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## **Educational policy and children's experience: Running records in a lower primary Singaporean English language classroom**

**Sally Ann Jones**

### **Abstract**

In this article, I report on a small project involving the use of guided reading groups, levelled texts and running records in a multilingual primary school in Singapore. I focus on running records and ask whether their use is suitable pedagogically and practically for the Singaporean context. The analysis of twenty-two records of primary one and primary two children shows differences in the knowledge and strategies used by the different cohorts, and reading miscues related particularly to the languages and varieties of English spoken in Singapore. The analysis also shows a tension between the educational documentation and the children's experiences of reading.

**Key words:** reading; running records; primary school; Singapore; educational policy

### **Introduction**

Singapore primary schools are going through a period of reflection and adjustment which has been to a large extent catalysed by Ministry of Education initiatives. In this article, I report on the result of one school's reconsideration of teaching reading in lower primary in response to one of these initiatives. Teachers in this school explored the use of the instructional strategy of guided reading with groups of pupils reading levelled or graded texts. Both the instruction of reading and the selection of texts were informed by the analysis of children's running records. In this article I focus on the question of whether running records can be used as method of assessment to inform about individual children's reading and the school instruction of reading, as well as the kinds of texts which might be used for guided reading in this Singaporean school. The article begins with brief reviews of the use of English and of English educational policy in

Singapore. Then I describe the school context and the method of taking running records which was modified for this particular context. I next show how the analysis of the running records can inform about the knowledge and strategies drawn on by individual children during reading, and discuss these findings in relation to pedagogy, curriculum and policy. I conclude with an evaluation of the possibilities and limitations of the use of running records.

### **Review: English in Singapore**

Singapore is both a post colonial and an immigrant city state. It is multi-ethnic and official statistics give the ethnic composition as Chinese: 75.6%, Malay: 13.6%, Tamil: 8.7% and Others 2.1% of total resident population in 2005, ([www.singstat.gov.sg](http://www.singstat.gov.sg)). Actually there is greater diversity than these figures suggest and multilingualism is the norm, rather than being only associated with minority groups, (Gupta 1994). How English has been viewed politically and socially, as well as educationally has affected the way it has been taught in schools. During the colonial era from about the 1820s to the 1960s, English use and education was determined by the administration for the benefit of an educated elite. After independence in 1965, language planning policies by the Singapore government designated English as a lingua franca to enable economic development and give access to technology (Pennycook 1994). However, English language and culture were viewed as separate and it was the four official ‘Mother Tongues’ which were to give each ethnic group cultural identity. This is the rationale behind the bilingual policy in schools at present. Today children are schooled together with English as the medium of instruction, and they also learn another language in separate language classes. This ‘Mother Tongue’ may or may not be the language spoken in the child’s home, but is allocated based on the father’s ethnicity. Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are the main ‘Mother Tongue’ languages in the Singaporean education system. Thus children are expected to be bilingual and biliterate to

some degree by the end of the foundation stage of primary education at primary four, when children are about 9 to 10 years old, (<http://www.moe.gov.sg>).

At present English in Singapore links the country to global culture and technology while at the same time, it has come to be used to construct a Singaporean identity through its use in inter-ethnic communication, (Pennycook, 1994). These different functions find expression in the varieties of English spoken in Singapore. Gupta (1994) notes how the expansion of education, and the influence of school languages on home language use by generations schooled in English, have led to the development of Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), a variety distinct from Singapore Standard English (StdE or SSE). For work on Singapore Englishes, see for example, Brown, Deterding, and Low (2000), Deterding, Low and Brown (2003), Low and Brown (2003) and Foley, Kandiah, Bao, Gupta, Alasagoff, Ho, Wee, Talib and Bokhorst-Heng (1998).

According to Gupta, SCE is:

the main kind of English used in the home and in casual situations. It is the normal variety to be used to small children, outside a pedagogical situation. Nearly all those children who have learnt English from birth will have SCE, rather than StdE, as their native language. (1994, 7)

Therefore, SCE may be one of the home languages for second and third generations educated in English and those families who are shifting to English (Silver, Hu and Lino, 2002), often because of its importance in their children's education or due to inter-ethnic marriage (Gupta, 1994), which in 2004 was at 12.9% of total registered marriages, ([www.singstat.gov.sg](http://www.singstat.gov.sg)). Gupta (1994) also acknowledges that SSE may be used in middle class homes. Therefore, societal language use and language shift in Singapore is complex, in that it can be observed that families use different languages and different varieties of languages in different domains rather than completely superimposing a single language or a single variety of English on the home. With reference to The Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore (2006) carried out among ten to eleven year old school pupils, Vaish (2007) shows both language shift and language maintenance

among the Indian Tamil speaking community. Moreover it can be observed that SCE is a part of children's culture now, and when communicating with other children, the imperative is for children to use SCE. Most children on entry to primary school have attended kindergarten and been taught in two languages. However, there has always been immigration into Singapore and this means that for newly arrived children and those who have not attended kindergarten, primary school may be their first contact with English. For children in Singapore then, varieties of English can give access to an academic curriculum, and can be a means of socialising, and of interpreting and constructing aspects of identity, alongside an official 'Mother Tongue' and other languages which are spoken and heard, in and around, and outside homes and schools.

### **Review: English educational policy in Singapore**

In Singapore there is a national curriculum and a national English language syllabus which is revised at approximately 10 year intervals (Ministry of Education 1991, 2000).

Principles and approaches for instruction are given in the syllabi:

But while these documents set the pace and direction for ELT practices in the classrooms, they do not tell the whole story because actual classroom practices vary from context to context. There is also, sadly, a lack of documentary evidence of what actually goes on in classrooms beyond brief anecdotal accounts, newspaper accounts and a few scattered studies. (Cheah, 2003, 352)

Lim (2003) argues that essentially the Singapore syllabi from the 70s have followed global trends in second language education in moving through a structural approach combined with literary activities, to skills based and communicative language approaches. However, the 1991 syllabus states that English has "the status of a first language in the national school curriculum", (Ministry of Education, 1991, 1) and so, according to Cheah, this meant that English was taught "at a first language level" in schools (2003, 359). In addition, the syllabus states that English is the medium of instruction for most subjects and is the working language of the society and the

“key to the information age”, (Ministry of Education, 1991, 1). Therefore the aims of this syllabus are linguistic and communicative competence, and Cheah (2003) notes that the general focus is essentially structural and technical.

Concurrent with the syllabi run various Ministry of Education (MOE) initiatives. So, predating the 1991 syllabus and based on findings emerging from the Reading Skills Project on teaching and learning English literacy at lower primary from 1983-1986, (Ng 1987), were the MOE Reading and English Acquisition Programme (REAP) and Active Communication Teaching (ACT) programmes introduced into primary schools. REAP was underpinned by the use of two main literacy strategies; the Shared Book approach (SBA) for example, Holdaway (1982, 1979) and the Language Experience Approach (LEA) for example, Stauffer (1980). Adaptations for Singapore included the Modified Language Experience Approach (MLEA) to suit a structural syllabus, and big books produced in Singapore representing Singaporean children and childhoods, for example “The Biggest Hongbao in the Whole Wide World” (Lim and Ng 1991) and “Roti Prata”( Lim and Chan 1991). However, there was a decline in the use of SBA and MLEA in the 1990s. There are three possible reasons for this. The first is that in the textbooks which became the defacto syllabus, and in the syllabus itself, there was little attention to teaching beginning reading. Second, although REAP and ACT were based on a communicative approach to language learning, the school and public examinations were skills and accuracy based (Cheah 2003). Consequently, an unacknowledged dual curriculum for English developed in which teachers strove to meet policy demands through REAP and because of the great significance of the examination culture in the education system (Cheah 1998), also spent much time preparing pupils to achieve success in school and public examinations. Third, to meet these dual demands of the curriculum, worksheets and workbooks were prepared both for

instruction in REAP and examination preparation. Cheah (2003) notes the enormous pedagogic influence of the “worksheet” or “workbook” syndrome in Singapore in the 1990s. Thus the practical demands of the school context and the society were in competition with the use of LEA and SBA in classrooms (Cheah 2003). It must also be acknowledged that with large classes of forty pupils and above, the demands of management and safety are likely to have restricted teachers’ selection of these pedagogies.

Moreover, the pedagogies of REAP have been criticised for being inappropriate in Singapore by Sripathy who shows how the use of these two main approaches to literacy and what resulted in a “talk curriculum” (Sripathy, 1998, 274) are out of step with the cultural scripts of both teachers and children. Working within a socio-cultural framework of literacy (Street 1995, Gee 1992, Heath 1983) and researching literacy lessons in lower primary, Sripathy (1998) finds that the diversity of the class, composed of children who have different cultural scripts, and the contrast of this diversity with the cultural interactional expectations of the pedagogy, in fact resulted in lessons in which the SBA talk is mainly factual and monitoring rather than exploratory and spontaneous. The transcripts Sripathy present show teachers rephrasing the text for children and using the pictures, asking questions which she notes “were almost always of a closed nature, thus limiting children’s participation in the meaning making process” (1998, 279). She suggests that this is caused by a neglect of the cultural loading of pedagogies and the perception that language itself is neutral. In addition, a “talk curriculum” presupposes knowledge of the language of instructional English as well as knowledge of the language of the text in its spoken form, and perhaps therefore this type of curriculum cannot be sensitive to the kind of linguistic diversity present in Singapore classrooms.

In 2001, a new syllabus was produced of which two of the main features are first, language use and second, genre or text types “determined by purpose, audience, context and culture” (Ministry of Education, 2000, 7). This syllabus does include attention to teaching beginning reading. In addition, since 2001, there have been two MOE initiatives which have affected reading instruction in lower primary, one is systemic and the other philosophical. The first was a reduction in class size in the lower primary from 40 children in a class to 30, and the second was ‘Strategies for Effective Engagement and Development of pupils in primary schools’ (SEED) (Ministry of Education n.d., 25). The reduction in the number of children in the lower primary classes has enabled the reconsideration of approaches to teaching reading because it allows for greater variety in the classroom arrangement, enabling, for example group work. This reduction in class size supports the aim of the second initiative which is for school leaders and teachers “to gain an enhanced understanding of the philosophy of learning and of learner needs and styles in the lower primary” (Ministry of Education n.d., 25). Schools are encouraged to “design their own teaching/learning programmes, pedagogical approaches and assessment modes, based on the specific needs, abilities and learning styles of their pupils, to engage and develop their pupils”, (Ministry of Education, 2005a). SEED also aims to encourage teachers “to reflect on their instructional methods and devise pedagogies suited to the unique needs and abilities of their pupils for enhanced learning outcomes”, (Ministry of Education, 2005b). Thus the initiative encourages learner-centred pedagogies and assessment modes designed in schools for their particular pupil populations. Instructional and assessment practices of SEED have been disseminated through schools sharing their practices, teachers collecting resources, and teacher discussion and reflection (Ministry of education n.d., 25). A review of a magazine published by the Ministry of Education ([www.moe.gov.sg/corporate/contactonline](http://www.moe.gov.sg/corporate/contactonline) ) in which teachers write

about their practices shows that SEED is being realised in schools as an integration of subject areas such as Music, Art, English, and sometimes Science, an attention to child centredness, creativity, holistic and formative assessment, as well as the use of learning centres, excursions, and school designed resources. SEED has also provided justification for blocking periods on the timetable longer than the usual 30 minute to one hour lessons. However, concerns are emerging that a focus on expression, experience and integration may mean a loss of attention to teaching skills such as the skills of early reading. Thus it is in this climate of reflection, change and reconsideration in multilingual and multi-ethnic primary schools that teachers are re-designing and adjusting their pedagogies and assessments of beginning reading in lower primary.

### **School Context: One Singapore primary school and a focus on reading**

The school is a large primary school of about 2,400 pupils situated in the midst of government housing flats. The ethnic composition of the school population largely reflects that of Singapore. Children are expected to speak English in the classroom for most lessons and they have English lessons and learn a 'Mother Tongue' in other lessons, as well as using a variety of languages in 'down time'. The school has been involved in SEED and therefore has planned the teaching of English at lower primary through integration with other subjects such as Music and Art. Alongside this, the teaching of reading was identified as a particular school focus in lower primary. The English curriculum for the year was planned so that there were three days in the week with one hour periods specifically for the teaching of reading which was in addition to the usual arrangement of English lessons. This adjustment in the timetable and the reduction in class size meant that teachers were interested in exploring the possibilities of using guided reading techniques with small groups of children reading levelled or graded texts, in addition to the

whole class instruction with SBA. Another area of interest was monitoring children's progress through some kind of formative assessment such as observation and running records, as well as by means of the usual comprehension tests in the examination papers set at the end of every school term.

### **Method: Running records and miscue analysis**

There has been renewed interest in miscue analysis internationally because of interest in authentic assessment and attention to considering readers' strengths and building on these as well as attending to readers' needs (Goodman 1996; McKenna and Picard 2006). Given the emphasis in SEED on learner-centredness and authentic assessment, running records were thought suitable for use within a guided reading instructional programme in Singapore.

The theoretical framework of running records and miscue analysis has been developed by those working with children learning to read in English as their first language and with children reading in English as a second or an additional language. When reading in English as a first or a second language, children are encouraged to use cues (Goodman 1984) or clues (Gregory (1996) from their semantic, syntactic and graphophonic knowledge to comprehend and decode texts. They draw on these knowledge resources by means of cognitive and metacognitive reading skills and strategies (Garner 1992; Pressley 2002) or operations (Clay 1993), appropriately for text and situation and these skills and strategies are used interactively according to the demands of purpose and text (Grabe 1988). Goodman notes that miscue analysis can show readers' linguistic strengths and provide "in depth views of small numbers of readers" (1996, v) and Gregory (1996) advocates listening to bilingual children's reading and using miscue analysis during rereading. During a child's reading aloud, a miscue is defined as "a point in reading

where the expected response (ER) and the observed response (OR) are not the same,” (1996, vi). Self correction during reading shows the use of monitoring strategies. Thus, how the child reads; the strategies used and knowledge drawn upon, can be inferred from listening to the reading and analysing miscues.

In multilingual contexts, readers bring knowledge of other languages than that in which the text is coded, to the reading experience (Bernhardt 1991; Birch 2002; Gregory 1996; Robertson 2002). Bilingual children may therefore develop reading strategies that arise from the interaction of the languages they know and draw upon during reading. Dressler and Kamil suggest that these strategies ‘are available in neither the first or second language, but are part of an autonomous system with its own internal organising principles’ (2006, 227). Birch (2002) also points out that differences among language writing systems may also affect the reading process. As an example, take grapheme phoneme correspondence in the languages known in primary classes in Singapore, that is, English and two of the ‘Mother Tongue’ languages. In English, the symbols ‘c’ or ‘k’ may both be pronounced /k/, ‘c’ may also be pronounced /s/ and in the digraph ‘ch’ as /tʃ/. In Mandarin ‘c’ may be pronounced as /ts/, seen as ‘c’ in Hanyu Pinyin (the romanised form of Mandarin) and is also read as part of a whole character, for example as in the character for ‘cai’ 菜. In Malay the symbol ‘c’ may be sounded /tʃ/. This example shows English and only two of the Mother Tongue languages in Singapore. There may be great variation in any one primary classroom in which children are learning various ‘Mother Tongues’ and English and are learning to read in two languages simultaneously as in Moll and Dworin (1996), Gregory, Long and Volk (2004) and Gregory (1996). Therefore, children may be approaching reading in English through a framework of another language (Bernhardt 1991), or through their experience of spoken English. Thus in a miscue analysis it is important to be aware

of the different linguistic frameworks children may be referring to while reading, as well as the unique strategies they may be developing. This awareness involves some comparative linguistics on the part of teachers (Koda 2005, Genesee, Geva, Dressler and Kamil, 2006), the vast majority of whom are bilingual themselves, but not necessarily in the same languages as all the children in the class.

Acknowledged also is the importance of observation in teaching and assessing children (Clay 1993; Y.M. Goodman 1985; Goodman 1996). Although some have reservations about using children's oral reading as an indication of cognitive processing, for example Blaiklock (2003), children in lower primary are learning to read by means of reading aloud. Therefore, in using running records we intended to observe children's situated knowledge, and see them practising reading in a way that relates to their learning. Our aims in using the running records were:

1. *Concerning children* - to inform about the skills and knowledge resources children use in reading, (Goodman 1996; 1984; Gregory 1996), and so help to plan instruction for individuals and groups (Clay 1993).
2. *Concerning the school instruction of reading* - to give information about emphases in the current instructional programme by analysing patterns common among children, in order to make suggestions for the programme.
3. *Concerning running records as a method of assessment* - to explore whether running records are suitable as a method of assessment in this context, both pedagogically and practically.
4. *Concerning text selection* - to help identify children's reading levels so to plan future group instruction on levelled texts and to discover whether the levels of

texts written outside Singapore are suitable for use in this context. (This could not be addressed because of the late arrival of the texts selected by the school, so will not be discussed further).

The procedure followed for the most part was that of Clay (1993) who acknowledges similarities to Y. M. Goodman and Burke (1972) but designed running records specifically for classroom use with young children. Keeping in mind the practicalities and specific features of the Singapore context, a somewhat modified procedure and expanded coding model were constructed.

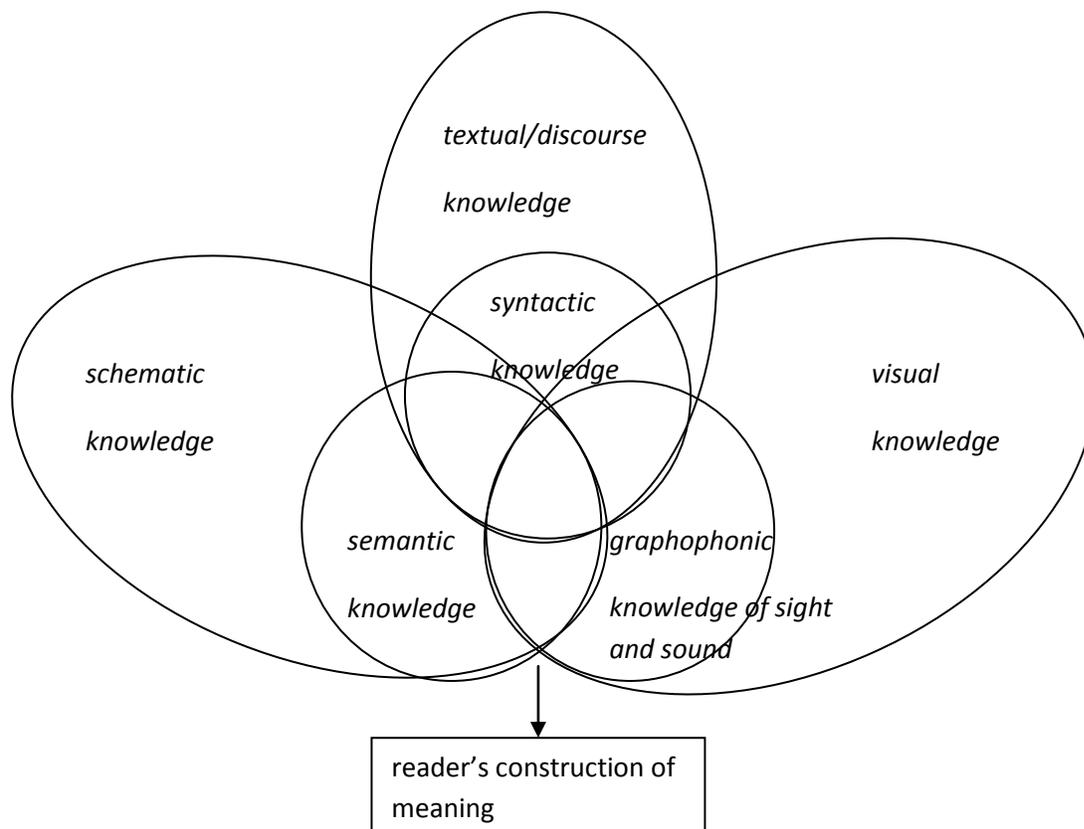
### **Method: Coding model and observation**

The coding of miscues is based therefore on Y.M. Goodman and Burke (1972) and Clay (1993) but extended to take into account theories of reading in a multilingual context. Young readers draw on their semantic, syntactic and graphological knowledge of language to interact with texts. They use reading skills and strategies to decode and match patterns in text to their own knowledge resources, as well as anticipate text. Taking into account theories of multilingual reading, it is possible to extend each of the three areas of language knowledge such as in Burns (2001), Clay (1993) and others, or to nest them within broader concepts as shown in the diagram below. (See Adams (2007) for a discussion of the origins of the cueing systems Venn schematic)

Semantic cues are those which readers use to construct meaning in the context of the text. This area can be expanded to, or nested in, a reader's schematic knowledge, when readers draw on their own experiences and relate them to the text. The area of syntactic cues can be expanded to include use of discourse or textual cues, which involve the reader applying knowledge of text structure or its organization or genre, as suggested by Goodman (1996). This might be important

in Singapore in light of the fact that genre is a feature of the English Language syllabus 2001 (Ministry of Education 2000). Although graphophonic cues include knowledge of the sounds of the language and their correspondence with print, this area can be nested in a broader area of visuals other than just the print in text. This takes into consideration first, the use of pictures in reading pedagogies, second, the consideration of the supportiveness of the pictures in text selection for the classroom, and third how technology has dramatically improved the quality of pictures in beginning reading texts in recent years.

**Figure 1:** *The reader's knowledge drawn upon during reading*



Clay (1993) emphasizes the value of observing children as they are reading as this can provide a context in which to locate information about children's use of schematic and linguistic cues and how they approach the reading task. This observation can show children's situated knowledge of reading which is gained through repeated experiences of reading. Children learn what counts as reading in particular reading events and they learn how to participate in these events, (Heap 1991; Robertson 2002). Information about children's situated knowledge can therefore be obtained by means of checklists and observation during the reading task as well as teacher note-making during and just after the reading.

#### **Method: Procedure of taking running records**

The procedure for taking the running records followed Clay (1993), Burns (2001), Winch, Ross Johnston, March, Ljungdahl and Holliday (2006), and others and was a process of selecting a text appropriate for the child, listening to and watching a child read, recording and analysing the reading and then planning future instruction for the child and possibly the class. The percentage of miscues (excluding self corrections) at independent (99-100% accurate reading), instructional (95-98% accurate reading) and frustration (below 95% accurate reading) determined text level. The records were analysed by referring both to the observation and recorded reading using the coding model above.

#### **Findings and discussion**

Teachers took 22 running records, 10 children in primary two aged about 6 to 7 years and 12 in primary one aged about 7 to 8 years. The texts used came from two reading schemes Sunshine Books and Ginn New Reading 360. This was because the ones ordered by the school for use in all classes had not yet arrived. The levels used were levels 1 to level 5. Apart from those indicated below as reading at frustration level (FL), all other children read at instructional level.

**Table 1:** *Text levels and children's reading levels*

*S: Sunshine Books, G: Ginn New Reading*

P2	number of children at the different levels	number of children reading at frustration level		P1	number of children at the different levels	number of children reading at frustration level
L5	2 (S)			L5		
L4	0			L4		
L3	5 (S)	2FL		L3	2(G)	
L2	2 (S)			L2	4 (S) 1(G)	2FL
L1	1 (S)	1FL		L1	5 (S)	3FL
number of children	10	3		number of children	12	5

The running records gave insights into the reading processes of individual children and also showed some patterns at each level, which can inform about past and future instruction. Four aspects of the analysis can be highlighted:

- *children's situated knowledge,*
- *the relation of children's knowledge of oral language to the reading,*
- *the reading strategies used by children in primary one and primary two, and*

- *children's discourse knowledge and use of text structure.*

In this article, I discuss these four areas, and then comment on how they inform about children's reading, the teaching of reading in the school and about running records as an assessment method in Singapore.

### ***Children's situated knowledge***

This was inferred from both the running records themselves and the observation of children during their reading. Generally, in primary two, children counted meaning as important in reading. They read with some expression and pace appropriate to the texts. Four children self corrected and those who did not, made miscues which were semantically appropriate to the contexts of the texts. For example 'squished' was read for 'squashed'. 'Squished' is perhaps more common in use in Singapore especially in children's spoken English. Articles were miscued by two children and contracted forms were generally misread. Another example shows meaning being drawn from schematic knowledge, as well as graphophonic knowledge in Wei Sheng's reading of the name 'Huggles' as 'Huggies'. 'Huggies' is a common brand name of nappies in Singapore. However, reading for meaning could become too reliant on guessing in that, in David's reading, while meaning and form could be somewhat sustained, sometimes the word produced was completely different from that in the text. For example, 'sickening' was given for 'cunning' crocodile and 'lazy' for 'sly'. This shows David over relying on schematic knowledge to support reading as in Stanovich (1980).

In primary one, 5 children out of 12 were reading levels 1 and 2 texts at frustration level, and overall, reading seemed to be more performance orientated. Children read more softly when not sure, rehearsed under their breaths before speaking out and took a longer time looking at the text and pictures. Possibilities are that children's knowledge of language was not equivalent to

that in the text, or that an emphasis on performance meant that the use of reading strategies was inhibited. This could be a question of language (see below) or a question of reading (Alderson 1984; Bernhardt and Kamil 1995; Clarke 1988). In either case it would be good to re-examine pedagogies used at primary one which assume a knowledge of spoken language, as well as the levels of language in texts in the main textbooks used in schools. Asking children to retell after reading in their preferred language/s might increase our understanding here, (Bernhardt 1991).

### ***The relation of knowledge of oral language to the reading,***

Among all the children and across all levels of reading, 12 did not sound final consonants accurately. This was especially true with reference to 's', 'd' and 't' which are syntactically important in English. This might be due to the feature of consonant deletion in SCE (Bao1998).When reading contractions, some children omitted the final consonants, while others read the full form rather than the contracted one.

There was also an effect of knowledge of oral language in variation of sounds. Anand in primary two read '/mek/' for 'milk'. This can be a common pronunciation in kindergarten. There was a greater variation in pronunciation at primary one than primary two, for example, Rosiah read 'crawl' as /kA:l/, 'cry' was read as /kA:II/, Raihan read /sed/ for 'sad'. Pronunciation of /e/ as in 'bed', for /æ/ as in 'sad' appears to be a feature of English in Singapore (Hashim and Brown 2000). Raihan in primary one omitted to sound 'h', and Wei Sheng in primary two read 'w' read as /u:/. This shows variation in children's knowledge of the sounds of English, and was especially evident at primary one.

In both primary one and primary two some children miscued particularly at tenses and verb order. Mariam read 'said' for 'says', Khalid read 'gobble' for 'gobbled' Jeremy read 'come to' instead of 'came on', and 'we can see where's the picnic' instead of 'we can see where the

picnic is'. Li Shan read 'you can' as 'can you'. Jason read 'has fed' as 'has feed', 'looking' was read as 'like' or 'look'. Fadil read 'buzzing' as 'buzzy'. These miscues may show children's unfamiliarity with tense formation in English as in many of these cases the word is read for meaning but tense formation is miscued. The miscues could also reflect interplay between knowledge of the different varieties of spoken English in Singapore, as well as other languages, for example Chinese, which does not mark tense through morphology as in some tenses in English.

### ***The reading strategies used by children at primary one and primary two***

Apart from the monitoring strategy of self-correction, children at primary one used these reading strategies:

- using knowledge of how words look and the initial sounds to read out unknown words,
- substituting words for unknown ones, but less appropriately than at primary two, and
- referring to the pictures to provide added context for the text.

Pupils generally relied on their sight knowledge of words and letters and sometimes used the initial consonants to anticipate what a word might be. For example, Jason read 'griffin' as 'giraffe' and 'skinny' as 'shiny'. Paul read 'park' as 'prak'. This shows an attention to the appearance of print and to the appearance of words as wholes. Other children relied more on the knowledge of letter sounds. In particular, they used initial letter or consonant cluster sounds to read the words. An example is Kevin's use of /b/ in reading 'burrow'. In addition 'grave' was read as /gr&v/, and 'glance' as /gl&nds/ by Nisha. Sometimes children did not have the knowledge of vocabulary which does not lend itself to sounding out, for example 'are' and 'live', and of common function words. Six pupils were observed to refer to the pictures to help their reading. This was not noted among the primary two children.

Strategies used by the children at primary two included those used by primary one and some different ones. At primary two, children

- asked for the unknown words to be provided by the teacher,
- used the initial sounds of unknown words,
- skipped unknown words,
- read ahead, and
- substituted a word with another of appropriate meaning in the sentence context.

At primary two children were more attentive to constructing meaning from the text. However, apart from the use of the initial letter, which many children used to tackle unknown words, only Mariam, reading L5 of the Sunshine scheme used any other information about sound. She used the ending sounds, reading 'grubble' for 'grumble' and 'elikster' for 'escalator', as well as 'squished' for 'squashed'. She also used the strategy of segmenting sounds or sounding out, for example 'elik-ster' and 'ban-jo' However she was the only one observed doing so. This means that at primary two while some of the children may know the sounds of English, they are not using this knowledge in reading, via strategies of segmenting and blending sounds in words. What most children appeared to do was to sound the initial consonant and then apparently grasp at the rest of the word. Some of the multi-syllabic words in some of the texts would lend themselves to a partial sounding out strategy such as 'escalator'. The children reading 'vine' read it as /vIn/ showing that they were not familiar with the silent 'e' rule. Neither did they refer to the pictures which showed a picture of a vine.

### ***Discourse knowledge***

Knowledge drawn on by readers includes discourse knowledge or formal schemata (Anderson 1994; Ambruster, Anderson and Ostertag 1989; Carrell and Eisterhold 1988). Thus it

is suggested that familiarity with the generic structure of texts enables experienced readers to anticipate organisational patterns and as a result read efficiently. In addition, patterning in beginning reading texts is thought to facilitate oral retention of the text, the sound of which the child may then match on to print (Holdaway 1982). In this project, for some children text patterning was helpful and for others it was not. Jason in primary one read a text in which there was a repeated pattern 'in room one', 'in room two' and so on. He misread this, the first few times with some self correction until at 'room three' he read accurately. On the other hand Evelyn also in primary one read 'like' for 'live' in a repeated pattern throughout a text and in fact made her version syntactically correct by omitting 'in' from 'live in' on two occasions. In her case the difficulty seemed to be more to do with knowledge of language than monitoring reading in order to access discourse knowledge.

## **Conclusions**

*1. Concerning children* – just a few running records have increased our knowledge of the strategies and knowledge resources children bring to reading English in a Singapore school. Apart from the primary one and primary two distinction, the analysis of the running records makes it possible to suggest instruction for guided reading groups and individuals. For example, Nisha and Kevin would benefit from instruction in the decoding strategies of segmenting and blending sounds, David perhaps from a more careful attention to print, and the primary one children from increasing their knowledge of oral English. Literate language is more similar to SSE than SCE and as noted by Gupta (1994), children will encounter SSE in texts while reading. If children are to gain access to the curriculum taught in English, they will need to learn the difference among varieties in English and through reading develop their knowledge of SSE.

2. *Concerning the school instruction of reading* – only a few children were listened to, so there can be no generalisations, but the records do suggest some differences in strategy use and knowledge between children in primary one and primary two. Contrary to the prevailing view of children reading in Singapore as concentrating mainly on word decoding, it seems from these records that at primary two children read with a focus on meaning construction, sometimes at the expense of accuracy. The records also suggest a tension between children's lived experience of the curriculum and how they are perceived as subjects of the documentation of this curriculum. The English language syllabus (Ministry of Education 1991) in which English is documented as a first language and pedagogic strategies are derived following that, seems to contradict children's multilingual lived experience, and the knowledge and strategies they draw on in negotiating the reading tasks and instructional language of the classroom, especially in primary one. It would be good to have more classroom research to examine how teachers and children manage this tension. Perhaps the observations of Cheah (2003) and Sripathy (1998) mentioned above, are a result of it.

3. *Concerning running records as a method of assessment* – In this case the procedure of taking running records and observing children reading was modified to try to account for both the cognitive and socially situated aspects of reading in the classroom. There is however, a practical danger that these extensions or nestings could be too broad, so that either there is too much to attend to when taking the records, or that the records could become less informative. Again it would be good to conduct more research on how they might be used. As a means of informing instruction by focussing on learner strengths and needs, running records do suit the philosophy of SEED. However, even in a class of thirty pupils rather than forty, teaching reading through guided reading in small groups and taking running records is very time consuming, and

makes more demands on teachers in terms of preparation and class management than the whole class teaching of, for example, SBA.

Thus the exploration of this modified procedure of taking running records has linked educational policy and children's experience, in showing how some children read texts in English in Singapore. It has suggested differences in orientation to reading between the primary one and primary two cohorts, as well as pointing to a tension between the documentation of the curriculum and how it is experienced by children. In addition, it has shown that although there are philosophical links between pedagogic and assessment strategies and policy, there are practical difficulties. It would therefore be beneficial from the points of view of the children developing literacy, and the teachers planning the curriculum, as well as policy makers, to conduct more research on reading instruction, and the use of running records in Singaporean lower primary classrooms.

### ***Children's Books***

Sunshine Books, Auckland: Wendy Pye.

#### *Level 1*

Spots L1

I have a Home L1

I am a Bookworm L1

I smell Smoke L1

Buzzing Flies L1

#### *Level 2*

Going to the Vet L2

What Mynah Bird Saw L2

Why Cry? L2

#### *Level 3*

Camouflage L3

#### *Level 5*

A Hundred Hugs L5

New Reading 360, Aylesbury, Bucks: Ginn and Company Ltd. Harcourt Education

#### *Level 2*

Ben and the Duck L2

#### *Level 3*

The Fast Car and the Slow Horse L3  
Fast and Slow L3

### **Big Books**

Lim, S. C. & Ng. E. (1991) *The Biggest Hongbao in the Whole Wide World* Curriculum Development Unit of Singapore, Singapore: E.P.B. Publishers  
Lim, S.C. & Chan, G. (1991) *Roti Prata* Curriculum Development Unit of Singapore, Singapore: E.P.B. Publishers

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