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Reading in Singapore primary classrooms: Realities and Aspirations
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Background
The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2001 reported that for the overall reading achievement, Singapore is ranked 15th out of 35 participating countries – no mean feat for a country where the majority of the students learn English as a second language. The findings suggest that our students perform better on basic decoding and standard comprehension measures compared to those in other comparable non-English-as-first-language countries, and that our increasing percentage of English-at-home students achieve better results than students in predominantly English-speaking countries such as New Zealand. However, on teachers’ self-report of practices, the study claimed that 90% of classroom activities in the reading classroom in Singapore are at the basic factual level, requiring students to identify main ideas and to explain or support their understanding of what has been read. More specifically, the findings reveal that the three main reading instructional activities in a Singapore reading lesson are “understand new vocabulary”, “teacher reading aloud” and “pupils reading silently”. “Identifying main ideas” and “Explain/support understanding of what has been read” make up 90% of reading activities in Singapore classrooms, and the three most common follow-up activities are pupils answering questions orally, pupils writing down their answers, and pupils talking to each other.

What is really happening in our reading classrooms? This paper reports on the design of a major research study that describes the reality in our reading lessons by empirically describing actual, not self-reported, practices in the teaching of reading in Singapore primary classrooms at the P3 level. Preliminary data collection and possible implications of various reading activities are discussed. The paper ends with the writer’s aspirations on how teachers can be empowered to enhance language learning in our Singapore primary classrooms.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT
Design and sample
There are two parts in this research study. The first part deals with the design of a coding scheme to describe Reading lessons in Singapore primary classrooms. Based on the data collected, the second part looks at in-service workshops, and suggests how the teaching of reading in Singapore primary classrooms can be improved.

The sample is Primary 3 (age 8) pupils. This level was selected to make the findings more generalizable and comparable to the PIRLS study, which looked at a cross-section of Primary 4 pupils.¹

What follows represents work-in-progress findings which generate some data-based insights into Reading lessons in some Primary 3 classrooms in Singapore.

METHODOLOGY
Time frame

¹Until recently, all Primary 4 pupils sit for a national streaming examination at the end of the year. Thus, it would have been extremely difficult for the research team to get access to Primary 4 classes for this research as the emphasis at this level would be to prepare the pupils for this crucial examination.
In July and August 2003, the research team developed the coding scheme for the descriptive coding and analysis of reading lessons for the P3 level. This scheme was piloted in one reading lesson each in two classrooms in a neighbourhood school\(^2\) in Term 4\(^3\), 2003, and in another classroom in a neighbourhood school in Term 1, 2004. The final instrument is then used to code 23 Reading lessons in eight primary schools in Terms 1 and 2, 2004.

**Method**

With the implementation of the new 2001 English syllabus, four commercial textbooks were available. These are: *Celebrate English*, *Instep*, *My Pals are Here*, and *Treks*. These textbooks were phased in in stages, starting with Primary 1 and Primary 2 in 2001, Primary 3 in 2002, and so on. Thus, all Primary 3 classes started using the new commercial textbook from 2002. Coincidentally, all the four textbooks organize English language lessons around thematic units, eg “The magic of nature”. Each thematic unit generally lasts from two to three weeks. *Treks* is the only textbook that is not used in any of our sample schools.

Two research assistants (RAs) were attached to this project. Each stayed in a class for the duration of an entire thematic unit for English. Even though we were only studying Reading lessons, it was felt that looking at Reading lessons in isolation would not give us the general sense of the flow, sequence and coordination of the lessons within each thematic unit. It was also not very fair to the teacher for us to analyse the Reading lessons without considering the objectives of the lesson(s) that came before and after the Reading lessons. All the Reading lessons were audio- and video-taped. Notes were made for the other English lessons.

At the end of the thematic unit, the teacher as well as twelve pupils (selected by the teacher) from different ability groups were interviewed. During the interview, questions about Reading and Reading practices were asked.

**INSTRUMENTATION**

**Reading taxonomies**

Singapore pupils and teachers work in distinctive and different pedagogical environments, given the social facts of linguistic and cultural diversity, and different pedagogical traditions, systems procedures and aims than Western school systems. To avoid being caught up in the web of the various Reading debates, and, more importantly, in order not to be trapped into making preconceived assumptions about what happens in a Reading classroom in Singapore, it was decided that our coding scheme would incorporate the existing taxonomies documented in Reading research to date.

**The coding scheme**

The Reading lessons are broadly divided into three main phases: Pre-reading stage, During reading stage, and Post-reading stage. Within each stage, there can be one or more phases. Each phase is determined by a change in activity.

Each phase is in turn coded for the following categories:

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\(^2\) Neighbourhood (now referred to as mainstream) schools are schools that come under the direct jurisdiction of the government. The pupils in these schools usually come from the nearby housing estates. Many of these pupils are from average and below average income families, and speak Mandarin or a Chinese dialect at home.

\(^3\) There are four terms in a school year. Term 1 is from Jan – March, Term 2 April – May, Term 3 July to September, and Term 4 October to December.
1. Focus
This research study adopts the four-resources model proposed by Freebody and Luke (1990):
   (a) Decoding skills: Concerned with basic decoding of the text.
   (b) Comprehension skills: Concerned with overall meaning of the text.
   (c) Functional skills: Focused on the sociolinguistic, pragmatic and sociocultural appropriateness of the text.
   (d) Critical analyzing skills: Focused on critically analyzing and questioning the underlying assumptions in a text.

The analysis of this category helps to inform us how teaching can be designed to address the various roles. While coding this category, we look at what the teacher does.

2. Personal text connectedness
This category allows us to check for teachable moments when the teacher creates opportunities for pupils to relate their prior knowledge/experience to the text that is being read. A five-point scale is used to measure this category.

3. Technical metalanguage
This refers to specialized language or talking about the language. In particular, we would like to find out whether the teachers are using metalanguage to raise the pupils’ awareness of text types. The teaching of text types is a new feature in our 2001 English syllabus. Thus, this category will provide insightful data on whether our pre- and in-service programmes have been effective in equipping our teachers with both the knowledge and the pedagogy of teaching different text types.

4. Discourse format
This refers to the discourse that is carried out during the lesson. For a more meaningful description of the data, the format the teacher uses is differentiated from that of the pupils’. In general, it is expected that only one discourse format will be checked during any single phase.

5. Participation structures
This refers to the interaction patterns between the teacher and the pupils.

6. Engagement
This describes the level and/or extent of the pupils paying attention or are engaged in the task at hand.

7. Classroom management talk
This refers to the amount of time spent on disciplining and managing behaviour, and will inform us on the extent that our teachers have classroom management problems which impede their teaching.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS: REALITIES

The text
Generally, the teacher sticks closely to the prescribed textbook. This is not surprising, given the examination-oriented emphasis in our curriculum. There are two areas of concern related to this finding. Firstly, it implies that our teachers, despite the teacher training, continue to view the teaching of English as a content subject, and so feel the need to “complete the syllabus”, in this case, complete the textbook. Secondly, and concomitantly, it implies that our teachers see product (as opposed to process) as being more important in the teaching of English. This pedagogy is, of course, largely driven by the examinations, which are currently more academic in nature.
The pupils
The pupils in the sample range from above average to below average. Most of the classes had pupils of mixed abilities. It is expected that by Primary 3, the pupils would already have mastered basic reading skills such as word recognition, decoding skills and answering literal questions. Our findings indicate that this is true for the majority of the pupils. Unfortunately, and not surprisingly, a few pupils fall through the cracks. For example, one teacher lamented that in her class, there were “twelve pupils reading at the Primary 1 level”. In another class, one pupil “still does not know the letters of the alphabet”, and some pupils in another class “have not even bought their textbook”. Given the fact that our Reading lessons are so heavily dependent on the textbook (see above), this means that these pupils become more and more academically disadvantaged. The good news is that where engagement is concerned, the pupils are usually highly engaged in the tasks assigned to them.

The lesson
There is more reading than we had originally thought. As expected, the bulk of the time is spent on reading aloud. This is done in various forms – the teacher reading aloud, the class reading aloud, groups of pupils reading aloud, or individual pupils reading aloud. The bulk of the questions asked were literal questions. Thus, the foci of the reading lessons revolve around (a) decoding skills and (b) comprehension skills in the context of the four-resources model.

The most common teacher discourse is the Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE). This is not necessarily a bad thing. In a class of 40, the IRE format serves as an effective means to check for comprehension.

Teachers are highly conscious of time in the Singapore classroom. This might explain why teachable moments shown in the transcript extract below are not capitalized on:

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Teacher : The action or the problem first?
Pupils  : Problem.
Teacher : Problem. You have to tell me your problem. After that the action, then the?
Pupils  : Morale!
Teacher : Moral. Morale ends with an “e”, ok? Now, we will not turn to this particular “Fox and the crow”. We’ll look into your worksheet.
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The amount of PTC and TM varies according to the thematic unit. For example, there was a lot of PTC and TM used for the thematic unit on “Stories that teach”.

Interestingly, for a nation that is so obsessed with doing worksheets and grammatical accuracy, there is less teaching of Grammar during the Reading lessons than we had originally expected.

The teacher
The teachers’ understanding of reading varies. Most of them define it as “comprehension” and “reading aloud”. A few say reading is synonymous with “phonics”, “doing worksheets” and “group work”.

Many of the teachers feel inadequate when it comes to the TEACHING of reading strategies, and express that this is an urgent area of need for in-service programmes.
The English proficiency varies from teacher to teacher. Some teachers articulate their words very clearly, and speak impeccable English. Others tend to be sloppy in their speech, especially in the word endings, and occasionally, grammatical mistakes are reflected in their speech.

Given the big classes and the range of reading ability among our pupils, the teachers in the research project emerge as saints who are able to handle their classes in the area of classroom management. There is usually a variety of participation structure in each lesson, with movement between whole class to group or pair work.

**CONCLUSION: ASPIRATIONS**

As a teacher educator, there are a few aspirations I would like to highlight from the preliminary data collected from this research project.

Firstly, I would like to see more teaching and scaffolding during the Reading lessons. The data indicates that the current teaching is very textbook-based, and that those who already know how to read are able to read, while those who cannot read lag further and further behind their peers. To aggravate matters, our rigorous education system has brought about high expectations, and teachers rush to “finish the syllabus” rather than spend the time on teaching. For example, one teacher shares that the “Primary 1 syllabus does not allow teaching any more”. Another teacher communicates the same sentiment when she says, “By Primary 3, we assume pupils already know how to read.” This means that for those who already know how to read, the Reading lessons as they are currently conducted merely reinforce their understanding and confirm their comprehension of the text. A few teachers lament that there is hardly any time for them to teach the non-readers Reading skills.

Secondly, I would like to see remedial classes focusing less on the drilling of Grammar and more on the teaching of Reading. Remedial classes should not be a repeat of the general curriculum lessons, and with the entire class of pupils. By its very name “remedial”, only those who are identified as still having problems with Reading should have to attend these classes. During these lessons, an additional dose of reading a la the shared book approach will go some way towards helping these pupils with word recognition and reading for meaning.

Thirdly, I would also like to see more storying and oralling in our English lessons. The pressure of a mythical “we have to finish the syllabus” for English means that many of the teachers stick to the prescribed textbook, and spend little time on reading stories and/or just having conversations with their pupils. Encouraging extensive reading and talking about books read would contribute towards an increase in language proficiency, and is particularly critical for those pupils who come from non-English-speaking homes.

Above all else, my aspiration is that our English lessons be FUN to our pupils. When they are having fun in the classroom, language learning will not be seen as being boring, tedious and artificial.

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