (Kinney, 1995).

Even for less traditional countries like Singapore, its leaders have consistently interpreted Western values from an Asian perspective. The architect of modern Singapore, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew recently declared: "If you have plain, straightforward Westminster rules, I would tell you, we would never have worked" (Latif, 2001; Lee, 1994, Vasil, 1995). An eminent educator in Singapore, S. Gopinathan stresses that the specific cultural context for the nation must be taken into consideration. With reference to Singapore, he observes that it has appropriately aligned itself to the view that "the neo-Confucian ideology is a sensible alternative framework for socio-economic and political organisation (1996, 77).

This is borne out in my observations as a General Paper teacher in Singapore; students in Singapore are also culturally conditioned to expect their teacher to be the authoritative figure in a teacher-centred environment. While there are always some vocal students in the classrooms, most students are passive and do not find the communicative approach the most useful method in their learning. Students who venture to share their answers in front of the whole class also risk "losing their faces" or being embarrassed if their answers turn out to be wrong (Collins, 1999). This Asian attribute is corroborated with the observations of Namsrai (2001) in Mongolia and Ellis (1996) in Vietnam. Feinberg (1993), who did extensive research on the Japanese society, reports that any concept of the individual is subsumed under the collectivistic conception of the self and community in Japan. This is in contradistinction to the Western societies where individualism is valued. Being exam-oriented, most students here see the traditional method of teaching where they are being spoonfed by the teacher as the safer way to arrive at

the correct answers in exams. This attitude is unfortunately compounded by their primary and secondary experience where the teaching of English language is more content-based and teacher-centred. So it takes a lot of adjustment for an average Secondary Four students to transit to a junior college where the communicative approach is embraced.

The second problem with the adoption of the communicative approach for General Paper in Singapore is that it does not provide enough teaching of grammar for the students. The underlying assumption among educators in Singapore is that students who qualify to study in a junior college are competent in the English Language and hence there is no need to help them in the language itself. This assumption, however, is fallacious as students only need a pass (C6) in their English Language at the GCE 'O' Level exams to qualify for a place in a junior college; consequently there are students who have a very weak foundation in the language and still find difficulty in speaking the language fluently and confidently. This explains why students tend to be passive in class; apart from the cultural factor as mentioned earlier, they are not confident enough to communicate expressively in the target language. Even when students are encouraged to speak up in a nurturing environment by their friends and teacher, Collins explains the danger of neglecting the teaching of grammar in the communicative approach:

It may be cause for concern that lessons focussing on dialogues and role-plays, while moving towards a communicative approach, do not always draw enough attention to grammatical patterns. The end result may be to produce learners who may well be more willing to communicate, but remain restricted to an impoverished and inadequate interlanguage, where grammatical errors remain "fossilised" and persist even after periods of further study (1999, electronic article).

This does not mean that the teaching of grammar is incompatible with the communicative approach. Thompson has argued that it is a misconception that explicit grammar teaching should be avoided in such an approach; in fact, grammar is necessary for communication to take place efficiently (1996, 10). Swan also avers that what students need is not more skills in communication, but lexical items to enlarge their vocabulary base (1985a, 9). There is definitely a need to equip students with a good grasp of the language so that they could communicate effectively. This is especially pertinent in Singapore where the weaker students are prone to speak "Singlish", a hybrid form of the English language where words and phrases of local dialects and languages are incorporated (Brown, 1999). This is a point which the government has indicated concern over, as it signifies the deteriorating standards of the English language (Jung, 2003, 4). As authentic texts, taken from newspapers, magazines and books, are usually used in the General Paper, weaker students face enormous difficulty in comprehending the texts as well. As Swan observes, such students "get bogged down in a morass of unfamiliar lexis and idiom" (1985b, 85).

## Implications

The above discussion shows that teachers of the General Paper need to modify the communicative approach to suit the nature and needs of students in Singapore. To prepare students who are not acquainted with the communicative approach, teachers could introduce non-communicative or pre-communicative activities before communicative activities are introduced. Nolasco and Arthur recommend that teachers should move from the "known" to the "unknown" by starting with teacher-centred activities such as question-and-answer exercises before leading to more student-centred activities such as role-play. Teachers who assume that such pre-communicative activities are inconsistent with the communicative approach have misunderstood what such an approach entails. Littlewood (1981), for example, believes strongly that pre-communicative activities are necessary for students to acquire a fluent command of the linguistic system.

The second implication is that direct teaching on language items and skills specific to the General Paper should be incorporated into the communicative activities. Swan recommends that a good language course should include lessons which deal with areas of vocabulary, functions, pronunciation and other elements of language (1985b, 81). For the General Paper, this means that the students need to learn how to write and express themselves in standard English, and understand the skills specific to the exam requirements of the subject. One way is to for students to begin with communication on a familiar topic, such as commenting on some social problems in Singapore, followed by the teacher presenting relevant language items to the students, such as introducing words like juvenile delinquency and corrective punishment (Brumfit, 1980). This approach is similar to the "retrospective" approach of grammar by Thompson (1996) where students are first exposed to new language in comprehensive context to understand its function and meaning, before they learn about the grammatical forms. This approach is salubrious for students who are weak in the language and need more assistance in building up their language competence.

For the teaching of skills specific to the General Paper, students need to know the text structure of texts, and be taught reading and writing skills. In this context, the schema theory is helpful where students learn to read a text by constructing meaning from their own based on background knowledge and schemata (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). Students will learn how to activate their background knowledge to understand the texts they read; this is easy for the students since the General Paper deals with a host of issues that concern the students in their everyday life, ranging from political issues like the Iraq war to social issues like the Sars outbreak in Asia. Students will then apply their knowledge of the schemata to the reading message; in the General Paper, they will learn about the text structure of three types of essays for Paper 1 - reflective, expository and argumentative essays. This skill will also help them to answer the comprehension questions in Paper 2; the correspondence between the schemata and the

giveness in the text will enable students their comprehension of the text (Steffensen and Joag-Dev, 1984). Teachers could consult materials available to them and select the appropriate skills their students need in their classroom teaching. For example, I have written a book on the reading, writing and thinking skills that students need to excel in the General Paper (Tan, 2001).

Finally, it is of utmost importance for teachers of the General Paper need to adapt the communicative approach to suit the needs of their students in Singapore. This means that they need to take into consideration the preferred learning styles of their students and to tailor their lessons to suit the learning styles of different students. In an excellent article on the different learning needs of students in Singapore, it is discovered that students have different styles of learning - they could be visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic learners, individual or group learners (Chew, Kitchen and Chu, 1999, 2; Reid, 1987). Knowing the specific preferred styles of students will then help the teacher to plan the lessons so as to maximise their learning. More importantly, teachers will empathise with students who may not prefer communicative activities as they are not group learners. This does not mean that communicative methods such as role-play should not be adopted; instead the teacher will learn how to modify the lesson accordingly. For example, students who are individual learners - those who like to work alone and prefer self-directed study, independent reading and computer work - could be given time to do the above as a pre-communicative activity before they are asked to share their ideas with their friends. Similarly, students who are group learners - those who enjoy group interaction in games, role-play and other social activities - should be given more communicative activities in the classroom.

## Conclusion

This article examines the communicative approach that is adopted in Singapore in the teaching of the General Paper. While this approach is suitable for the subject which requires students to be well-read and well-versed in a broad range of current issues, the wholesale adoption of this approach has proven to be counter-productive. What is needed is for teachers of the General Paper to be more discerning in their use of the communicative approach by being cognizant of its limitations, and implement appropriate communicative activities judiciously to meet the learning styles and needs of their students.

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