THE NEW LOWER SECONDARY HISTORY SYLLABUS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

MOO SWEE NGOH

The New Lower Secondary History Syllabus (Social and Economic History of Modern Singapore, Part I) has been implemented. Its content represents a significant change from the study of ancient civilizations and world history of the previous syllabus. The rationale, aims and objectives for the change have been explained in the document, “History Syllabus for Secondary 1 and 2”, issued by the Ministry of Education. This article attempts to look at some of the pedagogical implications of the new curriculum package.

Implicit in the new syllabus is the need for some major modification in the traditional classroom approach to history teaching. The picture as it exists today is one which places great emphasis on formal work, with the teacher either lecturing or dictating to the class, note-taking and some form of written work. In such formal lecturer-audience patterns pupils become mere passive “sponges”. The emphasis of the new curriculum package is on the need to actively involve the pupils in the learning process through carefully planned pupil-centred instructional activities to supplement the traditional chalk-and-talk method. The objective is to make history learning meaningful and pleasurable. The new curriculum package has thus been designed to enable the history teacher to work towards this goal. This calls for a re-orientation of the traditional “syllabus-bound and examination-centred” thinking in history teaching.

For a start, it has to be understood that the New Lower Secondary Syllabus is not intended to be slavishly followed, with every chapter and exercise conscientiously covered by the teacher. There simply will not be time. Instead the history teacher is expected to exercise a high degree of flexibility in the implementation of the syllabus. This point, so clearly advocated in the Teacher’s Guide (which even includes suggestions that some of the chapters be left out if so desired), needs to be underlined.
Given this "liberty" (to be exercised within reason) the message is simply this: make time for pupil-centred activities in the teaching of history. The "lack-of-time" and "need-to-complete-the-syllabus" defence for the overuse of the chalk-and-talk method in the past should no longer be offered. The many interesting activities suggested in the new history package will benefit the pupils only if the history teacher is willing and prepared to make time for their implementation.

Then there is the question of examinations. Since these are school-based, each school can decide on the areas to be covered and examined, again within reasonable limits. The pupils need not be assessed on every chapter in the syllabus and the form of assessment should not be rigid. This means that in drawing up a scheme of work the school is able to make allowance for the inclusion of action-oriented teaching methods aimed at making history learning enjoyable for the pupils.

Let us next consider how history learning can be made meaningful and pleasurable. We will need to make it relevant, concrete and active.

Make it Relevant

Many lower secondary pupils have found little interest in studying ancient world history because of its remoteness in time and the apparent irrelevance of this knowledge to the present. The new syllabus has a built-in advantage in being local and being relatively recent. Pupils are better able to see the relevance of such history to their life which the study offers. It should make the task of motivating the pupils and arousing their interest less difficult for the history teacher.

He is also helped by the fact that the new syllabus is being introduced at a time when much public interest in our own past has been generated by the media through the many articles and reports in the press on topics related to our country's history and the SBC programmes such as "The Making of a Nation" (produced by CDIS) and "The Awakening". The history teacher should make capital of this to reinforce what relevance that is apparent of the study of our past to the present. He has to deliberately and constantly relate what is in the history textbook to what is seen and what is happening in Singapore today. For example, in the study of Raffles' Town Plan, it could be shown that the layout of the city
today is very much a legacy of the Plan. Have the pupils match its various sectors with the corresponding areas in the map of the city today. The buildings and names of roads are “good” clues as to the respective sectors these had come within: the Supreme Court and the City Hall in the Government Area; churches and cathedrals, Victoria Street, Queen Street and Waterloo Street in the European Town.

**Make it Concrete**

Piaget’s theory that a child’s intellectual development goes through recognisable stages has direct relevance to history learning. Recent research findings have shown that many pupils in their early teens are still mainly in the concrete stage of operation in history learning and are unable to handle abstract ideas meaningfully. As the study of history involves numerous abstract concepts, these may prove problematic for our pupils. Some of the ideas may even appear deceptively simple, such as “trade” and “empire”.

The history teacher will need to carefully identify the many concepts in each chapter and plan how these can be made “concrete” through the use of analogies and visual aids such as the many illustrations in the textbook and the teaching aids provided in the CDlS history package. These include wall pictures and charts, slides and transparencies. There are also historical films such as “The Making of a Nation” and “The Lure of Temasek” which can be loaned from the Instructional Media Library.

**Make it Active**

More meaningful learning can come about when pupils actively participate in the learning process. Although active-learning is more time-consuming it can be quite powerful as the classroom atmosphere becomes less formal and less anxious. As a result of the pupil enjoying what he is doing, he is better motivated and the learning that takes place can be powerful as he sees himself to be directly involved.

Activities such as role-play and drama can add a dynamic element to the classroom for both pupils and teachers. Pupils can take on the role of Raffles and explain why he wanted to found
Singapore, or the role of an immigrant and say why he wanted to come here, and what his experience had been. Simple dramatisation is possible with topics such as the Founding of Singapore, the Secret Society problem, and the reasons for British Intervention in the Malay States. These activities will also help pupils develop their historical imagination and their empathy for the people in history.

Other activities include debates, simulation board games and picture research exercises. The many colourful illustrations in the textbook are interesting material for picture research. Questions could be set which require pupils to make a closer study of a picture and guide them to make valid inferences from it. The National Museum has issued a set of postcards depicting scenes/paintings of Old Singapore which are well-suited for this kind of exercise.

Group projects on themes such as “Land Transport”, “Sea Transport”, or even on the different forms of our forefathers’ attire could also be assigned. The history teacher can therefore select from the wide range of activities and plan for their inclusion at suitable intervals with the aim of making history learning not only meaningful but also fun!

Conclusion

To sum up, the implementation of the New Lower Secondary History Curriculum package calls for a corresponding modification, no matter how gradual, of the traditional classroom approach to history teaching. The aim is to make history learning interesting and to help pupils develop a positive attitude towards the subject. The history teacher’s understanding and acceptance of the teaching implications of the New Lower Secondary History will determine the extent to which this fundamental aim will be achieved.