BEYOND ABC:
LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE IN THE SINGAPORE PRIMARY CLASSROOM

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Paper presented at the 1st Joint Conference of the Australia Reading Association (ARA) and the Australia Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) held in Darwin, Australia from Jun 30–Jul 4, 1989
Beyond ABC: Learning to Communicate in the Singapore Primary Classroom.

The S’pore Language Scene
The task of attaining literacy in Singapore is a complex one for our children. Out of 4 official languages viz Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English, and a host of dialects, English has been chosen as the language of work and learning. The children have to acquire English in a complex multilingual situation, where adults or siblings either do not use English at all or use a non-standard brand of Singapore English. Singapore’s bilingual policy demands that in the first year of school, the S’pore child, often from a non-English speaking home, has to learn to read and write in English and one other official language, which sometimes is not the child’s mother tongue. Curriculum time even in Primary 1 is divided between the teaching of the 2 languages. Till 1984 language and reading were taught through a structured syllabus and an instructional package based on this syllabus. In a great number of classrooms the children read little else but their basal readers which numbered 2 in a year. Teachers then understood reading as little else but reading aloud and many Primary classrooms had a mere handful of ‘discarded’ books in their classroom libraries.

A pilot study in 1980 and a major follow up study on the reading progress and problems of Singapore children has revolutionised the early language learning classroom in Singapore. (Ng, 1980; 1984b; 1984c; 1986; 1987)

The Reading Skills Project was ‘a crucial precursor in suggesting what would be most relevant and realistic in improving reading and English acquisition for young children in Singapore.’

Sim, W.K., foreword.
Research into Children’s Language and Reading Development (Jan 1983-Dec 1986)

The implementation of a Reading and English Acquisition Programme arose from the study. As a later collaborative effort between teacher training bodies in Singapore, another programme - the Active Communicative Teaching programme (ACT) - based on similar communicative principles as REAP was evolved for the retraining of primary language teachers in upper primary classrooms. This workshop however will only attempt to present the state of the art for the REAP or lower primary programme.

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Background to REAP

*The Reading Skills Project (1983-1986):

The primary objective of this 3-year study was to gather descriptive-analytic data on Singapore children's skill and progress patterns in reading in their first 3 years of school. An added task that was later commissioned was to make recommendations for teaching strategies. The project therefore entailed not only gathering of data on Primary 1-3 children but also classroom observation of reading instruction activity, interviews with reading teachers, and it included a search for viable teaching approaches for the Singapore classroom.

A total of 312 children from Primary 1 to 3 from 24 schools were initially chosen through stratified random sampling procedures to present a wide range of reading levels. In compliance to an official request for a larger sample, this number was enlarged to 624 children by August 1984.

The children were allotted to 4 reading progress levels per class level and tested on an individual basis at 6 monthly intervals. The battery of tests measured reading comprehension as well as accuracy; they also measured reading-related skills like decoding, oral language and writing vocabulary.

*Major Findings on Children:

1. There was wide heterogeneity in performance in the reading progress of Singapore children at different progress levels and even within each class level.

2. One quarter of the children were reading at frustration level indicating that the children were finding their basal readers difficult. (Ng, S.M., 1984a). They were also not using self-correcting strategies, an important behaviour in children learning to read, seen particularly when children are reading sufficiently easy texts. (Clay, 1979; 1982)

3. From the reading comprehension scores being lower than the reading accuracy scores, indications were that children might have been reading aloud correctly but not understanding what they read.

*These sections are summarised extracts from Reading Skills Project and Reading and English Acquisition Programme reports (See Ng, 1984, 1985, 1987)
4. Singapore children's Writing Vocabulary scores compared less unfavourably to that of children from English speaking countries than scores on their Oral Language.

5. Data supported the view that the skills tested (decoding, oral language, writing) are interdependent and mutually facilitating.

6. Poor readers were found to lack even concepts about print like alphabet recognition and concept of letter-sound correspondence. Good readers on the other hand were found to be applying subskills in an integrated manner.

*Major findings on Teachers*

1. Teachers showed a narrow understanding of the reading process. They saw word or sentence recognition as most important, phonics second in importance, and comprehension ability as third. Reading research in the last 20 years (Clay, 1979; Goodman, 1970; Smith, 1978) has shown this to be otherwise and that reading involves complex processes of language, thinking and memory processes of rather than sequential letter or word recognition.

2. Teachers were not helping children build up their independent processing skills nor guiding them into the use of multiple cues like graphic, contextual or syntactic cues.

3. Teachers spent most time having the children practise reading or answering questions. Minimum assistance was provided.

4. Their most commonly used tools were the flashcards, the basal readers and the blackboard. There was over-reliance on the basal reader, and little use of supplementary materials.

5. Teachers were not sufficiently equipped to cater for children's different abilities, nor to use a diagnostic-prescriptive approach to teaching reading.
The Recommended Approaches

Although the study was initially focussed on reading, the research findings consistently indicated the interdependence of language skills. It argued that the weaknesses in reading instruction be seen as an inextricable part of weaknesses in the total English language instruction programme.

A literature search for viable reading and language instruction programmes led to the conclusion that the Language Experience Approach to Reading (LEAR) can help our children's peculiar weaknesses in their learning to read strategies.

The approach entails creating a shared activity in the classroom so that the experience provides a natural stimulus to talk. The children's talk then is written down, read and reread. The instruction of subskills like phonics, concept about print, or structural features can take place with the use of these children-created texts which would have special significance for the young readers. Further rationale offered were:

1) It could provide a pre-reading programme (where children lacked such readiness), a foundation for word attack skills, as well as a whole class approach that also makes provisions for difference in ability.
2) It is a meaning-based approach emphasising understanding of the language read rather than an imitation or 'parroting' of the language.
3) It is multisensory in nature and involves listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. It would introduce language in an integrated, motivating and enjoyable way.
4) The reading material in LEAR derives from the children's own speech. They would hence always have special relevance for each child and be of the right level.
5) As the children learn to use more words through LEAR, they could learn concepts of print which were found to be lacking in our poorer readers' word attack skills.
6) The LEAR approach has provisions for children of differing abilities and different rates of learning since it capitalizes on each child's thinking and feelings about an experience.
7) It stresses the collection of on-going diagnostic information on the children's abilities to speak, listen, read and write.
The method is adapted to Singapore children's needs through certain added features and is hence called the Modified LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH (MLEA). Since many of the children are unable to speak English on entering school, the teachers in Primary 1 first introduce certain language structures or vocabulary to the children before proceeding with the activity or 'experience.' A further modification follows from the constraint of policy decision to use the existing instructional packages which in fact adhere closely to a structural syllabus. The solution lay in some ordering of the sequence of activities so that these provided a communicative learning situation for the acquisition of the prescribed language structures.

**Shared Book approach and Book Flood**

The MODIFIED LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH is complemented by the SHARED BOOK APPROACH (Don Holdaway, 1979), an approach that is basically a language experience, but one providing the pupils with correct English models that would compensate for inadequate teacher or peer language models or deficiencies in interest, content or vocabulary in the basal readers. This approach using an enlarged book for class or group sharing would allow for the incidental teaching of concepts of print and foster a positive attitude to reading. This supported reading scheme was to be accompanied by an extensive reading scheme called BOOK FLOOD modelled after the Book Flood in Fiji (Elley, 1963). Each school doing REAP would be 'flooded' by carefully selected and interesting story books— as many as 150-200 shared between 2 or 3 classes.

**Implementation priorities and concerns**

The added significant contribution to the study was its carefully planned research-based implementation strategies. A feasibility study of the approaches was first done. Special care was taken that the innovations were teacher-conducive. REAP planners were aware that Singapore teachers, used to close adherence to an instructional package, needed an introduction to the Language Experience Approach that was more structured. A great deal of institutional support was given, retraining was classroom-centred, instructional support came in the form of guidelines, videos and slide teaching packages.
Books, both enlarged (for class sharing in the Shared Book Approach) and small, were supplied and monitoring of training, trainees and materials were vigilantly attended to. With such planned measures, the Reading Skills and REAP planners anticipated and avoided the many pitfalls of educational innovations that have often come with unsound, inadequate planning and monitoring of the implementation process.

**REAP IN SINGAPORE SCHOOLS (1985- )**

The Reading Skills Project team was commissioned to trial the programme in 30 schools. By the end of 1985, the research team, mainly from the Institute of Education, was joined by personnel from the Ministry of Education and the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore. The REAP implementation team was thus formed. By 1987, the programme had been implemented in 135 schools (Ng, 1987). To date, about 189 out of the 210 primary schools in Singapore are practising REAP.

*The Children’s Progress in REAP*

A comparative assessment was made of children from REAP and non-REAP schools. In February 1985, a sample of 512 children were pre-tested and selected for monitoring. Equal numbers were taken from 10 REAP and 10 non-REAP schools. Following further stratified sampling measures they were subjected to the same individual battery of tests as were the Reading Skills Project children. An additional instrument *Retell-a-Story* was developed to measure the children's listening comprehension and oral language.

An additional assessment tool package, a *Group Survey Test*, in the form of paper and pencil tests were used to assess the 512 on reading and listening comprehension, grammatical structure, vocabulary and written composition. The same Group Survey Test was administered to a much larger sample of 4947 children on 20 REAP schools and 20 non-REAP schools. Testing was done in November 1985, May 1986, and Nov 1986. It was found that:

1) for all 3 stages of testing, REAP children had higher mean scores except in the decoding and writing vocabulary tests.

2) the differences between REAP and non-REAP scores became more marked by the end of the second year.

3) The weakest group of REAP children performed better than the weakest group of non-REAP children.
4) The Group Survey Tests again showed that REAP children were scoring better than non-REAP particularly in vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension and written composition.
5) The Retell -a-Story test showed the REAP children having a better grasp of story structure.

**The Changing Classroom Environment**
With the advent of REAP, physical and curricular changes have transformed the schools involved. Much effort was put into getting support from school administrators for this. As the REAP approaches integrate the teaching of the language skills, block periods have been carved out of the timetables to facilitate activities and all class movements involved. Mixed Group seating has become the norm and REAP classrooms are especially distinguished by their colourful Library Corners, their print-rich environment with walls replete with children’s writings and drawings.

**Changes in Children**
REAP children have been reported to be increasingly vocal with their growing English proficiency. They are full of questions and are eager for English lessons, particularly for Shared Book lessons. They dramatise and run to the Library Corner at every opportunity. It is common to see REAP class children doing dramatisations for assembly. In varying degrees of efficiency depending on teacher management skill level, the children have been trained into routines for class discussion, handling of equipment like the Listening Post and group Word Bank trays and collaborating to write group stories. In contrast to many Singapore primary children before, most REAP children are happy and eager to write or compose.

**Impact on Teachers**
Monitoring of teacher attitudes and acceptance level of change form an important aspect of the implementation.
Teachers found the Shared Book Approach easier to master than the Modified Language Experience Approach. Many began sceptically, but by the end of the first year were won over by seeing the changes in the children's language and reading performance and attitudes. The new approaches, particularly the group activities that went with the Modified Language Experience Approach demanded a high level of class management skills and questioning skills.
Many have been encouraged to follow their classes up to Primary 3. Such teachers show their confidence now with the techniques by improvising activities and being able to speak in retrospect of weak questioning skills in their first year of REAP.

One constant anxiety they have is that many of the term-test formats and the national examination at the end of Primary 3 have not been changed to match REAP instruction. Although the REAP team have devised a suggested booklet of alternative types of tests more in line with the communicative types of instructional activities, schools are slow to adopt the test format changes.

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Ongoing efforts at refinement of teacher retraining and pretraining for the REAP classroom have revealed certain areas of need:

1) The structured syllabus and the existent instructional packages embodying them are overdue for change. The new syllabus, currently being evolved, should leave sufficient flexibility for more communicative language learning activities such as those incorporated in REAP. New basal readers, that should be written following a new syllabus, could be more carefully graded and better suited for easy reading practice.

2) Monitoring of REAP implementation needs to continue in one form or another as attitude change in teachers are hard to effect and maintain. A feedback system needs to be maintained at all levels.

3) A scrutiny of the children's class dictated stories and individual writings give an indication of directions in which teacher guidance can be improved: Quality and flow of ideas and language range from the contrived to the fluent, from being highly predictable to highly creative, and in a few cases from being an uncomfortable mix of colloquial and literary expressions to being model pieces of children's narrative or expository writing.

Indications are that the heterogeneity in quality may vary according to the informed nature, and adequacy of the teacher's guiding questions ("scaffolding"). The present constraints of having to base activities on the teaching of prescribed language items may also be contributing to this heterogeneity. It seemed that:

i) the nature of the language structure emphasised at times does not lend itself to being used repeatedly within a piece of writing. Children's stories that attempt to make use of these structures repeatedly often appear contrived.
ii) Insufficient 'scaffolding' of the writing process is evident when teacher has not sufficiently discussed the possibilities of storyline, characterisation, vocabulary, and needed structures with the children. In the Shared Book lesson, literary appreciation skills may be lacking in the teacher, and opportunities for character or story development left unexploited. In the Language Experience a greater variety of writing genre need to be utilised, and teacher knowledge of text structures built up to aid children in the writing of a variety of subjects for a variety of purposes.

iii) Teacher knowledge of differences between spoken discourse and written discourse may aid the children particularly in Primary 3. When children have already learnt to read. Problems arise when dictation is still elicited and individual children still offer a sentence each in turn. The primary purpose of learning to read from one's own story no longer holds for such children. Instead the teacher needs to elicit ideas in such a way that the flow of language at intra-sentence and intra-paragraph level is given importance. The dictation then serves as a modelling of writing. Guidance should be given in the use of conjunctions, conjunctive phrases, clear pronominal references, use of the embedded clause or phrase that comes with the more complex structures of written language.

CONCLUSION
Tremendous amount of planning, carefully researched understandings of the Singapore children's language needs and of implementation strategies have gone into the realisation of REAP. The undisguised enjoyment of the Singapore children in their language and reading classrooms today attests to its success.

Maureen Khoo
Institute of Education
Singapore 30 June 1989
References


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### Table 9: Performance of Children from Different Progress Levels in October, 1985

<p>| Texels | Familiar | Texlaar | Diagnostic | Record of Oral Language | Neale Vocabulary | Neale Comprehension | Neale Accuracy | Neale Writing | Print Accuracy | Print Comprehension | Print Vocabulary | Print Oral Language | Print Record | Print Reading | Print Writing | Print Accuracy | Print Comprehension | Print Vocabulary | Print Oral Language | Print Record | Print Reading | Print Writing | Print Accuracy |
|--------|----------|---------|------------|--------------------------|------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------|----------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|</p>
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<th>Tests</th>
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<th>Primary 1 (October, 1983)</th>
<th>Primary 2 (April, 1984)</th>
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<th>Primary 3 (April, 1985)</th>
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Differently lettered subscripts represent significant differences at p<0.05 level (read horizontally)

Research into Children's Language and Reading Development
(January 1983 - December 1986)
Research Papers: Institute of Education, Singapore
### Table 15: Means of Achievement Scores of REAP/NonREAP Children on Battery of Language Tests November, 1986

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<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>N</th>
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<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
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<th>Prob &gt;</th>
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<td>110</td>
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<td>42</td>
<td>12.81</td>
<td>7.13</td>
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Significant at 0.05 level.

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Figure 1: Language Tests over Three Testing Stages of Mean of Read/Nonread Children on Four Levels of Oral Language and Reading Comprehension.
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*Significant at 0.05 level