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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Ho Wah Kam</td>
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which theories derived from the West have had an influence on educational practice in Singapore, particularly in the case of curriculum planning and development.

In analysing the type of Western theoretical influence on curriculum planning and development in Singapore, the author locates the paper in a broader context of the movement of ideas from one culture to another, taking into consideration the historical experience of the recipient country, its social and cultural environment, the aims of education as officially enunciated and local institutional and infrastructural arrangements.

The paper was developed along the two dimensions of time (diachronic/synchronic) and levels (macro/micro). The resulting matrix permits a study of the process involved.

Keywords: Western theories, curriculum development, indigenisation.

Introduction

This paper will attempt to examine the extent to which theories derived from the West have had an influence on, and relevance to, educational practice in Singapore, particularly in the case of curriculum planning and development. Since the school curriculum, defined in terms of syllabuses and sets of learning experiences made available to students in school, is essentially a response to questions about the purpose and nature of schooling, the paper will necessarily take into account the historical experience of Singapore, the social and cultural environment, the aims of education and the indigenous educational infrastructure.

This paper was developed along two dimensions — time and levels. On the time dimension, the paper took into account both the synchronic (one point in time) and diachronic (across time) aspects of curriculum development. The other dimension encompassed the macro and micro perspectives, i.e. firstly at the macro-level of exogenous influence on curriculum development as a whole, and secondly, to get a better idea of

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2 A definition of terms follows: 'Curriculum' is used as an umbrella term to cover the courses of study in a school system, the syllabuses and the instructional materials that come between the teacher and the pupils, while the term 'syllabus' is a statement for achieving the objectives of a specific subject including the topics to be studied in a subject. Although the term 'curriculum development' is often used to cover both curriculum planning and development, it would be clearer, as the story unfolds in the Singapore setting, to make a distinction between planning and development. At the planning stage, in a syllabus-dominated centralised curriculum like Singapore's, the objectives of learning a subject and the types of experiences needed to achieve those objectives are defined. The product is usually a syllabus and related guidelines. The development phase involves the provision of specially prepared materials to bring about qualitative improvements in students' learning. In a sense, this stage is interventionist as it leads to change in teaching practices. Western is used in the title as a broad geographical term to refer to the sources of theories in countries such as North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Perhaps, more than geographical entities, they constitute a set of references.

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the influence of Western theories on and their relevance to a specific subject at the micro-level. An investigation was made of curriculum planning as evidenced in the syllabuses for English Language and of the nature of curriculum development in two language-based projects.

A major assumption underlying this paper is that language, especially English, as the medium of instruction, is central to all of the activities that we associate with schooling, and in the Singapore system, with its bilingual education policy, language has probably attracted greater attention than in any other education system.

Another assumption is that since teachers follow the syllabuses, textbooks and instructional materials rather closely (and often more closely than they should), the concepts and theories that have influenced the thinking in these documents and materials (and embedded in them) are likely to have the greatest impact on practice in the classroom.

As Tyler (1990) puts it, "The decisions made, consciously or unconsciously, in developing the curriculum greatly influence what is taught, what students learn, what teaching procedures are used, what learning activities students carry on, and how instruction is organised to facilitate continuous and integrated learning".

The central question, then, is the extent to which curriculum planners and developers themselves have been influenced by theoretical perspectives derived from the West.

The theme under which this paper is developed permits three possible strands for discussions interwoven in this essay, viz.
(1) the transfer of ideas from one culture to another, and the type of indigenisation that takes place,
(2) the process of curriculum planning and development in Singapore, and
(3) the relationship between theory and practice.

Exogenous Linkages: Transfer of Ideas from One Culture to Another

The paper locates itself in a broader context of the movement of ideas from one culture to another and also of the process of indigenisation, and will try to draw pertinent insights from the social science literature.

In a free marketplace of ideas in an increasingly interdependent world, such as it is today, theory borrowing and adaptation has an important place in the diffusion of knowledge. This transfer of knowledge from institutions in the developed countries (the centre) to those in less developed countries (the periphery) has been characterised as part of the centre-periphery paradigm (Altbach, 1981). It is a useful descriptive term, but it necessarily suggests a certain amount of dependency of the periphery on the centre and also the absence of cross-influences.

In criticising the dependency theory, Raggatt (1983) notes that "there is no space in the paradigm to explore how important ideas and models, as they pass through different levels in the system, interact with deep-seated cultural commitments and notions of cultural identity ... it assumes 'fidelity' when 'mutual adaptation' by planners and implementers is the reality".

In turn, Raggatt calls for detailed studies of "how educational ideas and actual reforms are transmitted through the system, how they are negotiated with different audiences and at different levels, and how they are modified in the process".

Whether or not this one-way flow of knowledge is a good thing has been a topic of extended debate among social scientists sensitive to what has been called "the dynamics of imperial expansion". Not a few of these social scientists have called for indigenisation of the social sciences (Atal, 1981), although there is general recognition that as a result of the inherent inequalities in the distribution of expertise and wealth, the means of knowledge production are inevitably located in prestigious centres in the West.

In the debate, the question of the relevance of Western ideas to indigenous contexts constitutes an important aspect of this call for indigenisation. For example, in the foreword to an early volume entitled The Relevance of the Social Sciences in Contemporary Asia, Shiozuki (1968) recalls that as early as 1949, a group of Asian leaders meeting in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) expressed the general feeling that much thinking about Asia was "too Western to be very relevant to the Asian setting" (p vi). In the same volume, Espiritu (1968) reminds his readers of the "limits to the applicability of Western concepts, values and methods to Asian realities" (p 43). Agreeing with the main thrust of Espiritu's paper, SA Lee (1968:52) elaborates on the point, "If we are not to receive
indiscriminately all Western thought, we should not at the same time throw out all Western thought; we should know what to select for our use and what not to select. In view of our scarce resources, it is in fact preferable to leave to Western universities and governments those items of research which can best be carried out by them and we should merely draw the results from time to time”.

In the light of SA Lee’s (1968) statement, it is useful to think in terms of three types of indigenisation (as applicable to the social sciences), as Kumar (1979) did, viz. structural, substantive and theoretical. The controversy has been over theoretical indigenisation, i.e. whether or not certain theoretical frameworks formulated in a particular society carry with them the normative values and dominant ideologies of that society, which has led to questioning the premises underlying the social sciences. Structural and substantive indigenisation are much less controversial. According to Kumar (1979:104), structural indigenisation refers to the “institutional and organisational capabilities of the nation for the production and diffusion of social science knowledge”, while substantive indigenisation has to do with the content focus of the social sciences.

Kumar’s concepts will be used when I generalise from the specifics, but the terms which will be employed are devoid of the connotations associated with the dependency theory so fashionable in the 1970s. In developing the general theme of this symposium, which is on the influence of Western theories on indigenous education systems like those in Hong Kong and Singapore, a threshold level for discussion must be first determined. The threshold level is the pull of the metropolitan centres (in the West) remaining as strong as it was in the colonial period principally because they are still the centres of knowledge creation and development. This is as true in the case of education as in the hard sciences. There are other factors, too. English, a major metropolitan language, is increasingly the medium of intellectual communication, and through it, the peripheries get to know about basic research in education coming out of Western universities and research centres, looking to the same sources for up-to-date journals and state-of-the-art books. Educational technology is Western in nature, and it brings with it not only a paraphernalia of hardware but also a philosophy and a set of views about teaching.

**Exogenous Influence on Educational Practice: The Macro View**

The British influence in countries like Singapore is well characterised in this statement made by Perren (1963) at a conference in Cambridge, UK, when he noted that “in Commonwealth countries where English is a second language, the influence of practice in Great Britain has been considerable. It has been exerted very largely through two agencies — British examinations taken overseas have set the syllabuses and largely controlled the teaching of literature in schools, and British trained teachers and inspectors have, often without question, assumed that what was believed right for Britain (especially anything which concerned the English Language) would also be valuable overseas”. Perren identified two factors, viz. the examination system with its prescribed syllabuses and expatriate personnel.

While it can be said that the heritage of a British colonial past has, to a large extent, determined the structure of Singapore’s education system until independence including the dominant use of English in instruction and in many aspects of the school curriculum, in reality, such influence was not uniform on each of the four language streams. The response of non-English-medium streams to Western influence, having used different reference points, was a complex combination of determination to preserve indigenous values and traditions, and general reluctance to learn from the West. For example, for a long time in the early days, textbooks for Chinese schools were brought in from mainland China; those used in Malay schools had a strongly indigenous cultural content. There was clearly a lack of fit between a Western orientation and the educational traditions of the Chinese, Malay and Tamil communities.

For the English stream schools themselves, the use of an exogenous language with grammatical and lexical norms set by educated native speakers in the UK and codified for teaching purposes in terms of Latin grammar, of textbooks imported from the UK and written by overseas authors employing a curricular orientation and principles of teaching more relevant to English-speaking children in England, of expatriate lecturers in the only teachers training college, and of exami-
nation syllabuses determined by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate based in UK, would collectively be the clearest example of the transmission of Western theories of teaching and their values from the centre to the periphery.

The continued use and, indeed, spread of English (the maintenance of the language of administration of the colonial period was in itself unique among former colonial territories in Southeast Asia), the continuance of the Overseas Cambridge Examination system and the undoubted superiority of these texts are often cited as reasons for the situation (see Gopinathan, 1989:182). Until an indigenous textbook publishing infrastructure was built in the late 1960s in the private sector, schools depended almost exclusively on books from the UK especially when all the secondary school subjects were tied to the requirements of external examinations conducted by the Cambridge Examinations Syndicate. Then, some encouragement was given by established publishers in the UK to practising teachers here to adapt some of the textbooks for local use when there was evidence of local expertise to write textbooks. This was the first stage of the process of indigenisation in textbook provision.

In the hands of well-qualified teachers, the textbook remains a very powerful tool in classroom instruction, but for the less qualified, it is the only source of school knowledge, and so very often, it determines the way a subject is conceptualised, taught and understood. Seen in terms of a worldwide knowledge-distribution network, the publication of textbooks for export from the centre (where the world’s major textbook publishing companies are located) to the periphery provides another example of the way Western theories in teaching were (and are) being transmitted to countries like Singapore, which gives some justification to Altbach and Gopinathan’s (1985:15) statement that “Colonialism structured an international system that emphasised the power of the metropolitan centres and a dominant-dependent relationship between these centres and their peripheries. The publishing enterprise reflected this unequal distribution of material and intellectual resources”.

However, as Raggatt (1983) has suggested, the centre-periphery mechanism can be modified with the development of regional centres. Such a centre is the RELC (Regional Language Centre) established in Singapore in 1968, an outcome of decisions made at the first meeting of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Council (SEAMEC) to train “key personnel” in language education and to organise seminars on various issues of concern to the region on linguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic topics.

RELC’s regional seminars are widely known as important occasions, among other objectives, “to exploit the results of research and to synthesise the efforts of an international community of scholars in related disciplines in an attempt to search for solutions to present day language teaching and language learning problems in Southeast Asia”.

Topics for such seminars have ranged from language education in a multilingual society (1977), bilingualism (1979) to communicative language teaching (1984). How ideas and theories discussed at these seminars have had an influence on the teaching of English here may be illustrated with the story of the spread of the concept of communicative competence, which has had a strong influence on language teaching.

At the 1978 RELC seminar, there were two papers (Di Pietro, 1979; Prabhu, 1979) which introduced the notions of linguistic competence and communication with reference to language teaching. The 1983 seminar, under the rubric of Trends in Syllabus Design, brought together some internationally known language teaching specialists, among them Munby, who spoke on the communicative syllabus design, and Prabhu, who explained the rationale of his Communicational Teaching Project in Bangalore, South India, to which reference will be made later in this paper.

The 1984 RELC Seminar, devoted entirely to communicative language teaching, attracted papers on the application and adaptation of communicative language teaching in different indigenous contexts within the region. Hence, the concept mooted in 1978 was reinforced once again in 1984, by which time a teacher trainer (Kirkpatrick, 1985) working in Singapore then was able to report at the 1984 seminar that “Singapore’s grammar-based syllabus and communicative language teaching need not be enemies but can work together quite happily”. In this case, a theory transferred from the West underwent some changes as it interacted with a
slightly different cultural bias. Thus, the mecha-
nism of the centre-periphery paradigm is being
modified with the building up of centres within a
region and linked through a network.

Although historical factors continue to weigh
heavily in areas such as maintaining a national
examination system and adopting curricular
orientations that are subject-based, Singapore has,
for good reasons, taken in some areas, a direction
seemingly against trends in mainstream Western
practice if they do not suit its purposes. One
element is the introduction of academic stream-
ing in schools after 1979, which created a lot of
debate in the local press and drew some criticism
from abroad. For example, Hunt (1987:117)
called academic streaming “retrogressive in
comparison with practices widely adopted else-
where” but he nevertheless recognised that the
“adoption of a policy of streaming is a clear
statement of priorities ... [it] must be seen as
primarily instrumental in the achievement of
economic goals and to have been adopted sub-
stantially on economic grounds”.

In fact, such streaming, with the provision of
lateral transfers, has provided greater access to
learning opportunities within the system than
was the case before as fewer students leave the
system prematurely. On the other hand, it was
the British psychologist, Hans Eysenck, who was
reportedly in favour of the Singapore
streaming system (see The Straits Times,
1987). Singapore has
developed a model of differentiated curriculum
that takes full advantage of pupils’ differential
learning pace.

Curriculum Planning and Development:
A General Picture

If ideas can be used to mark out certain
historical trends, then, curriculum planning and
development in Singapore may be seen in terms
of three phases.

The early phase, up till about the early 1970s,
essentially involved the maintenance of a select-
ive, highly academic curriculum with the peri-
odic updating of subject syllabuses. The major
achievement then was the provision of common
content in the four language streams of education.

Then in the 1960s, a few new subjects were
introduced with a technical-vocational slant. In
form, the syllabuses collectively represented a
subject-defined curriculum. From the early 1970s
to 1980s, the influence of a liberal, humanistic
approach recognising the centrality of the learner
became evident. Probably taking the cue from
the progressive movement in the UK, the syllabus
designers introduced ideas focussing on students’
interests and activities in learning. New subjects
in civics and moral education were introduced,
reflecting social and political priorities at that
time. In structure, the syllabuses carried more
details on the what of content, how of method, and
where of objectives, thus, helping to define the
relationship between a syllabus, teaching, learn-
ing and their organisation.

The third phase, starting with the establish-
ment of the Curriculum Development Institute
of Singapore (CDIS) in 1980, saw the introduction
of the project team model in curriculum devel-
opment, which brought together experienced
teachers, subject specialists, material writers and
external consultants (usually from the main-
stream of education in the West) to produce
subject-specific, attractive, multimedia learning
packages. It was also during this period that the
introduction of new subjects like religion and
Confucian ethics into the curriculum led the
Ministry of Education into some of the more
sensitive and difficult areas of social policy.

The Practice of Curriculum Planning: Sources
of Influence

In the Singapore context, the curriculum is best
seen as an example of organisational planning
and management to which the principles of
rational curriculum development can be applied.
Early advocates of this view of curriculum
planning were Tyler (1949) and Taba (1962) in
the US.

However, unlike the situation in the UK (where
school-based curriculum development in the
1960s and 1970s was very much in vogue), US,
Canada, Australia and New Zealand, curriculum
planning is highly centralised within the educa-
tion system with subject syllabuses drawn up by
the Ministry of Education. This development is
probably the product of a colonial experience.

Although the school system itself is largely
patterned on the British model with students
working towards taking nationally conducted
examinations, this aspect of the planning mecha-
nism has developed through much improvisation
because the colonial administration did not leave
behind any special expertise in curriculum development in a centralised system nor did it have much experience in administering such a system.

In 1979, when the Ministry of Education underwent restructuring, a team led by the then Minister of Education visited, instead of the largely Anglo-Saxon countries, the Centre National Documentation Pedagogique (among other institutions), France, to learn how the CNDP functioned for the production of instructional materials for schools in their country. That visit resulted in the publication of a widely-distributed report and in certain decisions related to the setting up of the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS).

While the French system could not be copied as it was, the then Minister (1980:iii) declared that “our understanding of how it [the French system] works confirms the conclusion I reached earlier about the pivotal role of curriculum work in a centralised system of education”.

The main conclusion was that the main task of curriculum development (defined as the elaboration of syllabuses, the production of teaching materials) was to be carried out by a newly established institute, the CDIS. Certain indigenous characteristics of CDIS made it very much an innovation (see Yeoh, 1983). As in the early days, the Ministry, through its Curriculum Development Committee (CDC), retains the authority to determine the subject syllabuses.

As evident from existing records, the formulation of subject syllabuses in Singapore has always been centrally determined. For example, prior to 1969, there was first the Textbooks and Syllabuses Committee (1959-66), then the Committee on Curricula and Syllabuses (CCS, 1966-69), followed by (between 1969 and 1976) the Advisory Committee on Curriculum Development (ACCD), which having replaced the CCS, was charged with the responsibility of advising the Minister on all aspects of curriculum development and of supervising the implementation of such recommendations as might be approved by the Minister.

The ACCD was, in turn, replaced by the Curriculum Development Committee (CDC) in June 1976, and among its terms of reference revised in 1979 were the following responsibilities:

(a) the analysis of the context of curriculum changes (social, cultural and national),
(b) analysis of needs (the individual’s, society’s and the world’s),
(c) stating objectives such as could be gleaned from policy papers and ministerial speeches or parliamentary statements, and
(d) operationalising the objectives.

The objectives were related to four categories of concern — the individual, society, the nation and the world, reflecting Wong’s understanding of the social purpose of schooling. Objectives from these sources seem to have some authority external to the classroom.

With these objectives, curriculum development was seen in terms of two dimensions, the horizontal representing widening circles of concern between the individual and the environment, and the vertical dealing with aspects of learning (knowledge, skills and attitudes). Experiences for students had to be structured. In many ways, this statement from the ACCD represented an important shift in educational constructs. Standing committees were formed for different subjects, drawing into a “collaborative effort” representatives from professional organisations interested in curriculum development.

As explained by Wong (1973:5) again, the various committees were “exhorted to relate, as much as possible, the overall objectives identified to their specific subject objectives. These objectives were to be defined and analysed to the extent that they eventually permeated every lesson in the classroom, at which level, each objective

reference to education policy, and to guide the development of curriculum materials according to educational objectives.

In designing the syllabuses, Ministry officers were assisted by the Subject Advisory Committees (SACs), which comprised subject specialists drawn from schools, the teacher training institution and the university.

It was Wong (1974), trained at Queen’s University, Belfast, Ireland and at Harvard (for her master’s and doctorate) and the first chairperson of the ACCD, who gave a detailed picture of how the ACCD operated. Under Wong’s leadership, the ACCD saw its most important functions as giving direction to the course of curriculum planning and coordinating the work of its subject committees, concentrating initially on four tasks, namely,
would appear operationally in instructional and behavioural terms*.

In the US, the doctrine of objectives was prominent in the periods, 1920s and 1960s. As in the US, the emphasis on objectives in the Singapore curriculum was in reaction to the highly academic curriculum that was patterned on the expectations of subject or content specialists. However, the major difference between the doctrine of specific objectives as espoused in the US and that advocated by Wong of the ACCD was that the former was quite mechanistic and Wong’s was based on a holistic view of child development and humanism. An inspiring teacher herself, with a strong sense of mission, Wong was against a lifeless curriculum and “ossified” methods of teaching, and the roots of her humanism might be traced to Dewey.

Nevertheless, the ideas of curriculum planning, as practised at that time, were clearly influenced by those advocating rational curriculum planning in the UK and US. The characteristics of this approach were explained by Hirst (1969), a British educational philosopher, “I propose ... to highlight three crucial demands of rational curriculum planning ... The first demand is that educational objectives be clear and precise ... The second demand is that we do not confuse questions about objectives and questions about content and questions about method ... The third demand of rational curriculum planning is that we begin first with questions of objectives and only then move on to questions about content and method”. Skilbeck (1972) called this approach “rational deductive decision taking” which is often realised in a “centrally-dominated curriculum system, where policy directives, detailed syllabuses, learning resources, examinations, personnel are controlled through a hierarchy from the centre”.

Although there has not been any explicit statement in the official documents on the theory that was/is used in curriculum planning in Singapore, it seems clear that the characterisation given above fits quite well the situation in Singapore before 1980. However, three of the curriculum planners in the survey3 mentioned Tyler’s (1949) and Taba’s (1962) theories as having an influence on their work. Hilda Taba elaborated on Tyler’s model. A few other respondents identified some of the features of curriculum planning found in Tyler’s model, which would appear that a likely source of influence would be that of Tyler’s curriculum theory, known generally as Tyler’s rationale. This is understandable, as Tyler’s book, I understand, has been translated into several languages, and is together with Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, probably one of the two most influential books on curriculum thought and practice.

A brief word about Tyler’s rationale is in order in view of its widespread influence on curriculum development. The rationale is systematic, proceeding from means to ends, as Tyler believed that any curriculum should be organised around pre-determined, explicitly defined objectives, which would collectively serve as a guide to the selection of instructional materials and procedures and for the evaluation of the curriculum’s success. As is well known, the rationale revolves around four principal questions which the curriculum planner in the Singapore situation would ask or had asked using different words when the curriculum was revised in the 1970s. Tyler defines education as a process of changing the behaviour patterns of people. The process consists of a series of learning experiences aimed at fulfilling carefully considered educational objectives. The selection of appropriate objectives, goals and ends is a major feature of the Tyler model of curriculum planning. The four functions in curriculum development (identifying objectives, selecting ways of achieving these objectives, organising the means, and evaluating the outcomes) are seen by Tyler as moving in a sequence.

As in the Tyler rationale, the data for educational objectives in the Singapore example were derived from three sources: the learners themselves, the community, and the content of school subjects as recommended by subject specialists. There were two ‘screens’ which served as filters to these objectives — philosophical and psychological. The philosophical screen was best encapsulated in Singapore’s aims of education, and the psychological screen used was probably underpinned by learning principles as understood then.

Curriculum development was characterised by Wong (1973:6) as a series of "specify-implement-
evaluate-improve cycles”, stressing the importance of objectives — “... the purpose of the curriculum cannot be clear except through thinking through these objectives and specifying them”.

Since the early 1970s, the use of educational objectives has been a dominant feature of curriculum planning in Singapore, and the question of how instructional objectives should be appropriately used by teachers in lesson planning and instruction was more recently the focus of a series of school-based workshops (see STU Report, 1987).

The Singapore curriculum has been undergoing continuous reassessment, synthesis and revision since the first major syllabus revision exercise in 1962. Traditionally subject-centred, it has taken a more child-centred orientation. From the replies of 40 curriculum planners in a questionnaire survey (please see Footnote 3), it is clear that there is now greater emphasis on the interests of the child which the curriculum is aimed at enriching. Together with what would be perceived as the needs of the child, the child’s interest seems to constitute a strong motivational base for the curriculum.

The closed-ended responses from the same survey are briefly analysed next. All the respondents agreed that their work in curriculum planning would have a theoretical foundation based on concepts pertinent to a particular school subject. Also, 90% of the curriculum planners acknowledged that their conceptualisation of the syllabuses was strongly influenced by theories and thinking from Western sources, but they (90%) also agreed that theories were used with adaptation, taking into account the cultural factors and social conditions in the local situation. There was, therefore, a certain amount of what Kumar (1979) called ‘substantive indigenisation’.

When asked to identify the theories that influenced their work and that were perceived to be relevant, the non-language officers mentioned, among other concepts, Bruner’s theory of instruction, Piaget’s stage development theory, the theories of Ausubel and Gagne, and the works of Dewey and Benjamin Bloom. However, it was the language specialists who were most specific in identifying theories pertinent to their discipline, eg. Krashen’s monitor theory, the schema theory in reading comprehension and the communicative competence approach. Some of the current theories pertinent to second language acquisition in the West were also mentioned as being influential by those involved in planning the syllabuses for teaching endogenous languages such as Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

While it is true that language syllabuses have always been influenced by a theory of language and a theory of language learning prevalent at that time, the language syllabuses in Singapore have been more eclectic, consisting of a combination of structural, situational, skills-based and task-based features. Nonetheless, there has been a shift in thinking, with increasing attention paid to language use and decreasing attention to language form.

In arguing for a revision of existing syllabuses in English, Mok (1987:148) said, “The fact that the present syllabuses are out of step with the firmly held views of Singapore language specialists on language teaching gives a valid reason for considering revision”.

The general shift of views of language learning is probably the result of what has happened in the West over the last 15 years in the area of language pedagogy. When the older behaviourist model of language acquisition gave way to a cognitivist perspective as a result largely of what has been called the ‘Chomskyan revolution in linguistics’, Krashen’s monitor theory and related approaches have taken its place. The audio-lingual approach, based on the behaviourist model, has not been completely abandoned here but adapted to emphasise the oral aspects of language learning and to encourage regular use of the language in a communicative context. According to Mok (1987:148), schools, under the guidance of curriculum specialists from the Ministry of Education and training institutions, have been keeping pace with “current approaches and practices” — a phrase to be interpreted to mean following trends in the mainstream of language teaching. For example, the learner is now at least an active user of language, “Many school English programmes are slanting towards a view of language teaching that places the learner at a focal point with the teacher seen in the role of a facilitator who provides creative contexts for language learning” (Mok, 1987:148).

In recent years, there is, therefore, clear recognition of the centrality of the learner, a position which seems to be tied to the liberal, humanistic tradition of the West that started with the progressive education movement in the 20s in the
US. This is evident in the responses to the questionnaires, which affirmed that the move has been in the direction of the learner-centred approach, building on students' interests and needs. There has always been this tension between the subject-centred and learner-centred approaches in an attempt to make the curriculum more relevant to the life experiences of the learner. And although the source of this idea is clearly Western, the interpretation of it is different from how it is conventionally interpreted. Even in the West, curriculum theorists did warn against total reliance on students' interests. The respondents in the survey recognised that the students' interests and needs, and the basis of motivation to learn should be the starting point in the curriculum, although at the practical level, the interpretation may entail different ways of making topics interesting and acceptable to the student. Nonetheless, the idea that students must be intrinsically (rather than extrinsically) motivated is central to any educational theory.

In general, a number of basic theoretical ideas have more recently influenced educational practice and the construction of the syllabuses. In the mid-1970s, for instance, the concept of learning as inquiry influenced in particular the science syllabuses. The work of Benjamin Bloom and his associates in developing the taxonomy of educational objectives threw into relief the lack of attention being paid to the higher-level cognitive objectives in many syllabuses and classrooms. In the 1980s, attention was focussed on the development of higher-order cognitive skills, which resulted in the revival of interests in teaching thinking skills. The introduction of the recent Ministry-initiated CoRT (Cognitive Research Trust) Thinking Programme is a case in point (see CoRT, 1990). Introduced into a few pilot schools in Singapore in 1987 and designed by Edward de Bono, well-known for his work on lateral thinking, it consists of a series of 60 lessons intended for the direct teaching of thinking as a skill, but the next stage of integrating all the thinking tools into school subjects is regarded as crucial. So far, a total of 45 primary and secondary schools have joined the programme. This programme has generated a number of other school-based thinking projects (eg. Perera, 1990) designed to adapt the general principles and tools to suit certain school subjects and local conditions.

The Practice of Curriculum Development

Before 1980, the development of materials for subject teaching was confined to the production of guidelines and manuals for teachers, and instructional materials for one or two pilot-scale projects while commercial publishers, some of them foreign, produced textbooks written to given syllabuses. In the practice of curriculum development, then, structural or infrastructural indigenisation did not take place in Singapore until the establishment of the CDIS.

Set up in 1980 to "produce teaching materials of all kinds" (Goh, 1980:iii), the CDIS has been active in developing a wide range of instructional materials covering practically all school subjects. According to Lim (1988:2), a former senior staff member in CDIS, curriculum development was re-interpreted to include "needs analysis, goal setting, syllabus design, materials design, language programme design, teacher preparation, implementation of programmes in the schools, monitoring, feedback and evaluation". Although the visit to France, by a team of curriculum specialists (see Lau et al., 1980), did confirm the need for a new system of curriculum development in Singapore, there is probably no parallel organisation in education systems in the West.

As originally envisaged, CDIS has taken on "the pivotal role of curriculum work in a centralised system of education" (Goh, 1980:iii). Over the last nine years, CDIS has developed a large number of instructional packages for practically all school subjects. Although the conceptualisation and writing of these materials have been assigned to local specialists and teachers, CDIS continues to draw upon foreign expertise (usually from UK and the US) as consultants to its projects.

In a sense, Singapore is very much less dependent on Western publishers for teaching materials and textbooks but inevitably, curricular perspectives from overseas have been adopted. This last point was confirmed by Lim (1988), who coordinated a number of the language projects at CDIS. She referred to a hierarchy of factors taken into account in materials development in Singapore, among which she called the

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1 "The goals are the sum of goals, largely humanistic, in language teaching as represented in current theory and practice, which focus on the learner, and which form the rationale of all the language materials produced by CDIS. They emphasise the learner as an active participant in the learning process, rather than a passive recipient, as an individual with special needs ..." (Lim, 1988:5).
goals' (or what Tyler would call the psychological screen)4.

These goals are moderated by what she called "Givens" and "Constraints". The "Givens", or the philosophical screen, are goals formalised in national policies, such as working towards a bilingual ability, the need to develop a cultural identity based on multiculturalism, and the inculcation of social and moral values. These form what Lim called the "ideological framework for materials development" (1988:4). The "Constraints" constitute the realities of the language situation, e.g. relatively large class size, the actual amount of curriculum time (less than desired), the heterogeneity of students' language backgrounds, etc. In assessing the effect of the invigorated curriculum development process after seven or eight years, Lim (1988:7) declared that "A combination of factors, including the worldwide trend towards a humanistic approach in language teaching, the advent of the communicative approach, a new emphasis on oral-aural skills, a new consciousness of the vast educational potential of technology ... have all contributed towards a greater willingness on the part of teachers to explore ways of removing barriers to make teaching more innovative". Lim cited, among other successful projects, REAP (Reading and English Acquisition Programme), a project currently based in the Ministry of Education.

REAP and the language arts component in LEAP (Language Activity Programme, based then in CDIS) will be examined for the way exogenous theories have been adapted to suit local needs and conditions. Both programmes took seriously Dewey's advice about starting where the child is. In both cases, language was seen as central to learning, and both recognised the movement in language teaching towards strategies "based on communication, the use of real language and real situations, and a reliance on the pupil himself to set some of the parameters of his own learning" (Somerville-Ryan, 1985:15). Both programmes adapted what is broadly known as the 'Whole Language' approach, each to suit its own purposes. Whole language teaching, eclectic in its theoretical underpinnings (attribution has been made to Dewey, Halliday, Vygotsky and Frank Smith, among others) "operates from an examined theory of how language, thought, and knowledge develop holistically and in support of each other" (Goodman, 1989:209).

Briefly, REAP was developed in 1985 after some extensive field work, and has since been introduced to the lower-primary classes in practically all the primary schools in Singapore. The objective of the programme was to guide lower-primary teachers away from their rather structured teaching strategies towards methods incorporating the teaching of both oral and writing skills.

The concepts underpinning REAP came largely from the Language Experience Approach to Reading (LEAR). Although REAP takes LEAR as its model, which is built on the use of children's use of language that they bring to the learning task (Lee and van Allen, 1963:35), the approach had to be modified to take into account the largely EL2 situation in Singapore by adopting additional features from other language programmes, resulting in REAP relying on books much more than the original language experience approach would require. This was regarded as necessary because the language used in print was likely to be more precise and exact than what is sometimes heard in the classroom. The two additional features are the 'Shared Book Experience' and 'Book Flood' techniques. The 'Shared Book Experience', developed by Holdaway (1979) in New Zealand, seems most effective with young children as it emphasises the enjoyment of reading that can be shared with another reader and in an EL2 setting; it compensates for the lack of such reading experiences in the home with another adult. The idea of a 'Book Flood' strategy was taken from the Fijian Book Flood experiment reported in Elley and Mangubhai (1983), which showed how children, exposed to a great variety of high-interest illustrated storybooks, made improvement in their reading and listening after only eight months of such exposure. Elley, an external consultant to REAP, is a Professor of Education in New Zealand. This project has had a very strong impact not just on a particular subject like English but on the whole rationale of the school curriculum. According to the (internal) project consultant (Ng, 1987), the decision to implement the project was based on evidence derived from the pilot study that the language experience approach was suitable for the local primary schoolchildren on linguistic and psychological grounds. Two features in the adaptation have made this version different from the original — (a) the local version offers more
structural elements in language than would be warranted in the original approach, and (b) the incorporation of features from the teaching of English as a second language.

In the case of curriculum development, then, the influence from the West has been both direct and indirect. A good example is the Learning Activity Programme (LEAP) designed for academically weaker pupils. It was developed on the principle that pupils learn differently and that the weaker ones, in particular, have different interests. The main aim of the LEAP curriculum was "to inculcate basic literacy and numeracy while providing skills training to prepare students for the world of work" (Quah, 1985:8).

LEAP has several subject components but this discussion is confined to the language arts component. Three features of the language arts component in this programme are worth noting. Firstly, it is the L1-L2 transformation, i.e. while the original idea of a language experience, task-based approach came from the West, the procedures were adapted from a project carried out in Bangalore, South India, where the pupils were relatively weak in English language, learnt as a second language. It was called the 'Procedural' approach1, and according to Somerville-Ryan (1986:1), one of the developers of this component of LEAP, "[LEAP] has incorporated the crucial elements of the procedural approach, but is structured around a broad model of skills development". While Somerville-Ryan (1985:1) fully acknowledged that the language component in LEAP owed much to the theoretical basis of the Bangalore Project and the work of its director, Prabhu, the local team also made several important changes in the design of the language learning tasks.

Secondly, it was this synthesis of theory and practice which proved most challenging to the materials writers. Thirdly, the result was an approach which was marked by a move away from the content/grammatical specifications of the traditional language syllabuses, and which required the pupils to be involved in tasks or activities which encouraged them to express themselves in English. While it kept to the criteria of the procedural or task approach, it differed in terms of methods and techniques (see Somerville-Ryan, 1985:10). The starting point of the programme is the belief that language is best acquired through use, and that the communication of meaning is more important than the teaching of form — characteristics shared with other approaches advocated in current second language teaching methodology. In assessing this challenge in synthesising theory and practice (and touching implicitly on the indigenisation issue), Somerville-Ryan (1985:1) said, "While most of the theoretical issues which have influenced these developments have originated in Europe and America, the nature and complexity of language policy and curriculum change in Asia has meant that it is one of the most exciting arenas for practical research into language learning and curriculum implementation where the synthesis is made real".

### East-West Perspectives in Education

Theory borrowing characterises much of the transfer of knowledge from one culture to another, but McLean (1983:25) has warned of the dangers of direct transfer. Other than the question of cultural relevance, there are inherent problems, as he points out, in a model of direct transfer. For instance, the conceptual factors may be different in important ways in the two (donor and recipient) settings to allow for effective transfer, but more importantly, users of a theory in the recipient setting may fail to take into account the debate about the theory and the modification made within the parent theory itself after the transfer has taken place. The "ossification" of theories is a special danger, and therefore it is necessary for theories to be re-evaluated against the wisdom of practice. Furthermore, according to McLean, transfer of theories from the centre to the periphery may inculcate "local elites with metropolitan values". In the Singapore situation, the kind of transfer that McLean warns against occurs less frequently because of the greater consciousness of the inappropriacy of direct transfer. It is clear from the replies of the curriculum specialists that much store is set by adaptation; indigenous mediating factors are inevitably taken into account. In the nature of adaptations, Widdowson's (1989:128)
advice seems valid, when he says: "... the influence of ideas does not depend on their being understood in their own terms. Usually it depends on their being recast in different terms to suit other conditions of relevance. The more influential an idea, the less dependent it is on the particular context of its conception".

But how is this process of influence to be conceptualised? One way of explaining the impact of exogenous theories on local educational practice is to see it in terms of Anthony's (1963) conceptual differentiation between approach, method and technique (see Fig. 1).

**FIG. 1. APPROACH, METHOD AND TECHNIQUE**

The term 'approach' covers the concepts and theories pertinent to the chosen way of teaching a particular subject. Such theories are related directly to method (an interaction of content and the selected principles of teaching the subject) and technique (a procedure implemented in the classroom). A 'method' refers to an overall plan in presenting and teaching the subject or topics in the subject, taking into account the nature of the content and the relevant principles of teaching. A 'technique' is what Anthony (1963) has called a device or strategem. In language teaching, for example, if communicative competence is the theory adopted, then it is located within the approach and reflected in the method(s) used. The techniques are made visible in the classroom as activities or practices introduced. The process of indigenisation often occurs at the levels of method and technique.

Educational practice in Singapore has benefited from the dynamism of the West in theory development and basic research in education, but what are the long-term effects on the system given the transmission of thought forms, values and ideas that come with the influence? This question has been publicly addressed with reference to another context. Brig-Gen Lee Hsien Loong (1989), in an important speech on the problem of Westernisation, has said, "Because of this Westernisation, Singapore society has become different from other East Asian countries, like Taiwan or Hong Kong. As a people, we have also changed, in outlook and attitudes, from what we were 10 or 20 years ago. This is an objective fact, and not just nostalgia for a vanished past. Even today, the process is not complete. Our peoples' values are still changing rapidly. With universal English education, we have become a totally open society. The next generation is not growing up with the same values and outlook as their parents. Nor are they acquiring updated values which their parents' generations have carefully thought out and imbued in them. As a society, we are absorbing ideas from outside faster than we can digest them, and in danger of losing our sense of direction".

This problem of response to Western influence is one faced by all non-Western countries, but Brig-Gen Lee adds, "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 says, is in building a strong sense of Singaporean identity, a "characteristic ethos and spirit of a people".

This argument can be traced to the roots of the bilingual education policy and the former Prime Minister's concerns which he expressed as early as 1966. The values-language-culture link was made explicit by Mr Lee Kuan Yew when he spoke to members of the Singapore Teachers' Union in 1972: "And it is not just learning the language. With the language go the fables and proverbs. It is the learning of a whole language system, a whole philosophy of life, that can maintain the fabric of our society intact".

It was basically this fear that the traditional cultural norms might be eroded as a result of rapid modernisation and Westernisation that led to the teaching of moral education in schools to promote a set of values perceived as Asian in nature. There were curriculum initiatives such as *Education for Living* (citizenship education in the context of Singapore's historical and cultural heritage), introduced in 1974 and replaced in 1981 by
**Good Citizen** and **Being and Becoming**, two moral education programmes for schools. In addition, a religious knowledge curriculum, offering a number of electives such as Bible Knowledge and Confucian Ethics, was later introduced and is now being phased out to give greater attention to a new civics and moral education course based on a set of metaethnic tenets which may well form the basis of a national ideology when such an ideology is finally formalised.

As the Western theories and ideas get selectively indigenised in the ways described in the preceding pages, the final form of the original ideas is going to look much different, which should add richness to the pool of educational ideas and theories. While the term Western is often used to describe a theory’s place of origin, is there really a clear Western/non-Western distinction? My own view is that some of the Western theories and concepts are probably etic, in that they are applicable across cultures and settings, while other concepts may have a unique ethnocentric (Western) bias and can be described as emic. This etic-emic distinction, drawn from linguistics, is a useful characterisation for the purpose of studying how certain theories and ideas can be adopted and others need to be reshaped to support approaches in non-Western settings. The ideas that are transferred are likely to be etic rather than emic, irrespective of their geographical origin.

**Summing Up**

As explained earlier, curriculum planning and development in Singapore may be seen in terms of three phases. The first phase involved the maintenance of a selective, academic curriculum with the periodic updating of subject syllabuses. Then in the early 1970s (the second phase), the influence of the liberal, humanistic approach recognising the centrality of the learner became evident. New subjects in civics and moral education were introduced. The third phase, starting with the establishment of the CDIS in 1980, saw the introduction of the project team model in curriculum development, which brought together experienced teachers, subject specialists, materials writers and external consultants (usually from the West) to produce subject-specific, attractive, multimedia learning packages.

Several factors have been identified as having promoted the continuing influence of Western ideas on educational practice here. These are: the continued use of an exogenous language like English which has made Western ideas very accessible to educators here, the importation of expertise from the West for projects, etc, and the postgraduate training of subject specialists in academic centres in the West.

Although most specialists earned their first degrees at the local university, the Western intellectual perspective has always influenced much of the work at the university — for example, the texts used to teach courses came from the West (see Gopinathan, 1984).

In this paper, I have tried to show the process of indigenisation in curriculum planning and development in Singapore. It seems clear that what is called theoretical indigenisation takes place less readily in the Singapore setting than structural and substantive indigenisation. This is understandable. Until we are in a position to set our own research agendas to develop theories specific to the local context, we should continue to make use of imported theories and approaches. In the real world, it is too simple-minded to imagine that in the social sciences, the vast resources of prestigious research centres in the West and what they can produce will not continue to exert a power on the thinking of scholars in the periphery. However, as Raggatt (1983) has suggested, with the setting up of regional centres with indigenous networks, partly supported nonetheless by international organisations, the centre-periphery model can be modified in the process I have described in this paper.

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