Initiatives in Developing an Early Years Literacy Programme for Bilingual Preschoolers in Singapore

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Abstract
This paper describes the collaborative efforts of preschool staff from the National Institute of Education and the Ministry of Education to develop a preschool language and literacy programme, from one that was originally teacher-directed, traditionally structured and academically orientated, to one that is transitional, holistic and interactive in its approach to language teaching and learning.

Introduction
The value and critical importance of providing a solid foundation at preschool to prepare children for the demands of primary school has long been recognized in Singapore. Two years ago, in 2000, the Ministry of Education took the initiative to further improve the quality of early learning in non-profit centres. It launched a seven year longitudinal research project in conjunction with the National Institute of Education, with the specific aims of evaluating intervention efforts in the areas of curriculum content and delivery, teacher training, and their impact on children's achievement from age five (kindergarten one) to ten (primary four).

This paper will describe the content and implementation of the language and literacy programme which has been designed for this new pilot curriculum, and feedback from teachers, parents and children who have been involved in the K1 programme during the course of 2001.

Background
The kindergartens run by the non-profit organisations in Singapore have generally adhered to a traditionally structured, academically orientated curriculum, which concentrates on preparing children for primary one. In order to accommodate the large classes, of up to forty children in some centres, lessons tend to be mainly teacher-directed, with minimal teacher-pupil, and peer interaction in
evidence (Gan, 1990). The emphasis at K1 has been on the development of listening and speaking skills, and at K2, the development of reading, writing and mathematical skills, with creative activities, Asian values and national identity also being stressed. More recently, attempts have been made to provide a more integrated thematically based curriculum, aligned to the British "infant" school model with its focus on a spiral curriculum and to discourage paper and pencil tasks in preference for more activity-based learning (Sharpe, 2000).

The new curriculum, to be completed at the end of 2002, is based on the desired outcomes of preschool education for Singapore, which aim to enable young children to construct their own meanings about themselves and the world around them, and to assist them in becoming responsible members of society. A more interactive, holistic approach to learning has been adopted with increased opportunities for maximizing purposive play in six critical domains; language and literacy; numeracy; creativity; environmental; social and health awareness, and motor skills development.

The Pre-school Education Pilot Research Study

At the beginning of January 2000 two teams were formed to spearhead the planning of the new curriculum. They were drawn from the preschool division at the Ministry of Education and early childhood lecturers from the National Institute of Education. Their task was to develop the new core curriculum and teacher training modules, and to identify those aspects of preschool provision which may make a positive impact on children’s attainment in the areas of literacy (English and Chinese), problem-solving self and social development.

The pilot study, which commenced in January 2001, involved 1,800 K1 children from selected non-profit centres spread across Singapore. A quasi-experimental research study was designed to compare children’s gains in basic literacy, problem-solving and social skills. Assessments of these skills were conducted before, and ten months after, the introduction of the new K1 curriculum in October 2001. Further assessments will be made towards the end of 2002 with the same children, after they have completed the K2 programme.

In order for improvements in teacher quality to be measured, the experimental centres at the K1 level have been staffed by certificate-trained teachers, who received training at the National Institute of Education on an intensive ninety hour course prior to the new curriculum being implemented in January 2001. Twenty-two of these teachers have since been replaced by a new cohort of diploma-trained teachers who have taken over the classes at the K2 level.

Children’s literature plays a pivotal role in the new curriculum. It has provided the springboard for launching themes which afford continuity and integration to the curriculum as a whole. Detailed subject-related lesson plans have been developed for each core theme, which extends for approximately ten days. NIE
lecturers have taken responsibility for initiating, coordinating and editing the final content of these lessons, which have been developed by subject specialist officers from the Ministry’s preschool division. All lessons follow the same sequence, and structure, in order to facilitate implementation in the classroom. This highly structured approach has been necessary to assist the specially trained teachers in accommodating the very different approach to the management of children’s learning in the new curriculum which utilizes large and small group work.

**The Language and Literacy Programme**

The learning of English and the development of emergent literacy skills are key features of this new curriculum, which has had to take into account the needs of the “clientele” it is being designed for, namely, children from non-English speaking homes who have limited use of English for communicative purposes, and for predicting, reasoning and imagining (Gan, 1990). Further studies have also revealed that their exposure to emergent literacy skills at home has generally been uneven, with the majority of children being deprived of the opportunity to partner adults in “playing” with language, in informal activities, such as reading and telling stories, reciting rhymes and songs, and participating in appropriate games and unstructured written tasks (Cheah & Gan, 1998, Sharpe 1997). The lack of sharing traditional rhymes and songs at home (which is so much a part of the linguistic culture in the West) has also resulted in these children displaying a certain weakness in phonological skills, considered crucial to the successful development of reading and spelling (Gan & Yong, 2000).

The overall programme was conceived with two basic principles in mind: firstly, that language is best acquired in a community-styled climate of cooperation and sharing, with children interacting and learning from both their teachers and one another. Secondly, that children will be more motivated to use English if language skills are taught in an environment which is rich in oral and expressive activities and print-rich materials.

**Language and Literacy at K1**

Recognising the importance of laying a solid foundation for literacy skills to develop, the K1 programme has focused exclusively on developing oral and aural skills with the explicit objectives of helping children to use English to access knowledge and be adequately able to express their needs and feelings as well as to communicate effectively in social interactions. A substantial part of the programme has also been devoted to extending children’s phonological and phonemic awareness, as a necessary precursor to developing decoding strategies for reading and spelling at K2.

Children’s literature has played a dominant role in creating the literacy environment at both K1 and K2, serving as an ideal model for language learning and a
strong motivator for learning to read and write. A rich blend of children’s literature, ranging from local, traditional, and modern classics has been introduced for large group lessons and extended in a variety of ways e.g. dramatization. The follow-up activities for most of the large group sessions encourage children to take greater responsibility for disseminating their content in interactive small group discussions, in order to produce a collaborative end product. Rhyming texts, as well as a wide range of rhymes and songs have also been used to "sensitize" children to the concept of rhyme and heighten their aural awareness of rhyming patterns in words. Commercial and in-house aids, and charts, with high visual input, have also been used to complement lessons, especially those involving communicative language games.

Ample opportunities for children to "share" their experiences, have been created during the three, weekly forty-minute periods designated for language and literacy. A social framework for language use has been established by creating informal situations to motivate children to use English in functional, everyday contexts, and to engage in conversations with their peers and teachers. Learning corners have been established in every classroom, with the dramatic play corner changing each week according to the theme (e.g. a restaurant or travel agent) complete with the necessary resource and print props for children to "play" e.g. recording customers’ meal orders and holiday schedules. Manipulative charts used in the daily “Talking Ring” have also encouraged children to verbally interact in more formal situations, with children taking it in turns to assume the role of the teacher in directing and questioning their peers on class routines and topical subjects (e.g. the weather), and leading groups in round-robin games. An exciting assortment of puppets and soft toys also played a key role in motivating children to talk, ask questions, and reinforce the letters of the alphabet. “Lovely Language Corners” also been permanently set up to house these new “members” of the class, as well as factual and fictional books, which relate to the themes.

Language worksheets have been kept to a minimum, and used almost exclusively for fine motor skill development and alliteration. Children have had unlimited access to a wide variety of writing materials in the “Lovely Language Corner” with teachers providing support for their early efforts at “free writing”.

Language and Literacy at K2

Increased opportunities have been made available in the K2 programme to actively engage children in more problem-solving literacy experiences. Its primary focus is on emergent reading and writing. Whilst still retaining the emphasis on informal interactive settings and group-based activities for speaking and listening skills to flourish, it assumes a more skills-based approach and introduces strategies for developing competency in early reading, spelling and writing in a print-rich environment.
Stories, rhymes and poems continue to provide the central platform for language skills development. A guide to helping teachers pose open-ended questions to promote higher order thinking accompanies all stories used in K1. The Shared Book and Language Experience approaches promote letter, word identification and comprehension skills. Vocabulary targeted for reading purposes in the lesson plans are also introduced in other related activities – for example, through rebus rhymes, classroom labels, and thematic word banks. Children record this vocabulary in their own individual “Word Bank” books (arranged according to a novel pictogram alphabet originated by the language team) and take them home at regular intervals to review with their parents.

Phonic skills are taught within the meaningful contexts provided by stories and classroom experiences and through alliterative and onset and rime activities. A wide selection of story books featuring highlighted rimes are used to help children recognize spelling patterns. Templates for supplementary manipulative aids afford children the opportunity to physically blend and segment language in order to generate word family lists. These are then recorded into children’s Word Bank books for future spelling reference. Children are also producing their own individual aids to take home to “tutor” their parents. Other explicit word-study activities have also been supplied for the teacher to use in small groups.

The different thematic scenarios in the dramatic play corner continue to provide children with the opportunities to engage in literacy-related activities. The “Lovely Language” corner has been expanded to include both language aids and games and to serve as an arena for children to participate in a wide range of free and directed writing activities. The mechanics of handwriting are being introduced with the help of “Mr Writing Worm”, a novel puppet, and his instructional charts, and through neatly contrived body shaping activities, all of which have been reproduced on worksheets for children to complete on a weekly basis. Other writing activities, in addition to class and individual Language Experience stories, have focused on giving children practice in writing different “texts” e.g. lists, letters and invitations.

In order to keep parents up to date on the aims and activities of the K2 language programme, special “letters” are circulated each week with the added request for parents to play a more active role in reviewing the vocabulary included in the Word Bank books and generated by the phonic “teach your parent” aids.

**Intervention and Implementation**

The curriculum teams from the Ministry and the Institute have been monitoring classes involved in implementing the new curriculum on a monthly basis since its implementation in January 2001. Ongoing feedback from the teachers has therefore been obtained and promptly disseminated in order for the necessary revisions to be made to K1 lessons and to help refine ideas for the K2 programme.
Seminars were also held at regular intervals for teachers and their centre supervisors throughout the year to discuss issues with the teams. The main problems teachers reported with regard to the language programme, were memorizing lesson sequence, preparing resources, and managing the verbal spontaneity of the children, who were suddenly released from the tedium of workbook activities to play a central role in their learning!

At the end of K1, teachers appeared more relaxed and confident about managing and teaching the language lessons and made more professional (and passionate!) in their comments about the programme in general. The feedback suggests that the shift to a more child-centred physical layout in all classrooms has not only given the children a greater sense of “ownership” but also provided increased opportunities for the majority of teachers to engage in one on one conversation with them. An encouraging number of teachers have become noticeably more competent in talking with and modeling complete, grammatically correct sentences for their children to use. However many admitted to having problems in effectively managing feedback from children during large group discussions, especially if puppets were used, which expanded the volume of responses! As a result they seem to have remained preoccupied with using language to control children’s behaviour rather than using it for effective interactional purposes.

Feedback from the teachers on the impact of the programme on children’s communication skills in English was most encouraging. Children who had only been using Malay or Chinese to communicate in class, were, by the end of Term 2, using English to converse, make requests and convey simple messages. Even more surprising to many teachers was the fact that children were generally using English and not resorting to their mother tongue to informally interact with their peers.

Further Investigations

The public launch of the new curriculum is in 2003. Data for the first phase of the study are not available at present, because of the confidential nature of the research project. This paper will therefore confine itself to feedback obtained from parents and their children obtained from a small survey of sixty-six parents, conducted by the author in centres she has been responsible for monitoring. The questions focused on children’s motivation to use English and competence in using it.

Comments

The comments provided by parents give a greater insight into the impact of the language programme on their children’s use of English and the levels of verbal fluency they were achieving.
Table 1.
Survey questions and feedback.

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<tr>
<th>Questions directed to parents</th>
<th>Responses in percentages (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Are you pleased with the progress your child has made in English?</td>
<td>75%</td>
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<td>2. Does your child seem to enjoy speaking and listening to English more than he/she did before entering the programme?</td>
<td>78%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Does your child show a greater interest in learning rhymes and songs in English?</td>
<td>87%</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Does your child show a greater interest in wanting to share books in English?</td>
<td>84%</td>
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<td>5. Did you enjoy the English language classes in K1?</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Are you enjoying the English language classes in K2?</td>
<td>95%</td>
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Three quarters of the parents surveyed gave a positive response to the first two questions regarding the progress their children had made in using English, and the frequency with which they used it. Comments focused on the increased confidence children displayed in expressing themselves in English and the improved fluency and accuracy of their sentences: “He now speaks proper English”, commented one, and others, “my son is so confident he now corrects us!” and “he never stops asking us questions!”.

Some parents, like the teachers, also remarked on the spontaneous way children were using English, not just with them but also with others, for example, “he even speaks to the maid in English!”. Having sufficient command of the language “to understand concepts and relationships in English” was also noted by one parent. Most of the negative comments from the remaining parents criticized the programme as being “too easy” and “no different to what was learned at nursery in the previous year.”

Over 80% of the parents agreed that the programme had stimulated their children’s interest in rhymes, songs, and stories. Local rhymes shared the spotlight with traditional nursery rhymes and pop songs. One parent observed that her son even “recites the rhymes while bathing!”. Parents reported their children were now choosing to read more books and magazines in English and to watch more English medium TV programmes.

Almost all the children enjoyed the K1 language programme particularly the storytelling and singing. Many were able to list their favourite rhymes and stories. Most of them enjoyed the freedom to speak and being able to interact with friends.
Quite a few said they liked the way the lessons were conducted. However, there was disagreement regarding homework. Some missed it and others were obviously relieved not to have any!

After two months at K2, the children admitted to finding the programme “more challenging and interesting” with one boy remarking that he enjoyed “the advanced learning of English” and another “that you can explore even in English lessons!”. Others focused on the new vocabulary they were acquiring e.g. “it’s fun learning new English words through songs” and “I’m learning more words from my Word Bank Book.” The manipulative aids to spelling and handwriting were noted by one child who said she liked “arranging words with plastic letters and the Writing Worm”, and an encouraging number of children said they were enjoying spelling using the word family approach.

Many parents in Singapore are concerned about how their children will cope with the demands of primary one. The following negative comments made by parents in this study reflect frequently voiced misgivings about changes to the kindergarten curriculum as a whole, which they feel may affect their child’s readiness for formal schooling, in particular reading and writing e.g. “My child needs more time for written work” said one whereas another remarked that “there are too many creative activities.” One parent gave a more balanced viewpoint: “I feel that my child now uses more initiative and is able to find solutions or alternatives to problems presented to her. However as she is not exposed to the rigour of spelling and reading she will not be able to keep up with the mainstream students in primary one.” Another was more blunt: “Children from Malay and Chinese speaking families will gain more from the programme. Children from English speaking families are being held at a standstill for the two years during K1 and K2, learning little new vocabulary and written skills. My daughter asks quite often why she does not have homework and why they seem to play so much and do very little work at school.”

**Discussion**

From feedback gained to date, we can conclude that the language and literacy programme at K1 has met with considerable success in motivating children to speak English and in improving their oral competence in the language. However, for many of the English-speaking parents in particular, the new programme has heightened concern that their children will be inadequately prepared for the demands of the primary school, because the methods being used are too “play orientated”, with limited tangible outcomes in evidence. As previous local research has revealed, parents are increasingly aware of the need to begin the task of literacy acquisition at preschool, with the majority preferring to employ direct instructional methods, using rote learning, and assessment books to achieve this (Cheah & Gan, 1998).

The teams involved in producing the curriculum however are confident that their more balanced approach to literacy instruction which blends problem-solving
techniques with explicit, direct instructional approaches, will better equip children to adjust to the more holistic approach recently introduced in primary school. It is also confident that the programme will more effectively empower children to acquire the linguistic flexibility needed to realise the aims of education in Singapore which have been redefined to prepare children for life-long learning and to encourage the growth of critical and creative thinking.

The seeds of change have been sown by this unique concerted effort of official policy makers and early childhood professionals, to provide a really authentic and innovative preschool curriculum based on tried and tested first-hand initiatives. Embracing as it does, an approach that values the emergent ideas, cultures and creativity of young children, it will hopefully provide the benchmark of both preschool training courses and preschool curricula for the years to come.

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References


