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NOTIONS OF LITERACY AND CULTURAL AWARENESS FOR STUDENT TEACHERS

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Introduction: The Background

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the study of a language in relation to the culture that comes with the language or to the culture of the group, community or society that uses that language predominantly. As early as 1985, McCroarty and Galvan had noted that "one of the most significant developments for the field of language instruction has been the recognition of the close relationship that exists between language and culture" (p 87). They had in mind specifically the context of second language teaching. However, in plural societies, such a cross-linguistic/cultural interest for the purpose of increasing cultural sensitivity and understanding should bring about important (positive) social consequences through fostering greater social cohesion. In this context, then, literacy assumes a role that goes beyond the skills of reading and writing to that of personal development and cultural enrichment. This paper deals with literacy in such a context and with the relationship between literacy and culture.

In Singapore, it would appear that literacy issues are centred primarily around the teaching and learning of English, which is the medium of instruction in education and the language of wider communication in administration and industry, while the question of values education and cultural transmission is associated with the mother tongues in a multi-ethnic community. Chinese (and the spoken form, Mandarin), Malay and Tamil (or one of several Indian languages® are offered as languages in the school curriculum, from which students make their appropriate choice of one to be studied as a second language or even two with the third as an additional language. In brief, ideally a student leaving school will have competence in English and a command of his/her mother tongue (both oral and written) - in essence, this is the bilingual education policy as practised in Singapore.

The logic and wisdom of this bilingual education policy can only be understood in the context of a new city-state that could have been plagued by inter-ethnic rivalry and hostility, when it gained complete independence in 1965. The adoption of English, seen to be politically neutral- as the main medium for administration and schooling, was an important strategy making for communicative integration, among the major ethnic groups. Cultural integration, in the sense of building a national Singaporean identity out of a diversity of ethnic cultures, was a long-term goal but it is recognised that such integration is best built on inter-ethnic cultural understanding awareness, and, where appropriate, consensus. At the same time, a growing competence in English among the younger population not only makes the Western world (i.e., its institutions, ideas, and publications) more accessible, but also the local milieu more vulnerable to influences from the main intellectual and technological centres in the West. While openness to ideas is a good thing for both institutions and individuals, however, at the individual level there must be a way of filtering out those ideas and values not consistent with local norms.

1. English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil are the four official languages, with English being used extensively in education and administration and in the marketplace.
2. These include Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati and Urdu.
Finding an appropriate response to Western influence, which inevitably affects local attitude and behaviour, is a problem faced by many non-Western countries, but the situation in Singapore was seen to be a little different. As Brig-Gen Lee (1989) put it, "Singapore's problem is: how to be cosmopolitan, but yet not be rootless; how to have an open mind and be forward and outward looking, but still keep a clear sense of identity and self-confidence?" The solution, Brig-Gen Lee added, was in building a strong sense of Singaporean identity, a "characteristic ethos and spirit of a people". At the same time, while Singapore aims for a single unified society, sharing common values, it also allows for, and in more recent years encourages, cultural diversity, recognising that each ethnic group is distinguished from the others by its unique language, culture and tradition, which adds to the richness of what would be a national culture. Brig-Gen Lee (1995) was very explicit when he said: "Each community has to feel that it has all the room it needs to express its identity and culture. It must not feel hemmed in by the others, especially by the majority Chinese community". Therefore, from this point of view, the cultures of the main ethnic groups are complementary and contribute to the larger national culture.

Purpose of the Paper

It is this relationship between language and culture which provides a major focus for this paper. Given the growing significance of literacy in English, which implies more than just a functional proficiency in the language for many students, we believe that the instrumental role of English can also be made to serve cultural ends. Given the primary purpose for studying and keeping one's mother tongue (MT), it would seem that the existing bilingual policy places too much attention on one's own culture and less attention on the other cultures in the community. One of the commentators on the local scene, Gopinathan (1974), believed that while English education and literacy may have produced a more deculturalised population, it is more racially integrated and has the best results in terms of breaking down racial intolerance.

The purpose of this paper is to consider how the teaching of English can be more consciously used to bring about a higher level of literacy (as distinct from functional proficiency) and also create greater cross-cultural awareness. The paper is structured in three parts. The first part discusses the findings of a research study aimed at understanding the notions of literacy in the teaching and learning of English in Singapore and how these findings have implications for the development of a national identity (or identities). The second part reports on the practice of teaching a course for creating cultural awareness among student teachers, drawing partly on the findings of the research mentioned earlier. The third part of the paper examines the relationship between literacy (and bi-literacy) and cultural understanding in a setting like Singapore's.

Part I - An Ethnographic Study of Language Education

The second author of this paper carried out a four-month ethnographic study of language and literacy education in a primary five classroom in a Singapore school which is reported in Cheah (1994). The study was aimed at finding out the notions of literacy that inform English education in Singapore, the effects of these notions on literacy practices and the implications of these notions for the development of an ethnic and national identity based on English. The study was concerned with both literacy and cultural issues.
In examining the educational context for the study, Cheah (1994) looked at how the new 1991 English Language syllabus had evolved over the years from a grammar-based syllabus to a skills-based one, which largely characterised the 1982 version. At the time of the study, the 1982 version, "grounded in grammar and a rigid structural framework" still carried a lot of influence with teachers as the 1991 syllabus was at that time just being implemented at the lower primary levels. The notion of literacy as a list of skills to be mastered has been disseminated in the instructional materials used in schools and has strongly influenced the way English was taught. In contrast, the 1991 syllabus as conceptualized is more pupil-centred and although the notion of "literacy has moved from being purely skills-based to one that includes the exploitation of the written word as a tool for thinking" (Cheah 1994:117), it has not completely accepted literacy as a cultural tool that it is (Cheah 1994: 118). The cultural dimension of language learning remains the province of the mother tongues.

The class Cheah chose to study was a small one (n=22) with an ethnic mix parallel to that of the general population. It was in one of the so-called "neighbourhood schools" situated in a public housing estate, and this makes the selected school representative of elementary schools in Singapore, most of which are found in housing estates which in Singapore cater to the housing needs of more than 80% of the population. The school principal welcomed the study and the teacher of English in the selected class was confident enough of her abilities not to be threatened by the observer's presence and her status as a university lecturer. Cheah chose the role of a passive observer for good reasons but she involved the class teacher in her research and shared all her field notes with her.

The 1991 English language syllabus is thematically organised, and during the period of observation, seven themes were covered in class; they were "Caring and sharing", "World famous stories", "World famous people", "Local customs", "Crimes", "Endangered animals", and "Important events in history". According to the syllabus, "no comprehensive knowledge of the contents" is required of the children as the theme merely provided the "vehicle" for language practice (Cheah 1995:7). This was to avoid over-teaching of factual information in the language classroom, but this practice also resulted in limited engagement with the ideas presented.

Box I presents a short excerpt from a long transcript of a lesson about local customs, in progress in the primary classroom being observed. As it turned out, Meiling didn't get the answer right on the difference between Hari Raya Puasa and Hari Raya Haji. As is typical of most classes in the neighbourhood schools in Singapore, the P5 class comprises a mix of pupils from the main ethnic groups, with the teacher herself from the Indian community. The rest of the lesson was to take the class into a discussion of the main differences between Hari Raya Puasa and Hari Raya Haji, but the discussion did not get beyond the observable superficial differences. As a researcher/observer, Cheah (1995:9) commented on this episode, "Granted that a thorough knowledge is not required in these classes, the main issue remains the sort of information, and perhaps more than that, the sort of issues that need to be raised during such discussions. Indeed, time after time, in all the lessons and discussions that I witnessed [in this class], no attempt was made to identify the major issues to be talked about, so much so, that the discussions were often superficial, leading to no new generation of knowledge, no new insights and no new understandings of the topic".
Nonetheless, there were two interesting points about this classroom episode. Firstly, according to Cheah (1995: 10), it was a "lesson in cross-cultural education, for this is the only time in the curriculum that students from the different ethnic groups get to talk about the different ethnic cultures". While these matters may be discussed in the mother tongue classes, there would be no input from pupils from the other ethnic groups. Secondly, despite the fact that the teacher tried to establish, unintentionally perhaps, what Rosaldo (1985:26-28) has called "cultural borders" [to Meiling: "you know?"] these borders were crossed by Meiling and others. Border crossing, culturally speaking, is an interesting feature of the Singapore classroom.

Another feature observed in this classroom would be best described by Rosaldo (1989:207) as: "human cultures are neither necessarily coherent nor always homogeneous". This was captured in another episode reported by Cheah (1995:12). The episode was centred around a discussion on superstitions, specifically about the practice of not having a mirror facing one's bed. This discussion drew contributions from pupils of the other ethnic groups who claimed similar beliefs and practices in their own cultures. This criss-crossing of cultural experiences led to Cheah's (1995:11) observation that "these border crossings have implications for the forging of a common consciousness among the children and suggest that the process of culture creating is actively going on in this classroom".
In this primary five EL classroom, then, Cheah (1994: 173) found that the EL lessons offer the teacher and pupils many opportunities to talk about our way of life, our beliefs and our values besides learning how to use a language. However, the idea of literacy as demonstrated in this classroom remained rather narrowly conceived. In summary, Cheah (1994) observed two notions of literacy being emphasised: one was directed towards competency in examinations, and the other was more pupil-centred and activity-based, representing an approach central to the idea of personal development as embedded in the 1991 English language curriculum.

Part 2 - An Elective Course on Literacy and Cultural Awareness

It is clear from Part I that the EL teacher is expected to be some kind of cultural resource in addition to being a linguistic one and is also, willingly or not, a social broker (see Murray 1971) or culture broker (Cheah 1995), or even a cross-cultural mediator (see Bochner 1982), a point to be more fully discussed in Part 3 of this paper. It was precisely this concern with what was happening in the EL classroom and the new demands being made on the teacher that the first author decided to offer a one semester course on Education, Literacy and Culture Learning. This course recognises the enabling aspects of our community's historical, political, economic and cultural experiences, and hopes to make young prospective teachers more sensitive to the issues of language, literacy and culture in multicultural Singapore. In particular, cultural awareness is seen as part of personal growth. It was also hoped that the course would orientate students to the thinking that the curriculum, especially one on language and literacy, is inevitably shaped by not only what goes on in the classroom but also what is happening outside it. So, it was common practice for the course lecturer to bring to class recent census reports, feature articles and news items appearing in news magazines and local newspapers as a basis for class discussion, tailoring the course to the basic needs of young prospective teachers. Stated as objectives, the purpose 'of the course is made explicit 'in Box 2.

At the same time, the sociocultural context provided an excellent impetus for the course. After having made considerable progress in the material well-being of the nation, there is now much interest in the arts and in the community's cultural heritage. There has been a rapid build-up of a cultural infrastructure, with the provision of a National Arts Council and the National Heritage Board. The National Heritage Board comprises what were previously the National Museum, the National Archives and the Oral History Department. There will be a network of museums, starting with the proposed Singapore Art Museum, the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Singapore History Museum. A national arts centre will be realised in a few years' time with the construction of The Esplanade: Theatres on the Bay. There is already a Malay Village which serves as a showcase of Malay cultural heritage. Sometime this year, the Chinese Heritage Centre was officially opened on the site of the former Nanyang University, with a mission to carry out research on the ethnic Chinese overseas. In a multicultural setting like Singapore's, the question of cultural identity is an intriguing one, and it has more recently re-engaged the minds of academics and leading politicians. At the opening of the Chinese Heritage Centre, the Minister for Information and the Arts found it necessary to state and reassure the public that "it is important that we separate the political idea of China from the cultural idea of being Chinese" (The Straits Times, 18.5.95). There was therefore an external legitimacy for the course, which was aimed at fostering in student teachers a better understanding of the complexities and the dynamics of a multicultural society.
Box 2
Objectives of the Course

- To provide student teachers with a conceptual framework to understand the relationship between literacy and cultures.

- To provide a framework to help student teachers relate understanding of their own culture to other cultures.

- To help student teachers with ways of applying their cultural awareness to what they do in the EL classroom.

The course was one of several electives offered within the two-year programme leading to the Diploma in Education, a qualification which serves as an entry requirement (together with good 'A' level grades) for teaching in local primary schools. The class was culturally mixed, made up of 9 ethnic Chinese students, 6 Malays and 3 Indians. They were all being trained to teach EL among other subjects like mathematics, science and social studies.

Course content was based on the main concepts of literacy and culture (see Fig. 1), and also related concepts such as biliteracy, enculturation, and acculturation. There was obviously a need for cross-cultural awareness among student teachers prepared for teaching in multicultural classrooms, who more than anybody else should respect and be sensitive to the customs and beliefs of other ethnic groups. As McGroarty and Galvan (1985) have put it (albeit with reference to a different context), "prospective teachers should understand and accept the notion of cultural relativity, i.e., that cultural 'norms' are societal conventions, that these conventions develop arbitrarily over time, and they are subject to the same evolutionary influences as language". The meanings of literacy and culture were discussed with contributions from different students. It was generally agreed that literacy in this day and age went beyond the mechanics of reading and writing to the ability to participate in the social, political, and intellectual life of a community. Culture was defined to include the way of life of a community, its values, beliefs and norms, as well as the artifacts that express the emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual dimensions of that society (see Fig 2). The concept of core values representing the identifying values of a nation was discussed with reference to an official document (Singapore 1991) published recently and publicly debated. Discussion of the relationship between thought, language and culture provided some kind of theoretical framework for later discussion sessions. The question of identity (ethnic, cultural, national etc.) was a difficult concept to explain as it covers different facets of social life, and the identity of different groups has evolved over the years. Questions which directed discussion at both group and class levels included those on culture and bi-literacy, the notion that English as an international language is culturally neutral, the link between home and school languages, and the role of textbooks/school readers as transmitters of values and culture.
There was a class project to encourage collaborative group work. For the class project, the student teachers were required to form groups to examine the role of language textbooks in the development of literacy and in the inculcation of social and cultural values. This project was conceived on the understanding that, by and large, school children's main and early contact with literacy and culture would be through the readers they use in elementary school and this provided a strong reason for examining these readers, as supported by Freebody and Baker (1985:382) who observed, "Little attention has been paid to the role played by school texts in the induction of children into the ways of thinking and knowing embodied in the culture of schooling".

Towards the end of the course, students were required to write up their discussion as an individual assignment and expand on their views of the textbook(s). They were advised to choose different sets of textbooks for examination.
One set of basal readers for primary schools that the students examined was the **Primary English Thematic Series (PETS)**, based on the 1991 syllabus. One student (Michelle) who examined the series found that the notion of literacy in the lower primary levels was principally one of oral fluency. She explained, "Emphasis is given ... to listening and speaking. From the first units on, pupils are encouraged not only to listen intelligently and talk to the teacher but also to one another". Another student, quoting Ferdman (1990), saw the lower primary readers as providing "stepping stones from oral, conversational conventions of communication to those which apply in a written, literate context". Yet another student (Noor A'shikin) who examined the same series noted that at the upper primary levels "the reading programme in PETS aims to foster pupils' interest in books and encourage them to become habitual readers, reading books for pleasure and for information. Shared reading, guided reading and independent reading are approaches through which literacy is acquired... Writing is a natural extension of speaking and reading. Opportunities for writing exist in many different situations throughout the materials in PETS". Nonetheless, student commentator (Sau Lai) said that the notion of literacy as interpreted in the PETS series was rather "narrow" - "literacy is not viewed in a broader perspective whereby it can be extended to things beyond the classroom". What she meant was that literacy was seen only as language proficiency acquired to master classroom tasks and pass examinations.

On the matter of values in PETS, Noor A'shikin added, "some of the general values are depicted through communicative functions [in] establishing social relationships ... like greeting and thanking people [which are quite different in the different languages used in Singapore], extending, accepting or declining an invitation. Values are also taught indirectly through stories... for example, an Indian boy helping a Chinese boy who had hurt his leg". Another student (Darren), also commenting on PETS, was a little more critical - he said that it has "a content that is not local enough... [for example] pictures are drawn in a Western context, i.e. [with] blond hair, cottage houses. This is not to say that it is totally devoid of 'local' drawings. However, in a course that takes up a significant, proportion of curriculum time, we felt that these representations were few and far between".

Other students looked at the **New English Series for Primary Education (NESPE)**, a set of readers published in the early 1980s. One student (Huay Ling) found that the early stages of NESPE (i.e., primary one and two), like those in the newer series, were based largely on conversation or oral literacy. The readers, she found, "serve to reinforce the correct use of grammar in speech and help children to internalise such language rules as they talk...... She added, "family values, moral values and basic social relationships are embedded in the content of the topics and these are... induced in the pupils as the teacher talks about them".

One other set of basal readers was **Sari Bahasa** in Malay, examined by a group of Malay language students. One of them (Norasikin) thought that, in these readers, literacy learning was aimed at grammatical accuracy in the use of Malay. For example, the first reader for primary one introduced many basic structures of the language and a basic vocabulary, which resulted in some ambiguity as to whether the series was intended for non-Malay students who choose to study Malay as a second language or Malay students whose MT is Malay and whose understanding of the language would, even at that stage, be much stronger than what was implied. Nonetheless, Norasikin thought that the teaching of values through the special choice of vocabulary was an important contribution of these textbooks: "A very large proportion of the text seems to deal with events set in the context of the child's immediate family [and the vocabulary shows it] (e.g., 'ibu' [mother], 'ayah' [father], 'nenek' [grandmother] and 'datuk' [grandfather]), with 'ibu' most frequently used".
In summary, the student teachers found, in the language readers they examined, an emphasis on mastering linguistic skills. Desirable values, to be transmitted, are embedded in the instructional materials, and there is obviously a deliberate attempt to bring about cross-cultural awareness in the English language classroom. Generally, there was a suggestion from the student teachers that it would be beneficial for some readers to move away from a dependence on adapted materials to a more liberal use of local materials.

Part 3 - Literacy and Culture: Teachers as Social Brokers

We think it is vital that prospective teachers should see literacy education (as intended in the 1991 EL curriculum) as being more than just acquiring a number of language skills for passing examinations and for vocational competence, which is in itself important but not adequate in this age of mass media and advanced technology. To quote Ferdman (1990:188), who makes a fine distinction between becoming literate and being literate, "Becoming literate means developing mastery not only over processes, but also over the symbolic media of the culture - the ways in which cultural values, beliefs and norms are represented. Being literate implies actively maintaining contact with collective symbols and the processes by which they are represented. Thus literacy goes beyond superficial transactions with a printed or written page and extends into the ability to comprehend and manipulate its symbols - the words and concepts - and to do so in a culturally prescribed manner".

Interest in the relationship between literacy and culture in language pedagogy has largely evolved from the contrastive analysis position (e.g., cross-linguistic interference) to the legitimacy of "basing English teaching on the norms of 'native speaking' cultures" (see Scovel 1994:208). The place of a native-speaking culture in second language learning (particularly the learning of English in most countries) has become an issue.

It is clear from the study of pragmatics that no language use is culturally neutral. Cultural assumptions are usually implicit or even unconscious in the way a language is used. While it is possible to learn a language (e.g., English) in purely functional terms, it would not be so in the case of English in Singapore. English is the main language of communication and education, and what use is made of the language goes beyond functional literacy or instrumental mastery to that of reflecting social processes and the literature and the arts of the country. There is already a growing body of creative writing in English. Pragmatics and sociolinguistic studies of English in Singapore has, to quote Carr (1994:152) in a different sociocultural context, "dismantled the notion of language as a neutral tool innocently engaged in the work of conveying meaning". A host country to English, according to the Alptekins (1984:15), "runs the risk of having its own culture totally submerged, and thus imposes restrictions in educational and cultural domains to protect its way of life". The political leadership in Singapore is conscious of this likely problem and acted to provide a language policy which requires school children to study their mother tongue(s) in addition to English. In sum, then, the EL teacher here has to be aware of the cultural overtones of English, the cultural assumptions of his own mother tongue and the cultural conventions of his own students which can be quite different from those of his own.

So, at a time when we are more conscious of influences from abroad that come with the language (English), the media and the technology and more sensitive to the cultural differences among the ethnic groups in Singapore, it is important to recognise that the EL teacher is a crucial factor in bridging whatever cultural differences there are in a multicultural classroom. He would be among what Bochner (1982:29) has called "mediating persons" - people "who have the ability to act as links between different
culture systems bridging the gap by introducing, translating, representing and reconciling the cultures to each other", as the teacher in the classroom episode had done (see Box 1). Another term used by Murray (1971:24) for such a role was "social broker" - a role being played, as Murray (1971:24) saw it, by the bicultural (bilingual) person in Singapore, "who communicates regularly with persons in two (or more) ethnic groups by virtue of being a member of both". Murray (1971:24) stressed that this role would be defined by "his structural opportunities to communicate, and not by the content of his communication". The EL teacher is in that position, structurally speaking, as the Singapore school today in a national school system is distinctly a "broker institution".

Conclusion: The Implications

While the substance of this paper has been drawn from what takes place in a typical EL classroom (the micro-level as it were), the implications deriving from what was observed have significance for the larger issue of social integration in Singapore (the macro-level). The first implication has to do with EL teaching itself, which should take the cue from the revised 1991 EL curriculum to move towards achieving literacy rather than merely language skills training. The second implication is that the EL teacher, to be an effective social broker or mediating person, has to be properly equipped with some basic knowledge and a proper understanding of, and sensitivity to, the different cultures in Singapore, and also with an appreciation of the theoretical and intellectual aspects of nation building. The third implication is that perhaps the best place to begin, as far as teachers are concerned, is in teacher education. While it would not be necessary to return to the social awareness strategies of teacher education programmes of the 1960s, some effort at fostering, cultural awareness should be worth considering. This leads to the fourth implication, which is that more attention should be paid to the cultural content in the readers used by school children since they provide for many children the most direct contact with literacy and the multicultural nature of Singapore society.