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<th>Planning the general paper lesson</th>
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<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td><em>Teaching and Learning</em>, 6(1)12-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Published by</td>
<td>Institute of Education (Singapore)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.
Belinda Charles’ article on the teaching of the General Paper (T & L, Vol 4, no 2) is certainly long overdue and is, in many ways, a useful introduction for young teachers teaching the General Paper (GP) for the first time. It is practical and addresses the main problems associated with the teaching of the subject. It also gives us a clear picture of the kind of doubts teachers have about the subject. However, there is more to the teaching of GP that I feel needs defining. A clear systematic approach is needed for beginning teachers so that they can not only plan but also teach their lessons effectively.

The teaching of the General Paper can be seen in two stages. When the students come into Pre-University 1 in January, they are first taught the various skills. These include reading, writing, comprehension and researching skills. In many ways, this can be seen as the teaching at a micro level of the different skills. Ms Charles has referred to this as the GP Skills unit in her college. This unit is indeed very basic to GP and should be taught as an integral part of the GP syllabus. When students have shown some proficiency in these skills, teachers often move on to the discussion of topics. This will lead to essay and comprehension assignments where students are expected to put their skills to use. This stage can be regarded as level two or the macro level. Teaching at both these levels require considerable skill and both levels are equally important. However, while there are numerous books suggesting ways to teach the individual skills, there are no books nor ways suggested to teach GP at level two, the macro level. What most schools provide is a list of topics and possible essay questions on each of the topics. Armed with this, where does the young teacher start?

I would like to suggest an approach to the teaching of these topics. However, for any approach to succeed, an ethos must first be established in the class. In this approach, I would suggest that the class be exposed to some student-centred group work and given a combination of teacher-controlled and student-controlled tasks from the very beginning. This is important because this
approach advocates maximum student participation and the practice of skills learnt at level one. As in any well conceived lesson plan, there are identifiable stages in the planning and teaching of the lesson. I can see at least six phases in the planning and teaching of a topic in the GP lesson. Each phase is necessarily linked to the next. These phases are as follows:

- Motivational phase
- Input phase
- Process phase
- Review and consolidation phase
- Transfer phase
- Evaluation and feedback phase

**Motivational phase**

This is an important phase in the lesson and teacher preparation is vital here. Often, teachers neglect motivating the students because of the mistaken notion that Pre-University students are old enough to motivate themselves to learn. Experience tells us that this is not so. In this phase, teachers should attempt to arouse their students’ interest in the topic to be discussed. Here input should be limited but stimulating. Some examples of materials may include short news clips, cartoons, pictures, recorded materials, charts, maps, realia, poems or songs. Other more time consuming activities may include trips or talks.

Students need to practise inferential skills and interpretive skills when looking at pictures, cartoons, poems or charts. They will also learn to ask relevant questions about the material, thus preparing and leading them to think about the relevant issues in the topic.

**Input phase**

This phase is student-centred and the teacher may vary the degree of aid given depending on the level and ability of the students. This stage is important simply because without any
input, there can be no discussion nor further written work. Input can be provided at different levels and in different forms. Teachers can provide a variety of articles, handouts and relevant magazines. Taped materials, video programmes and lectures are alternative sources of input. Most school libraries have such material available. For students needing help, worksheets with questions can help direct their reading and researching. Sometimes, teachers can combine the process phase with this phase. Students can often brainstorm or discuss the topic by themselves. They will then provide their own input. Ms Charles’ comment on research should be noted here. While I agree completely with her on the futility of research from encyclopaedia for “projects”, I believe directed research and reading is important. This is partly because students need to learn to work independently and not rely on the teacher for facts and notes. Secondly, students also get to practise a variety of skills. These include reading, scanning, skimming and note taking. They may also need to select facts, organise facts, and learn to distinguish fact from fiction. It must be stressed that at this stage, students should be taught to look for information with a clear purpose.

**Process Phase**

After the necessary input is obtained, students must put their ideas together to address the issue under discussion. This stage is again student-centred and students will work in their own groups, putting together the different bits of information they have obtained. They will also work on the presentation of the results of their work to the class. This may be in the form of notes or even diagrams and charts.

**Review and Consolidation Phase**

In this phase, students will present their ideas in groups. The presentation can be in the form of a panel discussion or an informal presentation. While the presentation is essentially student led, the teacher may have to direct the discussion. She may contribute by asking questions about the presentation and helping to clarify any vague areas. The skills practised here include
that of asking questions, giving constructive criticism, presentation, analysing and synthesising ideas.

**Transfer Phase**

This is when written work is done. The task is usually an essay and students will be adequately prepared by now. The task will involve the practice of the various writing skills. It is also useful to get students into the habit of checking their work before submitting it for marking.

**Evaluation and Feedback Phase**

This stage has all too often been dominated by the teacher who marks and decides on the quality of the work. This is not always the best form of assessment. Students should be encouraged to write with more than the teacher or the examiner in mind. Similarly, their work should be read by others, apart from the GP teacher. Students should be encouraged to read each other’s work and thereby find out for themselves what a good essay is, instead of relying completely on the teacher’s decision. It is only from reading and being able to distinguish good work that students can learn. Teachers can encourage the exchange of scripts and allow for students’ comments before marking the scripts herself. Feedback to the students is also important and discussion on the merits of better scripts should be encouraged. Some teachers have pointed out that this may be discouraging to the weaker students and that students may be sensitive to criticism.

This is a valid point to note. A lot depends on the ethos of the class and the way the teacher conducts the feedback. If teachers have established rapport with the students and trained them to see the value of the feedback, there may be less resistance.

**The Time Frame**

These then are the phases I see in the planning and
implementing of a GP lesson. What about the time frame then? This I believe may depend on the teacher and the class. For some, the motivational and input phases may be combined as one. Or the input and process phases may be taken as one block.

Depending on the way the teacher plans his lesson, the time frame may vary. As a rough guide, I would suggest a minimum of five hours for each lesson/topic. The first three phases may take one double period of two hours with the bulk of the time given to the input and process phases. The review and consolidation phase will take at least an hour with another two given to the transfer and evaluation phases. On an 8 hour 2 week plan, that would leave another 3 hours for comprehension or other related GP exercises. This approach is summarised in Figure 1.

![Figure 1](image-url)
Conclusion

Ms Charles, in her article, has given a clear idea of what is required of the Pre-U student in the General Paper. Students need to be well informed and to show maturity of thought in their thinking. More often than not, our students tend to echo what they have read without much thought added to the original. Too often too, teachers go into class and put an essay title on the board for the students to write on. Faced with this, it is no wonder that students resort to copying verbatim what they read elsewhere. What I would like to emphasise here is perhaps worth repeating.

- Students need to be motivated.
- They benefit from working with their peers and should be given adequate time to do so.
- They should be encouraged to work independently of the teacher and to come up with their own ideas.
- They should be given constant and adequate feedback.

If we teach with these principles in mind perhaps our students will benefit more from our General Paper lessons.

Reference