
Title	Influencing change in language teaching strategies through school based in-service training
Author(s)	Claudia Sullivan
Source	<i>Singapore Journal of Education</i> , 7(2), 49-54
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

Influencing Change in Language Teaching Strategies through School Based In-Service Training*

Claudia Sullivan

Abstract

In 1980, a Singapore study showed that many Lower Primary teachers lacked skills and techniques in reading instruction which could help pupils overcome the difficulties they faced. Learning to read in Singapore, where English is the medium of instruction from P1 upwards, causes problems for those children coming from non-English speaking homes.

This study led to a traditional sixty-hour in-service course with the somewhat untraditional proviso that participants return to their schools to conduct reading workshops for their colleagues. In this way, every primary school could be reached in a relatively short time. Between February 1982 and November 1984, two primary school teachers from nearly every school attended the course and many have already conducted workshops.

Beginning with the pilot course and based on participants' responses to questionnaires, subsequent courses were altered in an attempt to improve course effectiveness. Despite these changes, a 1984 study showed that little change had taken place in teaching techniques. Due to a rigid prescribed syllabus, segmented timetables, crowded classrooms, teachers' resistance to change, and other reasons, there had been minimal transfer from the course to the classroom.

Resulting from recommendations of this study, a team of researchers, lecturers, school inspectors, and primary school teachers was formed in 1984 to develop an in-service alternative. Instead of teachers attending courses at the teacher education institute, a core of ten team members underwent training and received training packages for school based workshops. These packages included locally made slide/tape presentations, materials for demonstration and discussion, and detailed printed guidelines for the techniques/approaches to be presented. Trainers then conducted workshops for Primary 1

teachers in the schools, one trainer per three to four of the thirty randomly selected schools.

During training, emphasis was placed on two integrated language teaching approaches, the Shared Book and Language Experience Approaches. Presentation of these was divided into two phases with a number of weeks between to allow the teachers to develop skills in one area before trying the next. In the intervening weeks, trainers monitored closely the responses of the teachers and gave support and advice whenever necessary. Teachers were asked to complete questionnaires and pupils were tested and given interest inventories. Based on feedback from trainers, teachers, pupils and test results, appropriate revisions will be made before the programme is implemented on a larger scale.

By July 1985, the team will have examined the feedback from the first six months and will have some indication of programme effectiveness. It is hoped that this school based approach to in-service training will provide more transfer from in-service workshops to classroom practice.

Introduction

Once an inadequacy in teaching strategies has been identified it is necessary to develop a teacher training programme to effect the desired change. This paper describes briefly a traditional in-service course which attempted to achieve such change and, in more detail, an alternative in-service programme presently in its trial implementation stage. Characteristics of this programme will be compared to

*Adapted from a paper presented at the First International Conference on Literacy and Languages, Seoul, Korea, August 1985.

characteristics identified as common to successful educational programmes in the United States and results thus far will be discussed.

Background

Since 1979 a number of significant events have taken place in Singapore that have affected the teaching of English. In that year the New Education System introduced a bilingual policy which required proficiency in oral and written English and either Malay, Mandarin, or Tamil, the other three of Singapore's four national languages. This emphasis on the English medium of instruction was due primarily to the increased importance to Singapore of international trade, most of which is conducted in English.

An indication of the trend towards English can be seen in the change from 1960 when only 49% of the pupils were registered for English stream instruction. By 1980 the percentage had increased to 86% and by 1982 90% were registered for English medium classes (Tay, 1982) despite the fact that for the majority, English was not their mother tongue. One of the main features of the New Education System was the increased concern for language learning. It states that "the first three years of primary education will concentrate on language learning (particularly English) . . . to give the pupils a strong foundation for the learning of content . . ." (Ministry of Education, 1979) in the later primary years.

As a follow up to the New Education System implementation, an exploratory study was conducted by the Institute of Education to determine the reading abilities of Primary 1-3 children and the types of reading instruction provided. The information gathered was to be used to improve pre-service and in-service reading methodology courses at the Institute in order to improve reading instruction in the primary schools (Ng, 1980). From 36 observations of reading lessons, 36 teacher interviews, and test data from 108 children representing 12 primary schools, Ng concluded that while the teachers observed were not knowledgeable in reading methodology they did show a willingness to learn. The pupils' test scores showed reading accuracy only somewhat below British norms but their ability to comprehend was low enough to indicate that emphasis was being placed on word perfect oral reading through rote memorization at the expense of comprehension and proficiency in language use.

Some of the recommendations made in the report were:

- 1 the classroom reading programme should be part of an integrated language programme to ensure proficiency in oral and written English,
- 2 the English language teachers should be given flexible timetables to allow for such integration,
- 3 long term retraining through in-service coursework should be developed to introduce teachers to a variety of reading instructional approaches, and
- 4 key teachers should be trained to serve as resource persons in the schools (Ng, 1980).

As a result of these recommendations a 60-hour in-service reading methodology course was planned. This course followed a traditional model in that teachers attended lectures at the Institute of Education outside their normal teaching hours. They were required to complete written assignments based on implementing the techniques learned with their own classes. The course had an ambitious additional component in which two teachers were trained from each primary school (lower and upper levels) and were then expected to return to their schools and conduct workshops for their colleagues upon completion of the course. In this way, between February 1982 and May 1984, 483 teachers from 232 (about 93%) of the primary schools in Singapore completed the course (Subramaniam, 1985).

In theory the long range effect of this multiplier system would be that in a relatively short time all of the primary school English teachers would have been exposed to the same variety of teaching approaches covered in the in-service course and would (hopefully) adapt their teaching techniques accordingly. In actuality, despite generally positive responses at the end of course evaluations, these effects were not realized.

In 1984 the Reading Skills Project (a research project conducted by IE) confirmed in a preliminary report that English language teaching, especially reading instruction, had changed very little despite the recommendations of the 1980 exploratory study and subsequent reading courses (Ng, 1984). The English subject timetables were still compartmentalized with oral reading, comprehension, grammar, composition, etc. assigned to specific slots. The pupils' oral reading ability still surpassed their ability to comprehend what was read.

Their progress was also hampered by the failure of the system to provide reading texts that matched the reading ability of the children. An individually administered test, the Running Record (Clay, 1979) indicated that 25% of the children were faced with reading texts too difficult for them to progress normally.

The recommendations of this report were similar to the 1980 report but more specific measures were outlined. It suggested that teachers be trained in and encouraged to adopt an integrated language teaching approach such as the Language Experience Approach as described by Lee and Van Allen (1963) and the related Shared Book Approach of Holdaway (1979). Both of these approaches teach English through the meaningful language of commercially produced storybooks and through stories created by teachers and children themselves after a shared experience in the classroom. Both approaches emphasize comprehension and English usage over rote memorization.

It should be noted that both these approaches were introduced in the in-service reading course previously mentioned. In October 1984 a survey was conducted of randomly selected participants from the in-service courses between 1982 and 1984. Questionnaires were completed by 66 such teachers and another 46 were interviewed. Although 92% of the teachers surveyed agreed that children benefited from those approaches, the constraints of the system prevented them from regular use of the approaches in the classroom. These constraints included a compartmentalized timetable, a tightly structured syllabus incorporated in the recently developed local language teaching packages, and limited time for preparation of materials (Reading Skills Project, 1984). It was obvious that simply retraining teachers would not bring about the desired change in the classroom without external support for the elimination of these constraints.

In November 1984 the problem was given to a newly formed core team of staff members from the Ministry of Education, the Institute of Education, and the Curriculum Development Institute. The team responded to the challenge with plans for the Reading and English Acquisition Programme (REAP).

REAP is a teacher training programme which utilizes the two approaches recommended by the Reading Skills Project (1984). The objective of REAP is to guide teachers of Primary Levels 1 and 2 away from their rigidly structured and compartmentalized language teaching strategies towards the

integration of oral and written language learning using the recommended Language Experience and Shared Book Approaches. To accomplish this the teachers are trained in school based workshops, provided with guidelines and selected storybooks, and monitored closely by workshop leaders to ensure transfer of skills from training to classroom.

Characteristics Common to REAP and Successful Teacher Training Programmes

Support for the implementation strategies of REAP can be found in the literature related to other projects involving desired change in teacher behaviour. In the United States, for example, an extensive and nation-wide independent study conducted by the Rand Corporation in the 1970s reviewed 293 education programmes which had been implemented between the mid 1960s and the mid 1970s. Although the effects of many of the programmes were disappointing, the evaluators compiled a list of characteristics exhibited by the most successful of these programmes. Among these were:

- 1 strong support from all of the key personnel,
- 2 an ambitious and complex structure requiring thorough prior planning,
- 3 receptivity to change of the various institutions involved,
- 4 emphasis on successful implementation,
- 5 development of local materials to fit the needs of the particular project, and
- 6 the process of "mutual adaptation", that is, continual modification to both the programme design and the teachers' classroom strategies (Mann, 1976).

Support for REAP

The REAP team has attempted to incorporate these characteristics in its programme. Throughout the first six months the programme has received extremely strong support from not only the key personnel in the team but also from various school officials. The team is composed of a local reading consultant, Ministry of Education inspectors, Institute of Education lecturers, Curriculum Development Institute writers, and two experienced primary school teachers who were made full time project officers. This gives the team credibility amongst teachers. In addition, the overall REAP Project Coordinator is also the Director of Schools.

The support system has grown steadily as the programme progressed and received positive publicity from supportive principals, from visiting reading specialists, and from teachers who have seen their pupils improving in English.

Planning the Programme

It is an ambitious and complex programme which will involve all of the lower primary school teachers over the next three to four years although the trial year is limited to 91 Primary 1 teachers in 30 schools. As in any such project the initial problems were those of planning, coordination, and staff deployment. The earliest tasks were the development of training materials for workshop leaders and the writing of teacher guidelines for the utilization of new materials and existing locally produced language teaching packages. At the same time staff were selecting, ordering, and distributing commercial storybooks; conducting the training of workshop leaders and teachers; and developing procedures for workshop leaders to monitor the teachers and the overall programme. The teaching approaches were introduced in phases and while teachers were trying out the first approach the team was preparing for the introduction of the second.

Receptivity to Change

The institutions involved in REAP are receptive to change, including the Curriculum Development Institute which developed the language materials currently used in schools. They see REAP as the first step in the revision process of their materials. The results of the 1980 and 1984 research studies have been convincing in the need for change as well as the inability of traditional courses to produce such change. Initially, the schools involved were somewhat less receptive to change but the majority of the teachers are now seeing that it is not only desirable, but also possible. Their pupils, predominantly from non-English speaking homes, are enjoying English storybooks and are able to use a great deal of the language they are exposed to through them. These experiences will be useful in the expansion stages to help alleviate the initial resistance encountered in the first year.

Implementation

Successful implementation of REAP is the team's major goal. Its first consideration was to make

implementation as teacher conducive as possible (Ng, 1985). Hopefully this would make the transition from the traditional methods of teacher centred "chalk and talk" to activity based approaches that would not be confusing and frustrating enough to warrant abandonment of them. The constraints of the structural syllabus, compartmentalized timetables, and lack of preparation time (as perceived by the teachers) had to be minimized. Since most of the Primary 1 classes within participating schools were involved it was easier to convince the teachers to restructure their timetables for the integration of language teaching. The structural syllabus was a more difficult problem and although it could not be changed at this time it was possible to plan language experience activities which would facilitate teaching the structures as they appeared in the existing local language materials. Lack of preparation time was also difficult to counteract, particularly since the teachers were being asked to try something new. However, the provision of detailed guidelines and already enlarged books for the Shared Book Approach helped considerably.

To further ensure implementation the teacher training programme was designed to prepare the teachers thoroughly but in phases. In this way the less complex Shared Book Approach would become part of the regular classroom programme before teachers were introduced to the more difficult Language Experience Approach. The Shared Book Approach workshop was introduced in mid January 1985 and the Language Experience Approach was scheduled for March. Between these workshops, after the teachers had had a chance to try out the initial approach unobserved, they were monitored individually. This enabled immediate response to any teacher's questions and misconceptions could be corrected by the workshop leader. Such close monitoring is necessary for successful implementation of innovative programmes (Hurst, 1983).

Production of Materials

The team developed its own materials to suit the needs of the programme. Specifically, these were training packages including slide/tape presentations and demonstration materials to be used by the workshop leaders. Written guidelines to accompany the enlarged books and for use in planning language experience lessons were provided for the teachers. General guidelines outlining the procedures involved in the recommended approaches were also developed.

Mutual Adaptation

The mutual adaptation process stressed by Mann (1976) and McLaughlin (1976) is also evident in the planning of REAP. Both workshop leaders and teachers were asked to evaluate the training sessions. Teachers were asked to respond to questionnaires seeking their opinions of the approaches and pupils will be asked to do the same. All of this information is being sought so that wherever necessary revisions can be made in any aspect of the programme. The opinions and suggestions of teachers, workshop leaders and pupils are important to this process of change, not only in schools but also in the implementation programme itself.

Results

At the midpoint of the trial year the available feedback included evaluations of the workshops for the Shared Book and Language Experience Approaches and the observations made by the monitors after visiting the teachers using the Shared Book Approach. Additional information was derived from the informal comments of various people involved, including principals and pupils.

Workshop Evaluations

The responses to the 15-item post-workshop questionnaires were positive.

In the evaluation of the Shared Book Approach workshop the teachers responded the least positively to the slide/tape presentation which had been too hastily produced. The Language Experience slide/tape presentation, produced less hurriedly, took into consideration previous criticisms, and was more favourably received (item 9).

On the other hand, four of the items decreased sharply in positive responses from the Shared Book to Language Experience workshops. These items (items 4, 6, 14, 15) are all related to understanding and confidence in implementing the approaches and could reflect the more complex nature of the Language Experience Approach. Revisions of the workshop programmes for 1986 are being planned according to the questionnaire responses and the suggestions made by workshop leaders, teachers and a foreign consultant.

Monitoring Results

To date, all of the teachers have been monitored using the Shared Book Approach. The workshop leaders who did the monitoring are all experienced

educators. They all underwent the same workshop training which included thorough discussion of the criteria for assessment. An additional practice monitoring session using a video of an average Shared Book lesson indicated high interrater reliability among the monitors.

Observations made by the workshop leaders included attention to four areas: general teaching strategies, the use of materials specific to the Shared Book techniques, the teachers' performance in English, and the teachers' personal involvement in the programme.

The results of monitoring the Primary 1 teachers so far are quite encouraging. In the area of teaching strategies, 95.8% of the observations showed that teachers had fulfilled, or performed better, the minimum criteria. The percentage for the use of specific materials was 91.4% at or above the minimum criteria. None of the teachers failed to satisfy the English performance criteria and 93.3% of the teachers observed were found to have positive attitudes towards the programme.

If all of the areas monitored are considered together, 95% of the observations indicate satisfaction of the criteria or better. Although encouraging, it should be mentioned that the Shared Book Approach is relatively easier to carry out than the Language Experience Approach. From the informal feedback of the workshop leaders who recently began monitoring Language Experience it is obvious that the teachers are having a bit more difficulty with these lessons. These lessons represent the bulk of their English teaching time, 10 periods per week as opposed to the 5 periods a week of Shared Book lessons. More planning is involved and preparation of materials is more extensive. It undoubtedly will be necessary for the workshop leaders to spend more time working with the teachers in their classrooms until they become more at ease with the approach. Formal feedback on this will not be available until the end of 1985.

Pupil achievement also will be monitored near the end of the year but significant gains are not expected in the first year. What is expected is an increased interest in English storybooks and reading in general which may lead to improvement in reading ability and overall English language proficiency in the future. This prediction is supported by the Elley and Mangubhai (1983) studies in the South Pacific. As the pupils improve the teachers should be more convinced that changing their instructional methods is worth the extra effort and the programme will succeed.

The informal feedback from workshop leaders, principals, teachers and pupils has been encouraging also. Some of the non-REAP teachers already are curious about the Shared Book and Language Experience Approaches and are requesting involvement in the programme.

Conclusion

As the programme is expanded in 1986 to the Primary 2 classes in the present 30 REAP schools and to Primary 1 classes in about 60 more schools, the team will need to scrutinize all feedback and revise as necessary both materials and implementation strategies. It will require a larger team of workshop leaders/monitors in order to provide the individual monitoring which is increasingly evident as the key to successful instructional change in the classroom. The REAP team will strive to

retain its present flexibility through the expansion years so that the effectiveness of the mutual adaptation process will not be decreased. To achieve this end it is essential to include the teachers in this process. For this reason the team is resisting the inclination towards professional printing of the guidelines so that they can be continually revised. Likewise, the slide/tape format will not be replaced by videos which are more difficult and costly to revise. Only after REAP ceases to be exclusively an in-service programme will the materials be put into a more permanent form for regular pre-service training. In the meantime REAP will continue to influence change in language teaching strategies.

The ultimate goal is for Singaporean children not only to be more successful at learning English but to find it less boring, less dreary — and perhaps even to discover that reading and writing can provide enduring pleasure. ■

REFERENCES

- Clay, M.M. (1970) *The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties*. Auckland: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Elley, W.B. and Mangubhai, F. (1983) "The Impact of Reading on Second Language Learning". *Reading Research Quarterly*, 19(1), 53-67.
- Holdaway, D. (1970) *The Foundations of Literacy*. Sydney: Ashton Scholastic.
- Hurst, P. (1983) *Implementing Educational Change — A Critical Review of the Literature*. London: University of London Institute of Education.
- Lee, D.M. and Allen, R.V. (1963) *Learning to Read through Experience*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Mann, D. (1976) "The Politics of Training Teachers in Schools". *Teachers College Record*, 77(3), 323-338.
- McLaughlin, M.W. (1976) "Implementation as Mutual Adaptation: Change in Classroom Organisation". *Teachers College Record*, 77(3), 339-351.
- Ministry of Education, Singapore. (1979) "New Education System Implementation Guidelines (Primary Level)".
- Ng, S.M. (1980) *The Status of Reading in Primary 1, 2 and 3 in Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Education. (Occasional Paper No. 5)
- Ng S.M. (1984) *Summative Report of the Reading Skills Project*. Unpublished MCM paper, MC/84/2433.
- Ng S.M. (1985) "Implementation Strategies for an Integrative Approach to Teaching Reading and Language". Paper presented at RELC Regional Seminar on Language Across the Curriculum, Singapore.
- Reading Skills Project. (1984) "A Feasibility Study of the Use of Shared Book and Language Experience Approaches in Singapore Classrooms". Unpublished report. Institute of Education, Singapore.
- Subramaniam, N. (1985) "Personal Communication from Ministry of Education". Singapore.
- Tay, E.S. (1982) "Some Issues on Educational Policy". Speech delivered at National University of Singapore Forum.