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# A Case Study of the Potentials of SGC-based Curricula

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## Abstract

This paper examines how the Specification of Generic (Foundation) Competencies – English (SGC-Eng) provides clear and objective standards for developing language curricula through a case study. A suite of thirty in-service English certificate programmes using eighteen Units of Competency (UoCs) were launched for various industry sectors in the Vocational English Enhancement Programme<sup>1</sup> (VEEP) from 2012 to 2015. It offers a unique experience and the best opportunity to study the value of the SGC-Eng in organising and delivering vocational English modules.

Descriptive accounts and documentation of the VEEP were analysed to shed light on the potentials and constraints of using the SGC-Eng. They revealed tremendous strengths in customising programmes to suit different target learners, allowing multiple articulation pathways to higher levels or across different skills and UoCs, compartmentalising learning to bite sizes, and offering a model of common currency for language learning courses across the territory. They also pointed out certain inadequacies of the programme which could be attributed to some inherent characteristics of the SGC-Eng.

**Keywords:** Qualifications Framework (QF), Specification of Generic (Foundation) Competencies (SGC), Unit of Competency (UoC), curriculum innovation, trade-related materials, vocational English

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 SGC-based Curricula

Generic competencies are the basic skills and knowledge most working people need for effective real-world performance, i.e. what individuals can do in different industries (Education Bureau, 2010). These skills are considered relevant to a majority of the workforce, as opposed to specialised skills and knowledge used exclusively in an industry or profession. The Specification of Generic (Foundation) Competencies (SGC) was developed by the Education Bureau under the Qualifications Framework (QF) and moderated by the Hong Kong Council for

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<sup>1</sup> The programme was funded by the Language Fund of the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR), Hong Kong SAR.

Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ). SGC-based curricula refer to education and training courses that adopt the SGC as the main basis for curriculum design (HKCAAVQ, 2015). The learning outcomes of these courses should ‘match with the performance requirements and outcome standards as set out in the SGC (Education Bureau, 2014). The SGC covers four strands of generic skills, namely, English, Chinese, Numeracy and Information Technology. The competency standards are presented as Units of Competency (UoCs) in the corresponding SGC.

## 1.2 SGC-Eng

As far as English is concerned, the Specification of Generic (Foundation) Competencies – English (SGC-Eng) comprises twenty-eight UoCs across seven competencies and four QF levels (Education Bureau, 2008, pp.1-2). The components of each UoC include the Unit Code, Unit Title, Level, Credit, Unit Purpose, Performance Criteria, Unit Range and Assessment Guidelines. The following table summaries the English competencies in the SGC-Eng.

**Table 1.** Competencies in SGC-Eng

Competency	Example
1. Understand spoken information and ideas	Listening to an announcement about train delays
2. Interact socially	Participating in a chat about holiday plans
3. Handle information and ideas in oral interactions	Conducting a telephone conversation on delivery arrangements
4. Present information and ideas orally	Giving an oral presentation to promote a new product
5. Understand written information and ideas	Reading a press release about an industrial accident
6. Handle information and ideas in incoming written correspondence	Replying to a client’s enquiry via email
7. Present information and ideas in written form	Writing a leaflet about new service plans

## 1.3 Purpose of Study

This study seeks to find out how the SGC-Eng operates as a planning tool for developing in-service vocational English modules with its well-defined competencies. Essentially it is about how practical and meaningful it is elaborated and translated to curricula and syllabi, assessments, schemes of work and learning and teaching materials. Findings will provide insights into the future direction of curriculum development for institutions or course providers that are interested in launching SGC-based curricula.

## **2 Method of Study**

### **2.1 Background**

The strength of the SGC-Eng as a planning tool operates best on programmes with a good number of courses, so that multiple articulation to a higher level or on the same level across different skills and UoCs is possible. With a range of thirty certificate programmes<sup>2</sup> developed using eighteen UoCs for various industry sectors, the Vocational English Enhancement Programme (VEEP), launched from 2012 – 2015 by the Vocational Training Council (VTC), was the only in-service language programme in the territory designed according to the SGC-Eng that enabled proper articulation<sup>3</sup>. It therefore provided the best context for an evaluation of this curriculum framework.

### **2.2 Method**

A case study methodology has been adopted for the research because real-life experience of how the SGC-Eng is implemented can yield useful recommendations which may be of immediate interest and value to any stakeholders like course providers, developers, writers, teachers and even potential participants. The following documentation on different stages of curriculum development, some published and others internal, was consulted to reflect on how the SGC-Eng was realised in the course of curriculum planning and programme delivery:

#### **2.2.1 Curriculum and Assessment Guide**

*The Curriculum and Assessment Guide for Course Providers Developing SGC-based Courses*<sup>4</sup>, is an indispensable component of the SGC-Eng. The Guide lays down the process and methods of using the SGC-Eng in materials writing. It also features sample curriculum and assessment documents and assessment tasks at QF Levels 1 to 4. It was used as an important reference material in the evaluation of the framework in this study.

#### **2.2.2 Trade Consultation Reports**

Reports on trade consultation conducted by the VEEP Curriculum Team were examined to determine how the SGC-Eng could be used to accommodate concerns

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<sup>2</sup> Each module course comprised 30 classroom contact hours and 30 – 60 self-study hours depending on the credit awarded.

<sup>3</sup> Ever since the launch of SGC, the VTC has been retrofitting its language modules to align them with the framework. The VEEP was the first attempt to provide courses in a native SGC-Eng environment.

<sup>4</sup> Developed by the Languages Planning and Development Office, VTC

and priorities of the industries and translate the training needs identified to learning and teaching materials. Industrial visits to trade associations and individual companies were made and meetings with members of the VTC's Training Boards and Industry Training Advisory Committees set up by the Education Bureau were conducted before curriculum planning commenced. A review of interview notes, records of focus group meetings, results of surveys on individual companies and comments on sample materials could reveal how the framework had catered for stakeholders' opinions.

### **2.2.3 Curriculum Documents and Materials**

Curriculum documents and materials of the twenty-four generic modules and six trade-related modules (QF Levels 1 – 4) developed for the VEEP were also referred to extensively in the study. From competency descriptors to syllabi, test specifications, module assessment plans and learning and teaching materials, they served as evidence of how the SGC-Eng manifested itself in the different stages and how much flexibility it allowed to accommodate stakeholders' preferences and needs.

### **2.2.4 Language Supplement**

There is huge room to interpret a UoC despite what is written on the SGC-Eng. The *Language Supplement for UoC-based English Courses in VTC Programmes with Suggested QF Levels*<sup>5</sup> provided some basis for the logical and common interpretation of the workplace contexts for the VEEP Curriculum Team. The Supplement comprises such sections as exponents of specific language functions, language strategies in oral interactions and expressions for specific job types, positions and corporate needs. It provides examples of how far the SGC-Eng could be stretched as a curriculum framework.

### **2.2.5 Tutor Briefing Documents**

In terms of course delivery, prior to course commencement, tutors were briefed about curriculum design, target learners, intended learning outcomes, the scheme of work and assessment details. A dossier is available for evaluation of the implementation of the SGC-Eng in and out of the classroom.

### **2.2.6 Quality Assurance Reports**

The quality assurance mechanism of the VEEP generated a host of quantitative and qualitative information which may be of some interest in the evaluation of the SGC-Eng framework that the VEEP was based on. Programme Quality Analysis

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<sup>5</sup> Developed by the Languages Planning and Development Office, VTC

Reports, Student Feedback Questionnaire surveys, learner interviews and tutor and employer feedback questionnaires were studied to supplement the collection of documented evidence mentioned above.

### **3 Discussion**

#### **3.1 Summary of Important Data**

It is not practical to single out the effect of the VEEP numerically and evaluate the SGC-Eng in isolation. A list of important data gathered from the VEEP documentation is given below. Together they present a picture of how an SGC-based language programme might stand on the market of continuing education and training.

##### **3.1.1 Course Types**

A vast majority, 93%, of the thirty courses offered were generic. QF Level 1 courses proved most popular, taking up 32% of the total, closely followed by QF Level 2 courses, contributing to 31%. In terms of language skills, 47% of the courses were on integrated Listening and Speaking skills while Reading and Writing courses accounted for 37%.

##### **3.1.2 Retention Rates**

Retention rates of the VEEP were high throughout the launch period, with an average of 92.1%, meaning an overwhelming majority of the learners managed to finish the courses.

##### **3.1.3 Passing Rates**

66% of the classes boasted passing rates of higher than 80%, with about one tenth of them attaining 100%. The average passing rate of all the VEEP classes was 82.4%.

##### **3.1.4 Satisfaction Rates**

Data from Student Feedback Questionnaire surveys revealed that average scores in the overall satisfaction in all categories regarding (i) teaching, (ii) learning and teaching materials and (iii) assignments and assessments exceeded 8 on a 10-point scale (10 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree).

Employers of the course participants also held our courses in high regard as demonstrated in their overall feedback. The average scores of 7.6 to 8 in 5 different

areas of English usage in the workplace confirmed that their employees became more confident and forthcoming in using English and became better communicators in general.

### **3.1.5 Interest in Lifelong Learning**

The Student Feedback Questionnaire scores regarding the intention of taking higher level courses under the VEEP stood at 7.9. Learners' growing commitment to learning English was also demonstrated as 26.6% of the learners did enrol again in the VEEP.

## **3.2 Tapping SGC-Eng Potentials in VEEP Curriculum**

The beauty of the SGC-Eng as a tool for curriculum planning lies on the versatility it offers. On the one hand, there is a good choice of UoCs, with distinctive unit purposes for intended learning outcomes and performance criteria for assessments ready to match the training needs of target learners. On the other hand, it allows immense possibilities in terms of choice of topics, development of syllabi or schemes of work, teaching content and pedagogy, assessment methods and formats, and so on. The following shows how these strengths were tapped in the VEEP.

### **3.2.1 Competency-based Curricula**

'Competencies' refer to 'essential skills, knowledge and behaviours required for the effective performance of a real-world task or activity'.<sup>6</sup> For example, the waiting staff at a restaurant need to offer to take orders, respond to requests, recommend food and beverage, and so forth. They may also need to explain to patrons why an item is not available and persuade them to accept an alternative. At times they may have to convince them to agree on a redress action, or refer a problem to the manager. To equip learners with such competencies, the VEEP Curriculum Team incorporated relevant contexts and language in a catering course, enabling them to perform these communicative functions. Competency-based curricula may include, in this context, vocabulary of food and beverage, grammar of modals like 'would', 'could' or 'may' and so on, but should go way beyond such bounds of traditional language training nomenclature. It does not mean these areas of underlying proficiency are not important, just that they are not the backbones of organising learning and testing.

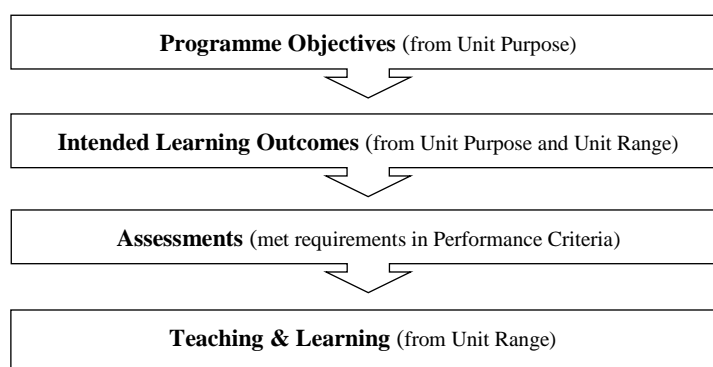
### **3.2.2 Outcome-based Learning**

As the SGC-Eng is concerned with what communicative functions learners are 'competent' in performing, SGC-based courses, therefore, require clearly spelt-out

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<sup>6</sup> Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, Fourth edition 2010; Richards, JC and Schmidt, R.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILO). To ensure these ILOs were addressed throughout the VEEP and achieved by learners on completion, careful mapping of the ILOs across individual outcomes of lessons was indispensable. For example, a course with the communicative function of ‘request’ for the waiting staff of a restaurant as an ILO might feature an output task of making or responding to a request for changing the date/time of a reservation for a table. A series of steps would follow to ensure alignment of the ILOs, objectives of lessons/activities concerned, rubrics, inputs and scaffolding so that learners would be able to demonstrate competency in performing the function of making or responding to a request in the output task. The following diagram provides an explanation of the alignment with reference to the components of UoCs:



**Fig. 1.** Alignment in different stages of curriculum planning

Every UoC in the SGC-Eng features Assessment Criteria and Remarks. SGC-based courses require outcome-based assessments that reflect attainment of the ILOs. A set of documents that details when and how different ILOs will be assessed and how outcomes will be graded is advisable. All the VEEP courses came with test specifications, assessment schedules, grade descriptors and assessment prototypes.

### 3.2.3 Communicative Functions

The SGC-Eng is concerned with what learners can achieve (competency-based) with the English language at the exit point of learning (outcome-based). In the course of development of the VEEP, ‘communicative functions’ remained the most important parameter of organising learning. They helped writers to structure pedagogy around vocational contexts where language was used for transactional or instrumental ends. The language taught, as a result, was more generative and applicable to a larger range of workplace situations.

Each UoC in the SGC-Eng has a list of sample communicative functions, which course developers may decide to cover in whole or in part. This distinctive feature of the SGC-Eng enables brief coverage of the whole spectrum in one single programme. Very intensive learning of a smaller range of functions in bite sizes in



one or across several programmes is also feasible. On top of these, there is room for tailoring, trimming, enrichment or enlargement of any kind within that UoCs.

In the VEEP, these parameters were decided with considerations of opinions from trade associations and practitioners, studies of job needs of potential learners and/or in relation to those already or to be covered in previous/forthcoming courses.

As the lists of communicative functions in the UoCs are not exhaustive, there is always room to cover underpinning proficiency and/or other language devices in SGC-based courses. Topics like goodwill, tact, subtlety and sensitivity and language strategies in oral interactions were introduced in the VEEP.

### 3.2.4 Flexible Articulation

The SGC-Eng enables flexible articulation pathways. Under the VEEP, all courses comprised specific learning outcomes (derived from the UoCs) and competency-based assessments. The flexible curriculum design allowed multiple articulation pathways, for example, from a course of a lower level to one at a higher level focusing on specific language skills required by a learner’s job or trade. Horizontal movements on the same level across the other language skills and competencies for an overarching award were also possible before a learner moved up to a higher level course. An illustration of the multiple articulation pathways in the VEEP, a mechanism enabled by the SGC-Eng is shown below:

**Table 2.** Multiple articulation pathways in the VEEP (twenty-two certificate programmes across four QF levels, allowing both vertical and horizontal movements)

QF Level	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Listening
4		Workplace Correspondence Reports Promotional Materials	Workplace Interaction Persuasive Presentations	
3		Presenting Information Workplace Correspondence Reports	Social Interaction Workplace Interaction Informative Presentations Persuasive Presentations	
2		Presenting Information Workplace Correspondence	Workplace Interaction Informative Presentations	
1	Understanding Information Workplace Correspondence	Presenting Information	Social Interaction Workplace Interaction Informative Presentations	

With the Recognition of Prior Learning mechanism, this flexibility goes well beyond the VEEP, as previous credits obtained under the QF could be accepted for consideration of admission and award offers. Similarly, the VEEP graduates can have their certificates acknowledged elsewhere as equivalent qualifications.

### 3.2.5 Flexible Course Development

The UoCs are discrete entities of course organisation based on language skills and QF levels. They were the backbones of the syllabi in the VEEP, providing a rich selection of ‘Context Variables’ for course organisation and differentiation. Thanks to such flexibility, many UoCs were covered more than once in the VEEP for different text types, modes of communication, communicative functions and/or text modes and topics and vocabulary. Some of these variables were involved as a different trade or simply a different client was on the agenda. The table below summarises instances of how this SGC-Eng potential was tapped in the VEEP:

**Table 3:** Examples of Flexible Use of UoCs in the VEEP

Unit Code	Course Launched
GCEN103A	2 courses in different trade sectors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• retail</li> <li>• hotel, catering &amp; tourism</li> </ul>
GCEN203A	3 courses in different job types: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• office administration</li> <li>• customer service</li> <li>• food &amp; beverage</li> </ul>
GCEN407A	2 courses in different text types: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reports</li> <li>• promotional materials</li> </ul>

### 3.2.6 Trade Flavour

Generic competencies are ‘developed in vocational contexts and the focus is on meeting workplace requirements rather than addressing the general education needs of employees’ (Education Bureau, 2010). Thus the SGC-Eng provides the best framework for a vocational English language programme like the VEEP. Initially trade-related courses were developed for five industry sectors, namely, (i) Import/Export and Wholesale; (ii) Retail; (iii) Hotel, Catering and Tourism; (iv) Banking, Insurance and Finance and (v) Transport Logistics. Task-based materials of these courses comprised workplace simulated scenarios and input texts/discourses adapted from or inspired by authentic resources. There was a gradual shift to generic workplace materials which focused on language even more generative and transferable to other workplace situations as well. All these vocational language courses were enriched with case studies featuring workplace problems to be solved

with brief instructions and minimal assistance for learners. The versatility offered by the SGC-Eng enables more and bigger innovations.

### **3.3 Constraints of Using the SGC-Eng**

Like any innovation, curricular or otherwise, the SGC-Eng is open to pitfalls and subject to challenges. The VEEP experience revealed some problems more likely to pertain to the framework per se, in addition to others that arose from the way it was employed.

#### **3.3.1 Abstract Terminology**

The Unit Range in the SGC-Eng permits a lot of possibilities and interpretations. The flexibility it allows, however, comes with a downside. At times, differentiating levels could be problematic when lines of demarcation between ‘very simple’ versus ‘simple’, ‘increasingly complex’ versus ‘complex’, ‘increasing length’ versus ‘extended’ and ‘familiar’ versus ‘largely familiar’ are not clear. These terms are widely used in the UoCs. The VEEP Curriculum Team had attempted to straighten out the problem by developing a sample task of a job application in four QF levels for writers’ reference.

‘Discussion, argument and evaluation’ are required in all QF Level 3 UoCs and some of the QF Level 2 ones. There were instances when an exchange qualified a ‘discussion’, a ‘discussion’ became an ‘argument’, or whether a ‘judgment of value’ was involved became blurred. An important marker of QF Level 4 language, ‘tact, subtlety and sensitivity’ was often missing in draft learning and teaching materials in the VEEP. This happened when writers did not agree that certain expressions carried ‘tact, subtlety and sensitivity’ or the context naturally called for such language.

There were also problems with similar language functions like ‘suggestion’ versus ‘offer’, ‘request’ versus ‘suggestion’, ‘request’ versus ‘preference’ and so on. The compilation of the *Language Supplement for UoC-based English Courses in VTC Programmes with Suggested QF Levels* managed to clarify some of these issues in material development by providing exponents of specific language functions.

Unfortunately these endeavours have not made the SGC-Eng less abstract for employers, learners and other course providers in the market in general. The currency of communicative functions in local in-service language training is very limited. SGC-based language courses are not plentiful on the Qualifications Register. Recommendations in this connection are made in Section 4.

#### **3.3.2 Coverage of a UoC**

The dynamic and fluid nature of the UoCs also subjects the qualifications awarded to debate, as courses of the same UoC may vary considerably in terms of breadth, depth and the focus. Despite an equivalent qualification awarded, a writing course on reports cannot be considered identical to another about marketing materials. In fact,

they are very different. While the UoCs allow thinking within a very big box, it may also bring confusion to employers or even course providers.

### **3.3.3 Competencies Vs Proficiency**

In the workplace employers are most concerned with what staff can do with language, and this is what makes the SGC-Eng a suitable framework for language training. However, one cannot have more guns without less butter. More time on competencies (hence communicative functions) inevitably means less on underpinning proficiency like vocabulary and grammar. They are equally important, like bricks and clay. It takes both to build a strong house. How much of each should go into the formula needs meticulous planning.

### **3.4 Limitation of the Study**

A shortcoming of this case study is that one can never isolate the effect of the VEEP from the SGC-Eng and ascertain whether a strength or weakness is genuinely arising from the latter. There is no chance that a non-SGC-based VEEP can be run as a control experiment nor has there been any other SGC-based programme of this scale existed in the territory in history for comparison. It is the rarity of the opportunity that makes the study so worthwhile. The lesson will still benefit for any future language programmes designed according to the SGC-Eng given the very same framework they are based on.

## **4 Conclusion**

The SGC-Eng is a major innovation in in-service language training in the territory. It demonstrates how training of a critical work skill can be provided in a developed economy with a sophisticated labour force and an educated entrepreneurial population. In the case of the VEEP, the SGC-Eng mapped the training needs of the VEEP participants, the jobs they held and the industry and workplaces they represented, against the thirty courses made available throughout the project duration. The VEEP experience has proved that the SGC-Eng is a possible framework for organising such training. To reap a full harvest, the following directions can be considered:

### **4.1 Course Adaptation**

The potentials of the SGC-Eng framework is immense. Its versatility allows so much customisation that every major aspect of a course, including content, pedagogy, class mode/organisation, coursework, assessments and even the course aims can be varied. Any party interested in developing SGC-based language courses may

consider writing brand new materials or adapting existing packages to suit the requirements of a corresponding UoC. Some of the possibilities are as follows:

- i. a flexible combination of face-to-face versus online study modes;
- ii. materials for individual job positions like security guards, receptionists and taxi-drivers; and
- iii. offer of SGC-based courses to enterprises so that they can run them with appropriate adaptation and quality control.

#### **4.2 Public Knowledge about QF**

As mentioned, SGC-based language courses still remain relatively unfamiliar to the local workforce. The sophisticated terminology and descriptions are, without doubt, not easy for the general public to grasp. The strength of the system in providing a clear roadmap and quick and effective identification of suitable courses should, nevertheless, not be undervalued, especially if a knowledge-based workforce is a priority in the development of the economy.

To widen the currency of SGC 'language', the Qualifications Framework Secretariat might consider more innovative outreach strategies to promote the QF levels, generic competencies and communicative functions in the younger workforce so that they will be more ready to seek training opportunities within the framework. On the other hand, course providers may consider parameters other than communicative functions in the UoCs, e.g. text types, industries, job titles and so on, when organising learning.

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