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Author(s)	Sally Ann Jones
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## **The possible cultural consequences for children as they learn to read in English at primary three in Singapore**

**Sally Ann Jones**

### **Abstract**

This article presents the findings of an observation study of reading lessons in English at primary three in Singapore. The aims of the study were first to establish whether a common pedagogy to teach reading in English exists at this transition year of children's schooling, and second what the cultural effects of this pedagogy might be for children. In the article, I show how features in common over the observed lessons form a pedagogy derived internationally. Next, through a detailed analysis of this pedagogy, a locally written text and the talk around the text in a single lesson, I show and discuss the possible cultural consequences of the pedagogy for Singaporean children.

### **Keywords**

Children, classroom interaction, culture, primary school, reading pedagogy, Singapore

## **1. Introduction**

This article reports a small scale exploratory observation study of teaching reading in Singapore at primary three when children are nine to ten years old. In the Ministry of Education documentation pedagogies and learning outcomes are given for teaching reading in English at lower primary, that is, at primary one and two. However, at upper primary, that is, primary three to six, while the aims and learning outcomes are stated, pedagogies for teaching what has become known as 'reading comprehension' are at the teachers' discretion. The aim of this study was first to discover the preferred pedagogy for teaching reading comprehension used in the transition year of primary three and second to analyse the effects of this pedagogy in terms of culture, specifically with regard to the cultural construction of the child. This is achieved first through a broad observation study of reading lessons at primary three and second through a detailed focus on the relationships among the text, the interaction around the text and the pedagogy in one of these reading lessons.

In this article I first give some background to the use of English and the teaching of reading in English in Singapore. In addition, I review what has been written about the construction of children and pupils in reading classrooms elsewhere. After introducing the method used in this study in one school, I present the general features of reading lessons at primary three which were identified. This general description contextualises the detailed analysis of one of the reading lessons studied. The discussion arising from the analysis of text and talk in this lesson in a Singaporean classroom centres on the complex relations between the use of a pedagogy derived from outside Singapore and a locally produced text and the ensuing possible cultural consequences for the children in the class.

## **2. English in Singapore**

Singapore is a multilingual and multi-ethnic city state which gained independence from Britain in 1965. Since then language use and learning has been centrally planned by the government. Historically, the function of the English language has been to enable the country's economic development (Pennycook, 1994). In the past English was regarded as neutral, a standard English was to be maintained, and it was the role of the mother tongues or heritage languages to give each community their cultural identity. (For discussions of these issues, please see the edited volume by Foley, Kandiah, Bao, Gupta, Alsagoff, Ho, Wee, Talib and Bokhorst-Heng, 1998). This specific role for each language is operationalised in the bilingual policy in schools today (Shanmugaratnam, 2002). However, Pennycook (1994) concludes that although English in Singapore has indeed become Singapore's link to global culture and technology, it is also bound up with local culture and Singaporean identity. In support of this view there are reports of a societal language shift to English (Silver, Hu & Lino, 2002) the complexity of which is shown by Vaish (2007), and reports of the use of English alongside other languages in this multilingual society (Vaish, 2007). The current

multi-functionality of English in a country where language use is determined by central planning has resulted in a certain ambivalence about the English language and its relation to culture, as well as a questioning of the concept of language neutrality from within Singapore (Sripathy, 1998; Cheah, 2003).

### **3. Teaching English and reading in Singapore**

In Singapore there is a national education system and compulsory primary education (Please see <http://www.moe.gov.sg> )New syllabus documents are produced about every ten years. The 1991 syllabus states that English language has ‘the status of a first language in the national school curriculum’, (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 1991:1), and is the medium of instruction for most subjects. The aims of the syllabus are stated in four domains: A: Communication and Language Development, further divided into the four language skills and language knowledge, B: Thinking Skills, C: Learning how to Learn, and D: Language and Culture. The framework of the syllabus highlights integration, contextualisation and interaction through the means of thematic units. Reading skills are listed in the ‘Spectrum of Skills’ in the syllabus (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 1991:45), and teaching was therefore expected to follow that influenced by theories of reading skills and strategies and schema theory, as in for example, Anderson, R. C. (1994), Anderson, N. (1999), and Pressley (2002). According to Cheah (2003) all elements of the syllabus have been successfully introduced into practice except ‘culture’ which in the syllabus is viewed as the appreciation of one’s own and the cultures of others. Cheah argues that this is because the priority was on teaching technical literacy and the skills necessary to achieve this (2003:356).

The 2001 English Language syllabus is seen as a broadening of that of 1991 (Cheah, 2003). Direction is set in terms of the following guiding principles: learner-centredness,

process orientation, integration, contextualisation, spiral progression and interaction (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2000:4). In addition, teaching reading is highlighted. Two of the main features of the syllabus are first, language use: for information, for literary response and expression, for social interaction, and second, text types: to provide models of language use and to contextualise language (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2000:5). Therefore, this syllabus foregrounds ideas of learner-centredness with a focus on interaction and process. Although no explicit references to theory are made in the syllabus itself, the ideas of learner or child-centredness and the importance of interaction in learning are socio-constructivist and can be attributed to Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1962). Genre or text type theory is newly added to the syllabus to highlight the need to contextualize language and literacy learning, as in for example, Derewianka, (1990) so as to ensure that children learn to use language appropriately depending on the context of situation. With particular regard to reading, the two overlayed syllabi have resulted in the recommended use of first a skills and strategies approach to teaching reading, second child-centred pedagogies which involve pupil interaction and third the need to base teaching upon a variety of text types or genres.

Indeed, by international standards, the teaching of reading in English in Singapore is very successful. The 2001 Progress in International Reading Study (PIRLS) conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (2001) is an international study of reading achievement of 4<sup>th</sup> grade pupils who are on average nine to ten years old. The study tests a variety of comprehension strategies in reading for both literary and informational purposes. Singapore is one of 23 countries out of 35 of which the average reading achievement is significantly above the mean, performing similarly to New Zealand, Scotland, the Russian Federation, Hong Kong, France and Greece.

However, although Ministry of Education syllabi give direction in broad aims and general learning outcomes, there is little description of classroom practice especially of the early years of primary school (Cheah, 2003). One of the few studies is by Sripathy (1998) who observed lessons in primary two. She argues that the child-centred philosophy underlying the Shared Book Reading approach (for example, Holdaway, 1982) and the Language Experience Approach (for example, Stauffer 1980) of ‘collaborative meaning making and expression of individual interpretations, emphasising difference and divergence, ownership and active participation in learning through talk with an adult’ (1998:280) runs counter to both teachers’ and pupils’ cultural expectations and experiences of learning in Singapore. Her conclusion is that neither language nor pedagogies are culturally neutral and that both teachers and pupils operate in the classroom according to their own cultural scripts while implementing and participating in imported pedagogies.

Given the fact that there are few studies of reading instruction in primary schools, that pedagogies may be being syncretised by teachers’ and pupils’ references to their own cultural scripts and that primary three is a transition year in which a different pedagogy to that of primary one and two may be used, I conducted a small exploratory study in a large government primary school in order to answer the questions below.

In general:

- What are the common features of reading comprehension lessons in primary three classes in this school?
- Is there then a recognisable pedagogy for teaching reading comprehension at this level and what is its provenance?

More specifically:

- What is the relationship between the use of this pedagogy as shown in the classroom interaction and the use of the text chosen to teach reading in each lesson?

- What are the possible cultural consequences of the pedagogy of the lesson for children?

Before I describe the study, I review briefly what others have written in the area of the construction of childhood culture by teachers and pupils through the reading of texts and interaction in the classroom.

#### **4. Childhood and culture**

It is recognised that the idea of childhood is culturally constructed (James and Prout, 1997; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998) and varies geographically and historically (Aries, 1962; Hendrick, 1997; Montgomery, 2003). Reading is also socially constructed (Street, 1993). Therefore, one community's idea of childhood and idea of appropriate reading are likely to differ from another's. Children become socialised into a community's culture through participation in the discourses of that community (Gee, 2002) and through exposure to the cultural content of books which are written for children and which are often about children (Stephens, 1992).

School texts designed for reading instruction are created to provide opportunities for learning specific reading practices and linguistic knowledge. Analyses of children's beginning reading texts have shown them to be a particular genre linguistically and structurally, and also to include particular views of childhood (Baker and Freebody, 1989; Luke, 1988). The way the text is mediated in the classroom is also significant. The classroom discourse is controlled by the teacher and is directed in part by the teacher's view of reading development and selection of pedagogic strategies. However, pedagogies, especially child-centered ones have at their heart an implied or ideal pupil (Woods, Boyle and Hubbard in Brooker, 2002). Austin, Dwyer and Freebody (2003) demonstrate how the child as reader in a cohort is constructed through the discourse of teachers, pupils and texts. They analysed a

literary text used in an Australian upper primary classroom. As in Baker (1991) the way the text was constructed through the classroom discourse led to a single preferred reading. In Austin's study a happy ending to the text, which was deemed suitable for children, was constructed in the class, when ironically this was shown not to be the preferred reading of some children. Therefore, classroom interaction around texts works both to engage pupils in learning to read in ways determined by the pedagogy selected by the teacher and to socialise children into culturally acceptable views of the world and behaviour of childhood (Baker, 1991; Baker and Freebody, 1989; Heap, 1985).

## **5. Method**

The study took place in a large, mixed, multilingual, multi-ethnic, government, Singaporean primary school of about 2,200 pupils. Each upper primary class has about 40 pupils. The school follows the national curriculum for primary schools in general and specifically the Ministry of Education Syllabus (2000) for English. This was an observational study in which I worked in the school teaching a primary three class for half a year and working with teachers on teaching and assessing reading at primary one and two. The lesson reported comes from a set of nine lessons, that is, a lesson from each class at primary three which was offered by teachers as being illustrative of the way in which they taught reading at this level. I observed and tape recorded the lessons, and interviewed the nine teachers about the lessons, all of whom I tape recorded except for one when notes were made instead. Consent was obtained in the usual way and anonymity maintained.

The broad sweep achieved through observations and interviews allowed an insider perspective on the teaching of reading at this level and suggested answers to the first two research questions. Then the reading lessons were transcribed and examined in more detail, using techniques from interaction analysis (for example, Baker, 1997; Baker and Freebody,



1989; Heap, 1997) and textual analysis (Freebody, 2003). This kind of detailed analysis of transcripts enabled an outsider perspective on the lessons and allowed the complex relations among text, interaction, pedagogy to become visible. One lesson was selected for reporting in this article to show this.

## **6. Reading comprehension lessons**

The observation of the reading lessons and interviews show that there are pedagogic features in common across all the lessons. As I describe these common features of the lessons, I link them to references which give theoretical support to the instructional practice shown. I also link these aspects of the lessons to books which recommend and describe reading instruction. A summary table of the nine lessons which includes the texts used and the activities at the different lesson stages can be found in Appendix 1.

Lessons were introduced by teachers as ‘learning about something’ or ‘doing a comprehension’. A structure of three distinct stages was visible in all nine lessons: a ‘pre-reading’, ‘during’ reading and activities ‘after’ reading as in, for example, Gibbons (2002), Grabe and Stoller (2002), Gunning (2004) and Tompkins (2005). Common to all lessons was time spent at the ‘pre’ reading stage of the lesson activating schematic knowledge either through pupil and teacher discussion, peer discussion or through the use of visuals in the textbook or the Internet using the large screen at the front of the classroom (Anderson, R. C., 1994; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988; Tompkins, 2005). In many lessons there was a focus on vocabulary development which also occurred at other stages of the lessons but was often dealt with at this stage and associated with the activation of background knowledge.

‘During’ the reading, pupils and the teacher read the texts in a variety of ways, aloud or silently, individually or chorally but almost always section by section. Each section was followed both by teacher directed questions focusing on the text including factual, inferential

and applicative questions as in Ruddell (1999) and by more teacher initiated discussion which involved the use of reading skills and strategies (Anderson, N.,1999; Gunning, 2004 and Pressley, 2002). These strategies included for example, predicting, visualizing, summarising, comparing, relating to personal experience, giving opinions, skimming to locate information and inferring vocabulary from contextual cues as in, for example, Gunning (2004) and Tompkins (2005). There was also attention to teaching vocabulary at this stage (Anderson, R. C. and Freebody, 1983; Birch, 2002; Pressley, 2002 and Tompkins, 2005). The words attended to could be the teacher's choice or the pupils'. 'After' the reading the pupils worked to answer questions or complete writing tasks on the worksheet/workbook. Preparation usually involved discussion in pairs or groups, teacher evaluation and assistance (Corden, 2000; Gibbons, 2002). Finally, the answers were written individually, usually for further teacher evaluation in the lesson or afterwards. In all cases therefore the interaction of the lesson served to prepare pupils to write the answers to comprehension questions or complete tasks either on worksheets or in the textbook workbooks. There was often also attention as to how the pupils should answer the questions in writing, that is, whether they should paraphrase, use cues, highlight or mark the text and these answering techniques were taught explicitly.

Another feature of these lessons was that the texts were all written and published in Singapore specifically for the purpose of teaching reading. Most were from 'In Step' (Wee, 2002a, 2002b), a text book and accompanying activity book. The texts ranged from an Asian folktale, a travel brochure, to children's adventures in everyday Singaporean life. Texts produced by the school were also used and these included an information text on the Himalayas, a recount about a family outing and a narrative. In this way a variety of genres could be read over the course of a semester. All the reading passages were arranged similarly on the page with the text accompanied by a few supporting pictures, followed by a set of

about six questions. Different media were used to show and work on the texts: the overhead projector, the computer showing either Power Point slides or Word documents, as well as the Internet.

The features common to all lessons suggests that in practice there is a specific reading pedagogy used for teaching reading comprehension at primary three in this school and it is different from the Shared Book Reading and Language Experience Approach recommended in primary one and two. The features of this pedagogy include: interaction at all stages of the lesson achieved through whole class, group or pair arrangements, child-centredness through this interaction to access children's existing knowledge and to guide children in the use of reading strategies which are contextualised through the reading of varied text genres. In addition, there is the added emphasis on the skills of answering comprehension questions which are taught explicitly. In this way the pedagogy identified closely follows the suggested directions of the 1991 and 2001 syllabi, which is supported by work on reading instruction in both the first and second language from outside Singapore such as Corden (2000), Gibbons (2002), Gunning (2004), Ruddell (1999) and Tompkins (2005),

## **7. Analysis of one reading lesson**

Having identified a pedagogy of reading at primary three in one school, I now use textual analysis following Freebody (2003) to analyse the reading text used in one of these nine lessons observed. In addition, I use interaction analysis for example, Baker (1997), Baker and Freebody (1989) and Heap (1997) to analyse the interaction of the lesson to show in greater detail this pedagogy in practice in this classroom. The lesson is number seven in the summary table in Appendix 1.

### **7.1 Analysis of the text**

The text read in this lesson was specifically written for the purpose of teaching reading in English in the school. It details an incident in which a parent took a group of children – his own, and their friends to a park to have a picnic. His daughter and two of her friends were stung by hornets. The father rescued the children and took them to hospital in a taxi. Later he complained to the authorities and the hornets’ nest was removed. The structure of the text is that of a factual recount in the form of a newspaper article (Wing Jan, 2001; Wong, 2003). The first paragraph orientates the reader by giving details of the people involved, the date and time of the incident and a one sentence summary of the event. The other paragraphs are arranged in chronological sequence, and the text ends with a reorientation and writer’s comment. Third person recounting is used throughout, as is typical of a newspaper article of which the purpose is to inform about a newsworthy incident in the community. However a closer analysis of the text, following Freebody (2003) in terms of participants, processes and emotive language shows some hybridity.

Analysis of the participants shows that the categories of generation and citizenship are of importance in the text. In the family the adult is first mentioned in his role as ‘a parent’ in relation to the children’, one of whom is ‘his daughter, Siti’. There are six children, four of Mr. Salleh’s and two of their friends. One is named and the fact that the others are not indicates that what is relevant is not their individuality but the fact of their childhood state in relation to the adult. Also relevant is the parent’s role as citizen, he is ‘Mr. Salleh’ in relation to the state as expressed through the ‘hospital’ and ‘authorities’. The terms used to refer to participants are shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Participants in the text

a family outing			
three children	four children and two of their friends	his daughter, Siti and two of her friends	the girls (mentioned twice)
a parent	Mr. Salleh (mentioned 4 times)		
hospital			

authorities			
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Analysis of the processes associated with the participants can show the social relations displayed in the text. In the five sentences involving both Mr. Salleh and the children, two have the participants in equilibrium. The first is ‘three children and a parent were attacked’ and the last is ‘Mr. Salleh and the girls will never forget the attack by the hornets’ The other three show Mr. Salleh as active, he ‘had taken’ the children to the park, he ‘rushed’ to the girls’ aid when they were stung, ‘was able to rescue them’ and ‘managed to flag down a taxi’ which took them to hospital. His role is to protect despite difficulty or danger to himself. This is seen also in his capacity as citizen in that he is at liberty to use the facilities provided by the state – the hospital, and to complain to the authorities and in so doing to protect all the children in his care.

Apart from the social relations, there is also the affect generated in the text through the emotive language and numbering. Emotive words and phrases include: ‘terrifying’, ‘lovely’, ‘angry’, ‘clung’, ‘stinging repeatedly’ and ‘unfortunate’. Numbers have a significance in that the human participants are very carefully counted, for example, ‘three children and a parent’, whereas the hornets are a ‘swarm’ who sting ‘repeatedly’. Naming one child singles her out and makes her more vulnerable than the rest. In addition, it was girls not boys who were attacked and their gender is mentioned only when the girls run from the hornets which ‘clung onto their hair and clothes stinging them repeatedly’. The incident happened when they picked some ‘lovely flowers’. In their own attempts to take care of themselves by throwing stones around to get rid of snakes, they ‘might have disturbed’ a hornet’s nest.

Through an analysis of participants, processes and emotive language, some hybridity in the text is evident. The final formulaic sentence, which encapsulates the moral of the text, is that even though the nest has been removed ‘Mr. Salleh and the girls will never forget the

attack by the hornets'. The analysis shows that although the structure of the text relates to the genre of the newspaper article, the topic of the text is more that of a cautionary tale.

## **7.2 Analysis of the lesson**

There are seven phases to the lesson and each boundary is explicitly marked by the teacher. A brief description of each phase follows.

### ***Using children's experience***

Phase 1 (Turns 1 – 109)

The teacher asks questions about pupils' experience. There are several key questions concerning where children go in their leisure time (turn 1), what kind of things they find in a park (turn 34), what they usually do in the park (turn 46), what they take for a picnic (turn 52), what surrounds them in the park (turn 61), what has happened to them in the park (turn 84), whether they would be afraid if there were bushes in the park (turn 90) and why they would be afraid (turn 93). Words are chosen and put on the board. The selection is determined by the text topic and therefore the cautionary tale. For example:

Turns 61 to 66	T: Sandwiches. O.K. ( ) thank you. Let's go further. O.K. You go to the park. Alright, you're there as a family, you want to enjoy yourself. What surrounded, what's surrounding you?
	P: Birds
	Ps: Trees
	Ps: Flowers
	P: [Bird]
	T: [Right]. I heard trees, I heard flowers. What else do you have?

In the above exchange 'trees' and 'flowers' are accepted, 'bird' is not, and the teacher moves on questioning towards 'bushes' until this is accepted at turn 84, 'Yes I heard bushes, good.'

### ***Using the Internet***

Phase 2 (Turns 109 - 134)

As the teacher introduces the next phase of the lesson, ‘today we’re going to erm have a passage’ (turn 109), the vocabulary already elicited – ‘family’, ‘picnic’, ‘bushes’ and ‘bees’ is recapped, then the teacher starts to show Internet pictures of hornets. There is direct explanation about hornets as well as reference to where pupils may find them.

Turns 112 to 116      T: Who has seen them? Where? Where have you seen them Ryan?  
                              P: In my house (    ) got two beehives outside my house right  
                              T: In the trees?  
                              P: No, the house top  
                              T: Alright. So we know that they don’t only build their nests in erm bushes alright. Sometimes in your H.D.B. er blocks right?

Here the selection is also determined by the text topic. The next new question concerns whether pupils have seen hornets ‘outside’ (turn 121) since the action of the text takes place outside in the park. In this way a framework of the text is created before it is read through the work on vocabulary.

### ***Using the text***

Phase 3 (Turns 136 - 289)

Vocabulary necessary for reading the text has been selected from pupils’ experience in the first phase of the lesson and in the second phase by the need to know vocabulary specific to the topic of the text. In phase three, selection is determined by pupils’ perception of ‘difficult’ or ‘new’ words in the text (turn 136). Pupils are asked to skim the text to identify these words, the words are then presented, the meanings requested and pronunciation checked through exchanges similar to those in phases 1 and 2, with the addition of choral pronunciation of certain words. Thus in these three phases pupils are brought to the text through vocabulary.

### ***Using the text***

Phase 4 (Turns 289 - 314)

Pupils are next brought to the text via reading for the main idea and summarising. The teacher sets up for group work and explicitly gives a purpose for reading through a ‘main idea’ question. The teacher rejects answering like ‘your comprehension’ in turn 291. The example of this is of a literal question requiring the short answer ‘He went to the zoo’.

Turn 291      T: Remember don’t answer me as if you’re answering your comprehension question. Alright where did he go? Oh he went to the zoo. I’m not asking these answers your answer should be telling me the story in a few words. You are able to tell me the story in a few words and because of that, the authorities cleared the hornet’s nest then I will know that you have understood what you have read.

However, expressing the main idea becomes a problem for the pupils, in that how long or short the answer should be and how it should be expressed, has to be inferred by pupils. The teacher makes references to length and type of answer as here ‘a few words’ and in the same turn ‘it need not be a very long story’ and ‘just tell me the important things’ and similarly in turns 295, 303, 307. Pupils proceed until they satisfy the task at turn 312.

Turn 312      T: Alright, see you must not be afraid to tell. O.K. nobody’s going to laugh at you for erm you know making a mistake. You must try to say things. So we’ve got quite a number of things. Alright they don’t want people to get stung by hornets again. Somebody lodged a complaint when their family was attacked that’s why they’re clearing so now do you know what the story is all about?

So there is a tension here for pupils between actually comprehending the text and then showing their understanding according to the requirements of the pedagogy.

### ***Using the task***

Phase 5 (Turns 314 - 434)

In this phase pupils are expected to complete a worksheet in groups finding answers to the ‘wh’ questions (turn 317, when, where, who, what, why, how). Since the text is taken to be a recount following the conventions of recount structure, the task of answering ‘wh’ questions is appropriate for the first paragraph only. As this becomes apparent, the teacher



spends more time on managing the procedure, requiring leaders to control their groups (turns 344, 375, 400, 411), pupils to stand when they give answers (turns 344, 402) and put their pencils down and stop writing (turns 320, 333, 351,) as well as look at the teacher (turns 320, 355). So in the later stages of this phase and in the next is a reversion to summarising text topic. Here there is the same tension as in phase 4 between the knowledge children may have and its expression in an acceptable form. The teacher makes explicit reference to the problem,

Turn 400                    T: Right class stop. Alright leaders control. O.K. What I've noticed is you know what is happening but you-don't-know how to write it out. Alright you're you're afraid of writing it in a short sentence you tend to write long sentences. But I find out each time when I come and ask you you know what you're supposed to write but you don't know how to write O.K.? Right let's look at this paragraph again. What is the main thing that happened in this paragraph?

Thus the children here understand the text, they 'know what is happening', but they do not yet know how to participate in the pedagogy, they 'don't know how to write'.

### *Using the task*

Phase 6 (Turns 434 – 475)

The teacher refers back to the procedure, 'we went through every paragraph' (turn 434) and then teacher and class recreate the text orally usually through teacher elicitation and whole class responses, for example:

Turns 451 to 465        T: yes somebody said they wanted to make sure there were no?  
                               P: snakes/  
                               T: snakes around so they?  
                               Ps: throw stones/  
                               P: threw stones/  
                               T: threw stones and it so happened that the stones?  
                               P: hit the hornets//  
                               T: hornet's nest and that?/  
                               Ps: and made them angry  
                               Ps: made them angry  
                               T: angry? and they started?  
                               Ps: buzzing/  
                               Ps: buzzing/

P: ( )

T: coming out, buzzing yeah, then we went to the third paragraph which is the main thing it talks about? .. What does paragraph three tell you? .. Hello you did the group work. Paragraph three yes (name)

At turn 475 the teacher marks the end of the lesson,

Turn 475 T: cleared the hornets' nest yes very good ... so that's the whole? . idea of that story.

### ***Phase 7***

(Turns 475 - 511)

The teacher then starts on the next activity which is to be related to further group work and writing the summary.

## **8. Discussion**

In this section I use the analysis of text and discourse of this lesson to explore the relations among the classroom interaction, the locally produced text and the pedagogy derived from outside Singapore in order to discover what the possible cultural effects of these relationships might be for the children in the class.

### **8.1 Reading the text**

The analysis of this newspaper article written locally to teach reading at primary three shows how it functions structurally as a factual recount. It also shows how the linguistic selections and topic create a hybridity and the possibility of a reading as a cautionary tale. Of these two possibilities it is the moral tale of children rescued by an adult which is constructed in the classroom. The text shows children as vulnerable and in need of adult protection and the roles and responsibilities of state, adult and children in Singapore are made clear. This moral tale is created in the classroom through recourse to pupils' personal experience at the beginning of the lesson and recreated by the teacher and pupil jointly constructed oral summary at the end. In the first phase the experience offered by individual pupils in answer to the questions about

going to the park is selected against the teacher's knowledge of the text topic. In the summarising in phase 6, the class as cohort creates a version of the text with the teacher. In particular, agency, while tentative in the text, is made explicit by the pedagogy. In the text the girls' throwing of stones 'might have disturbed a hornet's nest nearby'. The use of the modal verb 'might' suggests possibility not fact. However, in turns 451 to 465 quoted above, cause and effect is directly stated and the jointly constructed summary becomes:

they (the girls) wanted to make sure there were no snakes around so they threw stones and it so happened that the stones hit the hornet's nest and that made them angry and they started buzzing.

Cause and effect is expressed by '... so.....' '... and it so happened ...' '... and that made them ...'. In addition, the effect is expressed in a formulaic phrase associated with folktales 'it so happened'. Therefore, the effect of this interaction is to make agency explicit and to confirm the cautionary tale within the text topic.

However, the purpose question of the lesson (turns 291 and 292) relates both to purpose within the text topic, that is, why the authorities cleared the hornet's nest, and to the classroom instructional purpose of teaching the strategy of skimming for main ideas suitable for reading a factual recount. Thus at the time in the lesson in phase 5 when the text is to be read as a factual recount and the pedagogic task relates to the text recount structure, there emerges a tension for children between understanding the topic of the text which has been constructed as a moral tale through the classroom interaction and showing their understanding through acceptable participation in the pedagogy which relates to the text recount structure. A further analysis of the pedagogy in terms of rationale, accountability and control makes this tension more evident.

## **8.2 Using the pedagogy**

*Rationale* - The analysis of text and interaction makes visible the pedagogy of the class. At various phases of the lesson, the teacher gives the pupils reasons for the activities. Phases one

through three are the 'pre' reading in which children's schema is activated or built through the interaction and the use of visuals on the Internet. With regard to the use of the Internet pictures of hornets, the teacher says 'it's good to? know, have some background about hornets so that when you read you'll have a better understanding', (turn 123). The reading is prepared or previewed through the use of vocabulary from pupils' experience and from the text. The teacher refers to the usefulness of knowing vocabulary in turns 166, 213 and 252 and teaches it explicitly. The text is read with an explicit purpose in phases 4 and 5. Turn 291 'O.K. so now I'm giving you a purpose to read the story now alright read ( ) but at the same time this question must be in your head'. Pupils also skim the text. After reading, a summary is jointly created in phase 6 by the teacher and pupils. So the activities 'during' reading deal with specific comprehension strategies. Thus the pedagogy and its rationale referred to in the lesson by the teacher, which is consistent with the principles of the English syllabi, and the other eight observed lessons, underlies the discourse of the class. The pedagogy is that of teaching the skills and strategies of reading, through the teacher and pupil whole class interaction or the pupil and pupil interaction in groups, moving between the text as a resource for teaching and learning the skills of reading and children's own cultural experience as resource to enable that interaction about the text. As seen in the analysis though, sometimes this pedagogy is not understood by the pupils, even though the text is. Therefore, in this lesson being a pupil of the pedagogy is not quite the same as being a child of the culture. The ways in which pupils are expected to behave according to the pedagogy is not the same as the ways in which the text shows children behaving according to the culture.

*Accountability* - Throughout the lesson, the text, activities and public talk for which children will be accountable is in English as both the language to be learnt and the medium of instruction. Pupils are accountable for the lesson in two ways. The first is in the listening to the answers to the questions on vocabulary. The class is asked to select vocabulary from the

text in phase 3 and once the words are selected pupils are asked for the meanings. The meanings having been evaluated and accepted by the teacher, they then become part of class knowledge and are available for each child's reading of the text. The second way in which pupils are held accountable is that once they have completed the procedure of one stage of the lesson, it follows that they should be able to produce acceptable responses and move on to the next stage. For example, having completed the first three vocabulary phases of the lesson the teacher says,

Turn 291      T: So when I ask you for this question you should be able to tell me because we have gone through all the words. Alright and now we know what are hornets and now you're going to read O.K.? O.K. you may read silently now.

Once the group work has been completed, the pupils are accountable for answers. The teacher says in turn 465, 'you did the group work' and therefore logically should be able to participate in the next phase of the lesson. However, it is this participation in the interaction which can be problematic for the pupils because there is a disjuncture between being a child as constructed by the culture and being a pupil as constructed by this pedagogy. In phase 1, the 'pre' reading, children follow the teacher's lead in establishing the topic of the text and offer words which will then be relevant for the lesson. However, in phases 4 and 5 the teacher remarks that the children understand the reading but are afraid of trying to contribute orally and are afraid of writing in an acceptable form and therefore cannot demonstrate this understanding procedurally. Again made visible is the tension for children between being children of the culture, created through the text topic and classroom discourse led by the teacher, and pupils of the pedagogic tasks which involve participation in the interaction in the 'during' stage of the lesson. This tension is resolved 'after' the reading by means of the teacher pupil joint creation of the oral summary for which children are accountable and which reinforces children's cultural experience.

*Control* – However at times the pedagogic expectations and cultural expectations of children synchronise. When the pedagogy is not understood by the pupils in phase 5, they come more clearly under the control of the teacher and group leaders. There is a structure of control in the classroom from the teacher who controls and manages the class interaction, to the group leaders who are expected to control the pupils in their groups, for example, turns 344, 375, 400 and 411. A similar hierarchy of authority exists in the text from the children to the parent to the authorities. In this case the pedagogy synchronises with the topic of the text and with the construction of children in the text. Therefore, in this area, the pedagogy and the culture make similar demands on children.

### **8.3 Participating in the interaction**

*Children are vulnerable*- both functions as topic of the text and pedagogic resource in the lesson. The text topic is of the ‘family outing, which turned into a terrifying incident’. Some of the words pupils select from the text and offer as ‘new’ or ‘difficult’ in phase 3 are ‘terrifying’, ‘first aid’ and ‘unfortunately’. As a resource for understanding the text pupils are encouraged to talk about occasions when something ‘happened to them’ (turn 84) and whether they would be afraid (turn 90). Answers evaluated positively by the teacher are falling down (turn 88), accidents (turn 90) and being afraid of bushes because of the insects around them (turns 97, 102, 104, and 107). Children are told that hornets also sting you (turn 125). Thus both the text and the classroom discourse construct children as vulnerable. They are also in need of adult protection. In the text the adult rescues the children and manages to take them to hospital in a taxi. When discussing ‘first aid’ (turns 215 to 232) in the text the teacher asks how many of the class had been injured in school and had to be taken by the teacher to the school general office (turn 221). Thus the dynamic of the text and interaction about the children’s personal experience construct the children of the culture as vulnerable.

*Children should participate* - because they are pupils of the pedagogy of interaction. They are expected to respond and participate as individuals through bidding during the question and answering. If they do not participate in particular ways, they are reminded that they should, as in turn 40, they are reminded that if they bid they are accountable for an answer, as in turn 93, or nominated, as in turn 142. They are also expected to respond as a cohort as in turns 244 and 254. Pupils are explicitly told that they should participate. In turn 312 (quoted above), the teacher says, 'see you must not be afraid to tell' and 'You must try to say things'. In turn 400 (quoted above) the teacher also mentions that the children are, 'afraid of writing it in a short sentence'. Thus pupils must try to participate in ways designated by the pedagogy, but as we have seen in this lesson, this participation is sometimes in tension with the cultural construction of children as vulnerable.

## **9. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the detailed analysis of one of the lessons from the broader observation study shows effects not visible merely through observation or reading tests. The analysis of the text read in this lesson, which although structurally a recount, is read in the class as a cautionary tale and shows Singaporean children constructed as vulnerable and in need of adult protection. Similarly, the analysis of the classroom interaction shows how this construction is maintained and reaffirmed through the topic of the text and by using the resource of children's experience to prepare for the reading through vocabulary elicitation. As seen in Sripathy (1998) the teacher is guided by reference to Singaporean culture in deciding how the text should be read in the classroom.

The analysis of nine lessons shows a pedagogy common to primary three in this school and how this pedagogy conforms to the Ministry of Education syllabi and to external sources. The teacher explains the rationale for this pedagogy in the lesson. However,

pedagogies are not neutral and those who design them have an ideal pupil in mind. The detailed analysis of the interaction in this primary three classroom shows how sometimes there is a tension for children between being ideal pupils as constructed by the external pedagogy and children as constructed by the local culture since while children understand the text, demonstrating that understanding in the ways required by the pedagogy is problematic at certain points in the lesson.

Here children are at the transition stage of moving from lower to upper primary and therefore they are in the process of learning to participate in the pedagogy of reading in English at primary three. Singapore's success in the PIRLS study suggests that in some way children do accommodate these tensions shown in this lesson in order to participate in the class in the ways required by the pedagogy and become successful readers. Baker's (1991) study of reading lessons shows how in an Australian primary school, the impetus to socialisation is stronger than the impetus to learning to read. However, this study contextualized by the PIRLS suggests that in Singapore it is the impetus to successful reading in English which is the priority and that it is the children who will have to negotiate between the demands of the pedagogy and the forces of their culture in order to become young Singaporean readers of English.

### **Transcription conventions**

**T** – teacher

**P** – pupil

? – upward intonation

. – downward intonation

.. – pause, relative length shown by the number of full stops

/ - successive turns without pause,

// - heard as an interruption

[ ] – heard as simultaneous



( ) – cannot be heard clearly enough to transcribe, sometimes the general area is given, for example, (name)

(( )) – added by transcriber, for example, a participant's action

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## Appendix 1

**Table 1.** Summary of the nine observed lessons

Lesson	Text and Text Type	'Pre' stage of the reading	'During' stage of the reading	'After' the reading
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a narrative text</li> <li>no title is given but the text is about a treasure hunt</li> <li>the text is produced by the school and thematically linked to unit 11 in Wee (2002a)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the teacher introduces the idea of a treasure hunt and <i>vocabulary</i> associated with the topic to <i>activate</i> the appropriate <i>schema</i></li> <li>pupils in pairs interview each other and report to the class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the text is shown on the overhead projector paragraph by paragraph and the teacher and pupils together read the text aloud</li> <li>the pupils answer the teacher's <i>factual</i> and <i>inferential</i> questions and the teacher teaches the pupils how to <i>infer</i> the meanings of words and phrases using contextual cues and their own experience</li> <li>the <i>vocabulary</i> is at first selected by the teacher and then by the pupils</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the pupils are given copies of the text and all reread silently</li> <li>the pupils write answers to <i>factual</i> and <i>inferential</i> questions</li> <li>the answers are discussed and evaluated</li> <li>the pupils and the teacher jointly construct a <i>vocabulary</i> list</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a persuasive text</li> <li><i>A Travel Brochure</i> in Wee (2002b) p. 69</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the teacher asks the pupils about their experiences of travelling to <i>activate</i> the appropriate <i>schema</i></li> <li>the teacher talks about her own experience and shows the class a travel brochure</li> <li><i>vocabulary</i> is identified and written on the whiteboard in a concept map</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the teacher reads the text from the textbook aloud in sections, stopping at the end of each to encourage pupils to <i>infer</i> meaning and to discuss features of the text type with the pupils</li> <li>more <i>vocabulary</i> is identified by the pupils and the meanings discussed</li> <li>the <i>purpose</i> of the text is discussed and its effectiveness evaluated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>in pairs the pupils <i>skim</i> and <i>scan</i> the text for information to write answers to <i>factual</i> questions as well as give their <i>personal responses</i></li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a folktale</li> <li><i>The Monkey and the Turtle</i> in Wee (2002a) p.51-53 and Wee (2002b) p. 46-47</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the teacher leads a discussion about animals in folktales to <i>activate</i> the appropriate <i>schema</i> and to <i>compare</i> the two animals (the discussion is prompted by the pictures accompanying the text in the textbook)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the text is shown in sections on Power Point slides and the teacher reads it aloud, asking pupils to <i>predict</i> content of the next slide, they <i>justify</i> their predictions based on the text</li> <li>once the next slide is seen the pupils <i>verify</i> their predictions</li> <li>the pupils reread the text in their textbooks silently</li> <li>after each paragraph the teacher encourages the pupils to <i>infer</i> character and <i>evaluate</i> character behavior <i>justifying</i> their opinions</li> <li>the <i>purpose</i> and type of text is discussed</li> <li>unfamiliar <i>vocabulary</i> is linked to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>as a class the pupils reread the text aloud with expression</li> <li>the teacher teaches answering techniques and then individually pupils write the answers to <i>factual</i>, <i>inferential</i> and <i>applicative</i> questions which are then evaluated through discussion</li> <li>the teacher works with individual pupils</li> </ul>

4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• an information text</li> <li>• <i>Roof of the World</i> produced by the school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the teacher introduces a short discussion about high mountains</li> <li>• the pupils are given copies of the text and <i>preview</i> it silently</li> <li>• individual pupils are chosen to read paragraphs aloud and the teacher models and corrects pronunciation</li> <li>• the teacher uses the Internet (projected on the screen at the front of the classroom) to show a 180 degree view of the Himalayas and the various animals and geographic features to <i>build schematic</i> knowledge</li> <li>• during the discussion <i>vocabulary</i> in the text which is unknown to the pupils is selected for discussion by the pupils</li> </ul>	<p>vocabulary the pupils already know</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the pupils reread each paragraph of the text silently</li> <li>• after each paragraph the pupils and the teacher discuss the text and <i>relate</i> it to the <i>visuals</i> of the Himalayas</li> <li>• the teacher expands and explains some of the geographical concepts and <i>technical vocabulary</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the teacher teaches the pupils answering techniques and individually they <i>skim</i> and <i>scan</i> for information to write answers to <i>factual</i> and <i>inferential</i> questions about the text</li> <li>• the answers are reported to the class and evaluated by the teacher</li> </ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a narrative text</li> <li>• <i>Stanley's Idea</i> in Wee (2002b) p.83-85</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the text is shown on screen at the front of the classroom with hyperlinks to <i>vocabulary</i> the teacher will access during the reading</li> <li>• the pupils <i>relate the title</i> to the text</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the pupils read each paragraph silently and then the teacher asks open questions to encourage the pupils to express their own understanding of the characters' feelings and motivation and <i>justify</i> their opinions</li> <li>• the teacher and the pupils note <i>technical vocabulary</i> and relate it to <i>personal experience</i> in school</li> <li>• the pupils refer to their textbooks and read the text aloud together and the teacher models and corrects pronunciation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the teacher teaches answering techniques and pupils work in groups to write answers to <i>factual</i> and <i>inferential</i> questions</li> <li>• these answers are reported to the class and the teacher evaluates them</li> <li>• the teacher works with one of the groups of pupils</li> </ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a narrative text</li> <li>• no title is given but the text is about a treasure hunt</li> <li>• the text is produced by the school and thematically linked to unit 11 in Wee (2002a)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in groups pupils play a memory game to <i>activate</i> the appropriate <i>schematic</i> knowledge</li> <li>• the teacher asks the pupils to <i>predict</i> the content of the text using the <i>vocabulary</i> from the game</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the teacher uses the questions to <i>preview</i> the text</li> <li>• the text is shown on the screen at the front of the classroom in large font</li> <li>• the teacher reads paragraphs aloud and asks the pupils to <i>visualize</i> the situation in the text</li> <li>• during and after the reading of the sections the teacher asks pupils to answer <i>factual</i> questions and to express</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the pupils <i>visualize</i> and jointly retell the story with the teacher</li> <li>• the pupils reread the text</li> <li>• the teacher teaches the pupils answering techniques and in groups they answer <i>factual</i> and <i>inferential</i> questions</li> <li>• the teacher works with one of the groups of pupils</li> </ul>

			<p>personal <i>responses</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the teacher teaches the pupils to deduce the meanings of <i>vocabulary</i> through the use of root words, and prefixes</li> <li>the pupils annotate their texts</li> </ul>	
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a recount</li> <li>no title is given but the text is about a family outing to a park</li> <li>the text is produced by the school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the teacher <i>activates schematic</i> knowledge through discussion of the pupils' experience and <i>builds schema</i> using pictures from the Internet which are shown on the screen at the front of the classroom</li> <li>the pupils <i>preview</i> and <i>skim</i> the text looking for unfamiliar <i>vocabulary</i> which is underlined and discussed</li> <li>the <i>vocabulary</i> is written on the whiteboard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the pupils read the text silently and then discuss in groups to identify the <i>main idea</i> and <i>purpose</i> of the text</li> <li>in groups the pupils write a <i>summary</i> of the text using one sentence per paragraph</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the <i>summary</i> sentences are written on the whiteboard and evaluated and modified by the teacher</li> <li>in groups the pupils then answer <i>factual</i> 'wh' questions on each paragraph</li> <li>the teacher and the pupils construct an oral <i>summary</i> of the text</li> <li>in groups the pupils write <i>summaries</i> of the text</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a narrative text</li> <li><i>Stanley's Idea</i> in Wee (2002b) p.83-85</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the pupils <i>preview</i> the text in their textbooks by reading silently and thinking about it</li> <li>they underline <i>vocabulary</i> and <i>skim</i> and <i>scan</i> for information to answer questions</li> <li>the teacher reads the text aloud</li> <li>the pupils and the teacher read the text aloud together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the text is shown on the overhead projector</li> <li>the teacher shows the pupils how to <i>infer</i> character and <i>evaluate</i> character motive and behavior and the text is annotated accordingly</li> <li>the pupils <i>respond</i> to the ideas in the text</li> <li>the teacher teaches the pupils how to use contextual cues and their own experience to <i>infer</i> the meanings of unfamiliar <i>vocabulary</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the teacher teaches the pupils answering techniques and in groups they work to answer <i>factual</i>, <i>inferential</i> and <i>applicative</i> questions</li> <li>the teacher works with one of the groups of pupils</li> </ul>
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a folktale</li> <li><i>The Monkey and the Turtle</i> in Wee (2002a) p.51-53 and Wee (2002b) p. 46-47</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the text is shown on the screen at the front of the classroom</li> <li>the pupils are encouraged to talk about the pictures in the textbook and on screen to <i>activate</i> schematic knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the teacher and the pupils read aloud paragraph by paragraph</li> <li>during and after the reading of each paragraph the pupils are encouraged to <i>predict</i>, <i>respond</i>, <i>evaluate</i>, <i>locate information</i>, <i>infer theme</i> and discuss the <i>purpose</i> and type of text</li> <li><i>vocabulary</i> is also taught here by means of contextual cues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>in groups of three the pupils write the answers to <i>factual</i>, <i>inferential</i> and <i>applicative</i> questions on transparencies which are then evaluated and annotated through display on the overhead projector and discussed</li> </ul>

**Notes:**

<sup>a</sup> Italics are used to show where skills, strategies and vocabulary are taught.

<sup>b</sup> The question types, for example, factual, inferential and applicative questions follow Ruddell (1999).