

Taxonomies of reading practice: Moving beyond PIRLS data

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Introduction

In Singapore, the last major attempt to describe and intervene in the teaching of reading was the *Reading Skills Project*, commissioned by MOE in 1983 and reported by Ng (1987). It was a three-year cohort-sequential study aimed at obtaining a description of the progress patterns in acquisition of reading English by Singapore children. The sample consisted of 208 pupils from each of Primary 1, 2 and 3. The skills measured were: reading of continuous texts, decoding, oral language and writing vocabulary. The study also looked at reading instruction approaches appropriate to Singapore classrooms. The results indicated that there was significant contribution of decoding, oral language and writing vocabulary to reading accuracy and comprehension. Classroom observations and teacher interviews revealed restricted pupil use of language in primary schools, and language learning appeared to be an accumulation of discrete skills like word recognition, punctuation and grammar accuracy learnt through repetitious drill.

Based on these findings, in 1985, the Reading and English Acquisition Programme (REAP) was introduced in 90 lower primary classes, and later implemented in 962 classes in 1987. This programme attempted to redress the situation by providing educational opportunities in the context of meaningful and communicative use of the language. The results of a two-year evaluation exercise showed that the experimental group that was exposed to REAP did better in listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Since REAP, while smaller scale case-based and action-research style projects in Singapore have occurred, there have been no larger scale attempts to systematically describe and intervene in reading pedagogy.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2001 and *Trends in Reading Achievement 1991-2001* (2003) report that, on average, Singaporean students read better than those in comparable non-English as first language countries. In addition, English-at-home Singaporean students surpass students in advanced post-industrial countries like Canada and New Zealand.

These are encouraging results. However, we are unable to state definitively the effect of different variables since there has been no empirical research done on what actually happens in Singapore classrooms where language learning is concerned. In addition, the PIRLS study used surveys as well as teachers' self-reports. The analysis showed, among other trends, an emphasis on oral reading and a decline in the use of worksheets. The accuracy and generalisability of these descriptions require empirical research, which this project aims to achieve.

Reading taxonomies

The team studied various reading taxonomies. Adams (1994) proposed a bottom-up psycholinguistic model that zooms in on the phonemes before branching out to the syntax and the structure. Brown *et al.* (1994), on the other hand, took the top-down approach and started with the cognitive interactionist slant before moving on to metacognitive strategies. Ruddell's (1994) question taxonomy ranged from the very basic literal questions to the transactive; while Tierney & Pearson (1994) concentrated on the role the schema plays in reading. Calfee & Calfee (1976) proposed a detailed coding scheme to record events in the classroom. And finally, Freebody & Luke's (1990) four-resources model argues that reading incorporates four roles: the code breaker, the text participant, the text user and the text analyst.

Pilot stage: Instrument development

In July and August 2003, the research team modified and redeveloped a coding scheme for the descriptive coding and analysis of reading lessons for the P3 level. This scheme was trialed for validity and reliability in one reading lesson each in two classrooms in a neighbourhood school in Term 4, 2003. The scheme will be trialed further in four to six reading lessons in Term 1, 2004.

Future directions

In Term 2, 2004, the scheme will be used to randomly sample P3 reading lessons in 12 classrooms. At the same time, semi-structured interview data from the 12 teachers will be collected. This self-report data will be triangulated against classroom practice data and existing student achievement data. Both audio and video tape of lessons will be transcribed using discourse analysis, ethno-methodological and ethnographic approaches to obtain a qualitative analysis and description of reading lessons at the P3 level.

In Terms 3 and 4, 2004, based on the research findings, the research team will work in partnership with teachers to value-add their reading lessons.

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