

Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 11

Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

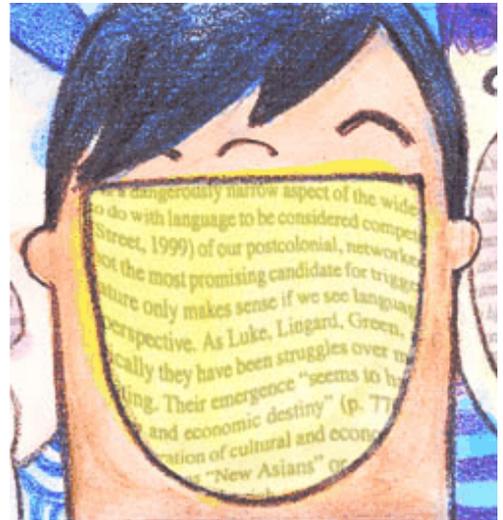
PDF Version

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

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INSPIRE
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VOICES
SingTeach features two articles on helping kids understand current events and communicate their opinions about them.



ARCHIVES



Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 11 ▶ Inspire

Archives

INSPIRE

Issue 1

Get to know the theories and issues that inspired defining trends in educational research, policy and practice.

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Reading Teachers and Teaching Readers

Issue 5

Research says that unless teachers themselves experience the struggle of actively engaging with texts, it would be difficult for them to encourage their students to do likewise. Our researchers put this to the test.

Issue 6

Issue 7

Click [here](#) to read more.

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

PDF Version

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 11 ▶ Inspire ▶ Reading Teachers and Teaching Readers

Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

PDF Version

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

INSPIRE

Reading Teachers and Teaching Readers

| Print |

Research says that unless teachers themselves experience the struggle of actively engaging with texts, it would be difficult for them to encourage their students to do likewise. Our researchers put this to the test.



Developing students' critical literacy and reading skills is a key learning outcome in Singapore's secondary English syllabus (Ministry of Education, 2001). However, research findings indicate that the use of texts in classrooms has been largely limited to extracting information, with very little need to interpret or generate new knowledge.

To address this disparity, a research team from the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) began the project, "**Building Teachers' Narrative and Textual Capacities**", a two-stage intervention into secondary English classrooms in Singapore. Beginning with teachers' own reading practices, the team hopes to influence how literacy is taught and learned in the classroom.

Where's the gap?

This research project was designed to first develop teachers' *narratological and textual capacity*, that is, their ability to understand and interpret various texts.

According to Dr Jim Albright, the project's principal investigator, "Teachers' narrative competence is a neglected aspect in professional development for improving students' literacy." (Albright, 2006, p. 8)

True enough, researchers found that many of the teachers had been "conditioned" to think that there is a fixed, singular meaning to each text. This mindset is then passed on to their students through a rigid reading pedagogy.

The research team contends that if literacy is basically about "having access to the practices involved in the making and remaking of textual meaning", then the limited capacity of English teachers to engage in such meaning-making in turn limits students' ability to interpret texts creatively. (Kwek, Albright, & Kramer-Dahl, 2007, p. 76)

At the same time, teachers who believe that textual meanings are determined tend to have repertoires of readings that are narrow and limiting. This can also affect how their students will be able to interact with the different texts they read in the classroom. As Dr Albright puts it:

"Importantly, *students' ability to explore and develop possible narrative connections, understandings and analyses are dependent on teachers' pedagogical practices* that afford students rich opportunities to work with texts." (2006, p. 11, emphasis added)

Building communities

To address the gaps in reading pedagogy, the research team organised reading circles where teachers come together regularly to discuss their responses to the texts they are reading. These texts could be literary, non-fictional or professional texts, and are either selected by the researchers or collectively chosen by the group.

These reading circles are important because though these teachers teach reading, they

have little time to read outside their areas of work. Also, some teachers are "poor" readers themselves - that is, they do not think critically about the texts they read nor respond creatively to what they read - criteria that they expect of the students they teach (Kwek et al., 2007).

Unlike book clubs, where discussions are limited to an exchange of personal opinions, the reading circle texts are chosen to encourage critical discussion related to their professional practice. The discussions are scaffolded by the researchers, who seek to link the teachers' own reading experiences and personal experiences with what is mentioned in the texts, and to consider how such texts may be useful for their classes.

Developing professional capacities

The merits of employing teachers' reading circles in their professional development have been documented extensively. Among other things, they facilitate an environment for professional development by opening opportunities for a diversity of personal readings within a safe and intellectually supportive context.

The reading circles provide teachers with a shared meta-language to talk about both the texts and about their pedagogical practices. "Working together the goal is to have teachers see that their engagement with these texts is enriched by sharing multiple and varied interpretations," notes Dr Albright (2006, p. 24).

"It is hoped that participants will come to feel a responsibility to help their colleagues learn through their sharing of their interpretations," he adds. "They may come to recognise that their colleagues are resources for their own learning and reflection, and thus, develop a commitment to their collective growth." (Albright, 2006, p. 24)

It is hoped that this enhanced capacity in turn would help them to design more effective lessons, which is the focus of the second phase of the research. It is also hoped that these teacher communities will later be propagated across other levels and schools.

Encouraging reading

The research team has been actively involved in two "neighbourhood" schools since January 2007. Despite some initial resistance, the reading circles are now into the second year (over 15 sessions). Over 20 teachers from the two schools are participating in the project, all of whom are lower secondary English teachers.

It is encouraging to note that the teachers strongly believe that reading is crucial in improving their students' English language competency. They also recognise that there is a need, in their reading curriculum and in their daily classroom interactions, to connect more strongly with their students' out-of-school textual experiences and practices.

These realisations form the foundation for the next phase of the research, which is focused on curriculum design and implementation. Here, the objective is to encourage teachers to use the knowledge and skills developed in the first stage of the project to improve their teaching practices. They will also be asked to do their own action research projects to find out more about their students' literacy practices.

For teachers looking for a good read or a good place to start, here are some recommended readings:

Appleman, D. (2000). *Critical encounters in high school English: Teaching literary theory to adolescents*. Toronto: University Of Toronto Press.

Commeyras, M., Bisplinghoff, B., & Olson, J. (2003). *Teachers as readers: Perspectives on the importance of reading in teachers' classrooms and lives*. New York: International Reading Association.

Day, J. P., Spiegel, D. L., McLellan, J., & Brown, V. B. (2002). *Moving forward with literature circles: How to plan, manage and evaluate literature circles that deepen understanding and foster a love of reading*. New York: Scholastic.

Tyson, L. (2001). *Learning for a diverse world: Using critical theory to read and write about literature*. London: Routledge.

Wineburg, S., & Grossman, P. (1998, January). Creating a community of learners: Among high school teachers. *Phi Delta Kappan*, pp. 350-

- > Read more about this project [here](#).
- > Read about other CRPP projects on student reading:
 - [Extensive Reading \(ER\) Programme](#)
 - [School-Based Reading Intervention Model](#)

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Kwek, D., Albright, J., & Kramer-Dahl, A. (2007). Building teachers' creative capabilities in Singapore's English classrooms: A way of contesting pedagogical instrumentality. *Literacy*, 41(2), 71-78.

Ministry of Education. (2001). *English language syllabus 2001 for primary and secondary schools*. Singapore: Curriculum Planning and Development Division.

Published in SingTeach, March 2008

Building Teachers' Narrative and Textual Capacities

This project aims to improve teachers' understanding of textuality, textual interpretation and explication, as well as develop their capacity to design curriculum and pedagogy with special focus on narratology, textuality and student response.

It comprises two stages: The first focuses on building teachers' capacities, while the second stage is a subsequent shift to improving student outcomes.

In the first stage, teachers will share their planning, curricular design and assessment practices while participating in a reading circle that focuses on personal response to contemporary Singaporean literature. Later, the reading circle will take up non-fictional and professional texts. Both print and multimodal texts will also be explored.

Project Brief

Project Number:

CRP 8/06 JA & 2/07 JA

Research Focus:

Language & Literacy

Keywords:

Textuality; narratives;
reading

Start Date: May 2006

Status: Completed Sep
2009

Project Team

Principal

Investigators:

- James Albright
- Anneliese Kramer-Dahl
- **Dennis Kwek**

Contact Person:

Anneliese Kramer-Dahl

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**Project
Publications**

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Related Links



**Project
Publications**

Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 4 ▶ Ideas ▶ Reading Beyond the Classroom

Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Issue 12

Issue 13

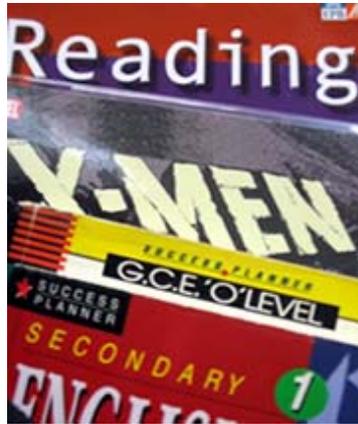
Issue 14

IDEAS

Reading Beyond the Classroom

| [Print](#) |

Do your students read enough? After all the worksheets and exams, can we help them discover that reading is fun? CRPP researchers teamed up with a group of secondary school teachers to determine how well the school's Extensive Reading Programme really works.



The Extensive Reading (ER) Programme helps students develop the habit of "reading for pleasure" by exposing them to a wide variety of material which they can choose and read at their own pace. In one secondary school in Singapore, this is implemented in the form of 20-minute reading periods and special classes where students review and talk about the books that they've read, often through creative presentations.

Teachers fully support the school's ER programme and believe in providing students with plenty of opportunities to read. However, they had one major problem: they were concerned that students were only reading for school and not for pleasure.

Given that ER was supposed to encourage students to be lifelong readers, this was an important issue that needed to be addressed.

School teachers approached CRPP to help them determine how well the ER programme works and how it could work better. This led to the project, Independent Variables that Impact Literacy and Reading Habits, led by Dr. Jeanne Wolf and Dr. Wendy Bokhorst-Heng.

Looking for answers

Jeanne and Wendy evaluated the ER programme using a formative evaluation approach, where teachers and school leaders were involved in everything from conceptualising research instruments, to gathering and analysing data. "It was never us saying, 'This is what we're going to do'," recalled Wendy. "At every stage, it was a partnership."

The evaluation required student interviews, classroom observations, diagnostic exams, and "a LOT of meetings". At the same time, case studies of three teenagers from different streams were done in order to get a deeper understanding of their literary practices beyond school.

Of course, this approach also had its share of challenges. "Because we had such a heavy process approach, it wasn't until the middle of the first year that people stopped thinking of us as those who were out to monitor what they were doing," said Jeanne. Still, it was this "heavy process approach" that kept teachers fully aware of the status of the research and how its findings were being interpreted.

"In a sense, there was no one moment of great surprise because they were part of the process from Day One," said Wendy, "We made sure we showed teachers some data at every meeting. We always gave them an update on where we're at and what we're finding. Most of all, we always asked them, 'What do you think?'"

What they found out

So it works, but...

Interestingly, the evaluation showed that the ER programme actually did well in spite of the teachers' earlier perceptions. Although they did not like filling out the online logs where teachers kept track of how much they read, students enjoyed the reading periods and talking about books with their classmates. They also showed a relatively positive attitude towards reading, with most seeing it as a way to do better in school and expand their vocabulary.

Ironically, this perception of reading was also the root of the ER programme's problem. The strong association between reading and school was actually part of the reason why few students read beyond the classroom. The case studies showed that this perspective was also shared by many parents and grandparents alike. "If your home is telling you the more important reading is the ones that are school-related, or that comics are not important although you love them, then that's what happens," said Jeanne.

Of course, this is not to say that reading to improve one's vocabulary is a bad thing. "You can't impose on any school or anybody what the appropriate value of reading is," Wendy explained, "but it needs to be recognised that okay, you've got a programme where a very important goal is reading for pleasure. Sure, there are other benefits, but simply, you want students to read because it's fun. If your objectives are this and the programme's objectives are that, is this the programme that we need?"

Definition dilemma

At the same time, there were also contrasting definitions about the ER programme's objectives and purpose. Jeanne and Wendy discovered that teachers and school leaders had different ideas about what "reading" they wanted to achieve.

"The perception of literacy, how the programme works and how it should work, varied among stakeholders and within stakeholders," said Jeanne. Some teachers believed that reading was for gaining information while others thought it was to improve English and do better in school exams. While these were all powerful reasons to encourage students to read, many teachers forgot that the actual purpose of the ER programme was to teach students that one can read for pleasure as well.

As a result, even students themselves were unsure of what ER was for. When asked why they go through the reading periods everyday, the students didn't know because the teachers did not tell them what it was about.

The BIG paradox

Another big question raised during the evaluation was how to reconcile the concept of reading for pleasure with the outcome-oriented focus of Singapore's educational system.

"It's a powerful question because it gets at one of the biggest challenges of the programme," noted Wendy. At the same time, it also leads to more questions, such as whether students should record how much time they spent reading or whether there should be a departmental standard about how much they should read.

The case studies also showed that there was a need to look into the students' motivations and attitudes towards reading. "There are many schools where you walk around and see all these book posters and book contests. But the notion that reading is fun is just not there - the liveliness, the passion. That's the way to change attitudes!" exclaimed Jeanne.

In spite of such challenges, Jeanne and Wendy do not think that the current paradox is a sign of failure. "Part of our answer is that there is the 'Singapore ER programme'," explained Jeanne. "It's not the Western idea of what ER is but, rather, a Singaporean version. Perhaps there's a way to make it more focused on reading for pleasure as well."

So what happened?

Jeanne and Wendy were quick to stress that the evaluation was not an intervention. While both are self-proclaimed bookworms, neither claims to be a "reading expert" with all the ready solutions for the ER Programme. "Once the school sees the evaluation report, it's up to them to think of what the implications are for them," clarified Wendy, "We can flag some and we are going to in the report but it's really up to them."

This does not mean that there has been no significant change. Since the beginning of the evaluation, the school has noted the limitations brought forward by the research and worked towards improving the ER programme. For example, students now choose from a wider selection of books and may be allowed to read magazines by next year. Newspapers are also delivered to the school every Monday morning, giving students yet

another genre of reading. At the same time, the evaluation highlighted the need for teachers to question things and share information.

"Initially, you really had very few conversations, but as the year wore on, we had a lot of people talking and even questioning. They would ask, 'Do we really need these online logs?' At the beginning, nobody would ask a question like that," recalled Jeanne. In a way, making teachers co-evaluators rather than simply those who were evaluated allowed them to step back and think about their own practice.

When asked about how other schools can make use of their research, Jeanne and Wendy refer to the evaluation process "as the most positive story you can get from the research". While the research findings are definitely important, they believe the formative evaluation is a perfect example of using research to inform practice, encourage reflection, and create change.

As stated by Jeanne, "A real benefit of evaluation is to raise questions for further discussion." It forces educators to consider how a programme may need to change to suit their own particular classroom contexts, rather than assume one can simply implement a static programme. As the project moves on to link ER with home and school literacy practices, it will be exciting to see what kinds of discussion we will have next.



This brief discussion with Jeanne and Wendy focuses on just some of the key components of their research. Click [here](#) to read more about this project.

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Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

IDEAS

Help for Young Readers

| Print |

Living in the modern world requires a high standard of literacy. As we gain access to more and more information, the ability to read text, understand its meaning and know its implications has become almost indispensable. Readers today need not only to be efficient and selective but critical in their reading. As a result, teaching children to read has become a priority for schools all over the world.



The above has been a key issue for Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) as well. According to our English Language Syllabus (2001), schools are required to have a reading programme that gives students the skills to make sense of print, provides enjoyable reading experiences, and pushes them to become independent critical readers.

However, fulfilling these objectives in the classroom has remained a challenge for many teachers.

A series of research studies done by the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) shows that reading lessons in Singapore schools are mostly about extracting information from text in order to complete required worksheets. Students are often not encouraged to wander beyond the text or develop a sense of inquiry or research.

The Reading Intervention Model

The School-Based Reading Intervention Model (SBRIM) aims to address these concerns by using the latest research findings and components from internationally successful reading instruction programmes to help teachers teach students to read effectively. It sets itself apart from other reading models used in Singapore by emphasising the need for children to be immersed in the world of books, develop a reading culture and be explicitly instructed on reading and comprehension skills.

"Teachers read books to kids as an optional extra rather than a fundamental part of the English Language curriculum," explains Dr. Chitra Shegar, the project's main Principal Investigator. "When they do read aloud, the emphasis is often on decoding and surface comprehension of text. There is very little global comprehension of the text and interaction with the text itself."

The research team hopes that the reading of stories and other non-fictional texts will not only develop literacy, but also a passion for reading as a lifelong habit. "The project has been designed in such a way that reading is not only seen as a skill to be taught but a habit to be caught," adds Dr Shegar. This, in addition to the explicit instruction of reading and comprehension skills, would bring reading instruction to a new level in Singapore. The model is described in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Components of the SBRIM

Phonics Instruction Programme

Before-school systematic phonics instruction for Primary 1 children with trouble decoding text, identified based on results of a Diagnostic Reading Test.

Supervision by class teachers so they will be aware of their students' decoding abilities and be able to cater to their needs in class.

Extensive Reading Programme

Students read for an extended reading period of 20 minutes (compared to the usual 20 minutes).

They can choose from, read and discuss a wide variety of literature.

Buddy reading will be conducted for those children who are still unable to read.

Systematic Instruction of Comprehension Strategies and Critical Reading

To help students become effective lifelong readers, teachers will be encouraged to teach comprehension strategies.

Students will be taught to understand the text as well as evaluate information presented in the text at various levels.

Students will be given comprehension questions that involve lower and higher order thinking skills

Reading Across the Curriculum

Content subjects (Social Studies, Science, etc.) will be utilised as avenues for further reading instruction.

Students can learn more about the subject matter while improving their reading skills.

Integrating Reading and Writing Instruction

Reading and writing instruction to be integrated, not taught as separate skills.

Helps students to see reading and writing as related and mutually supportive processes.

How does it work?

Currently, the SBRIM is being implemented in collaboration with Primary 1 teachers in a primary school in Singapore. It will be conducted over a period of 4 years and comprises two phases.

The first phase spans the first 2 years of the study. Here, a reading expert will act as a coordinator and work with teachers through a series of hands-on workshops. These workshops are important for them to gain the "procedural knowledge" necessary to translate the reading model into actual practice. Dr Shegar defines this knowledge as not only including an understanding of theory and practice of reading instruction, but also "the confidence, intuition and flexibility to know what are suitable and likely to work with a group of students."

Following these workshops, the teachers and coordinator will work together to incorporate what has been learnt in the workshops into the reading curriculum. The coordinator may also co-teach with teachers in order to facilitate the process.

At the same time, teachers will form a study group where they can share problems or knowledge gained from reading the literature. Meetings will also be facilitated by the coordinator, and the time spent in the study group will be counted towards the teachers' professional development hours.

The second phase of the model will take place during the third and fourth years of the research study. This time, the coordinator will "retreat to the background" and allow teachers to take charge in implementing and developing a curriculum based on the model.

Looking ahead

Currently, the SBRIM is still in its first year of implementation, with researchers wrapping up the collection of baseline data. In line with the first phase of the study, teachers have also begun attending professional development courses to further develop their knowledge of literacy instruction.

Dr Shegar and her team now hope to get teachers to try more effective teaching methods and reflect on their own classroom practices. And while the model has a long way to go before significant changes can be made in the classroom, the response from teachers as well as the school has been extremely positive which certainly affords reason for optimism.

> Click here to [read](#) more about this project.

Other related projects:

- > [Teaching Reading in Singapore Primary Schools](#)
- > [Independent Variables that Impact Literacy and Reading Habits](#)

Also read:

- > [Describing and Improving the Teaching of Reading in Singapore Primary Schools](#)

Published in SingTeach, September 2006

Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 11 ▶ Ideas

Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

PDF Version

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

IDEAS

Discover innovative ideas on teaching through thought-provoking articles on the latest research findings by NIE academics and researchers.

Figures of Speech

In 2005, CRPP began the first massive study on the language use, proficiency and identity of Singaporean children. Three years down the road, *SingTeach* catches up with the research team to show you what they've found out.

Click [here](#) to read more.

Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 11 ▶ Ideas ▶ Figures of Speech

Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

PDF Version

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

IDEAS

Figures of Speech

| [Print](#) |

In 2005, CRPP began the first massive study on the language use, proficiency and identity of Singaporean children. Three years down the road, *SingTeach* catches up with the research team to show you what they've found out.

Learning to speak more than one language is a large part of growing up in Singapore. Yet, little is known about how we decide to choose, use and develop the languages we speak. As the nation's multiracial society continues to grow, there needs to be a clearer picture of exactly how we communicate.



The Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore is an ambitious large-scale project by the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) aimed at understanding the language use, ideology, proficiency and identity of 10-year-olds in Singapore. Now in its third year of implementation, the research team shares what they've found out with *SingTeach*.

Pertinent findings

The team's findings indicate that the way young Singaporeans use language is largely dependent on context, with constant code-switching depending on the speaker, the location, and even the type of conversation going on. Below is a brief look into some of their findings:

Who am I talking to?

- A majority of the children surveyed prefer to use English at home. Seventy-one percent use English, sometimes mixed with their mother tongue (Mandarin, Malay or Tamil), when speaking to their siblings. However, when speaking to their grandparents, 85% of them use the vernacular.

- Chinese children tend to use more English to discuss school work and other matters while Malay children tend to use their mother tongue when they are with friends of the same race. All three groups indicated that they are most comfortable with friends who can speak both English and their mother tongue.

How do I decide?

- The team noticed that the students code-switched often. "This literacy practice is often disallowed in Mother Tongue classes but in reality, people do code-switch when they communicate," says **Dr Viniti Vaish**, one of the project's principal investigators.

- Children's perceptions of the person they are addressing influences what language they use. For example, in one activity, a child was given \$10 to spend in a mall. Interestingly, she spoke to the shopkeeper in her mother tongue but spoke to the researcher in English because she felt that she needed to use English to speak to an "educated" person.

What do I like to watch?

- Chinese children watch a lot of Chinese programmes and movies whereas the Malay children do not like watching programmes in their mother tongue.

- Some Indian children only watch Tamil movies. Their parents do not allow them to watch English-language "made-in-Hollywood" programmes because they feel that the language used is unsuitable. Despite this, these children speak fluent English.

Am I good at using this language?

- When asked to rate their language abilities, the children rated themselves much higher than what the school rated them.

- The majority of them indicated high levels of proficiency in English. Of the three groups, Indians indicated the highest level of proficiency in English.

- Chinese children generally had a less than positive attitude towards their mother tongue.

Is it part of who I am?

- The children are comfortable using English to express their religious identities; they do not necessarily link race with language.

- When a child was asked if speaking in Malay made him feel Malay, he replied: "I got the colour of Malay so I feel like Malay." He added that even if he spoke English, that would not make him feel less Malay.

Practical applications

"Each language that is in the mind and heart and soul of the child helps in the understanding and comprehension of the other languages," says Dr Vaish. "We need to find ways to accommodate these biliteral practices as an English-only or mother-tongue-only space can be quite constraining for the child."

For example, if a child cannot pronounce an English word but if he or she can write it in a different script then he or she would have understood and learned the word in his or her own way.

Dr Vaish feels that movies and music are great resources for teaching since most children watch a lot of movies and listen to music in their mother tongue. However, the current national school curriculum does not allow for popular culture to be incorporated into classroom pedagogy.

"This could be due to cultural reasons and the feeling that the text you encounter outside the classroom looks so different from traditional literacy texts. The child might feel that entertainment outside school are the fun things and are unrelated to school," explains Dr Vaish. "We should try to bridge this gap, and sensitively incorporate popular culture into the classroom."

The research team hopes that their findings can help teachers understand more about how their students feel about their own language and how they rate their language abilities. Teachers can use this information to address language areas that the children are weak in.

What was this project about?

There were two stages in the Sociolinguistic Survey. The first stage was the quantitative survey, which was administered face-to-face in the students' homes. A total of 668 Chinese, Malay and Indian students took part in this survey.

The second stage involved qualitative follow-up studies, which aimed

to develop a clearer picture of the patterns of language use, ideology and proficiency of the students. Twelve students were involved in this part of the study.

The researchers planned an activity for the students each time they visited, such as visits to shopping malls and religious places. All these interactions were audio- and video-taped. As part of the qualitative study, the children were also given tape recorders and encouraged to record their exchanges with others as well as to keep a journal and log of their experiences, feelings and activities.

> To read an earlier article on this project, click [here](#).

> To read more about the project, click [here](#).

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Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 2 ▶ Ideas ▶ An Introduction to The Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore

Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Enrich

Relax

Links

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

IDEAS

An Introduction to The Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore

Page 1 of 2

The Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) has undertaken a large-scale language survey. The survey involves 1,000 Primary 4 students from the three main ethnic groups in Singapore. It is hoped that these children's language patterns and attitudes can be documented.

What we know

The census is a document that presents the broadest possible view of language use in a nation. In terms of language, the Singapore Census asks what the language most frequently spoken at home is. On the basis of this question, the following decadal trend can be observed:

Ethnic group \ Language most frequently spoken at home	Chinese		Malays		Indians	
	Year					
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
English	19.3	23.9	6.1	7.9	32.3	35.6
Mandarin	30.1	45.1	-	0.1	0.1	0.1
Chinese dialects	50.3	30.7	-	0.1	0.2	0.1
Malay	0.3	0.2	93.7	91.6	14.5	11.6
Tamil	-	-	-	0.1	43.2	42.9

Table 1 . Language trends in Singapore. Source: *Census of Population 2000*, p. ix

It is clear from these statistics that English has increased somewhat as a language most frequently spoken at home, especially for the Chinese community, and that there are substantial gains for Mandarin and losses for Chinese dialects. The number of Indian homes where English is the household language has not increased except by 3.3% though this number was high throughout the last decade compared to the Chinese and Malay communities.

What we want to find out

However, this is merely the surface of the language situation in Singapore. If Singaporeans were asked what their most frequently spoken language was, they are likely to answer "it depends". Xu and Li (2003) commented that "What is not reflected in the census report is the indecisiveness (uncertainty) of many Singaporeans when asked about what is the language they use most frequently in a specific type of situation, e.g. at home; neither does the report reflect the practice of code-switching among the young people". **The Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore** tries to address this shortcoming

with the following in-depth research question:

Who speaks/writes what language to whom in what context with what level of fluency with what communicative ends and with what attitude?

A few similar studies have been done in Singapore (Goh 2001; Xu, Chew, & Chen, 1998). Goh's (2001) findings were that though the younger cohort of Chinese language teachers that had been trained under the current bilingual education system rated their Mandarin as being better than their English, that was not the case in reality. In actual fact, "there is a sharp disparity between their actual proficiency level and their self perceived language competence" (p. 238). The latter, a much larger study of 4000 Chinese in Singapore, found that acceptance and use of English was less than that of Mandarin. Though this is probably the largest sociolinguistic survey done recently in Singapore, it only surveyed the Chinese community.

The following comment by the authors is one of the inspirations for our study: "A pan-community survey reaching all sectors of the population was never attempted by the academics" (Xu, Chew, & Chen, 1998). **The Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore** is such a pan-community survey.

What we are setting out to do

Our study differs in terms of the age of its cohort, the depth of the survey questions, and the theorizing of the instrument and data. The following table summarizes our research design:

SES	Chinese		Malay		Indian	
	Pilot	Main study	Pilot	Main study	Pilot	Main study
1	10	100	8	75	8	75
2	10	100	8	75	8	75
3	10	100	8	75	8	75
4	10	100	8	75	8	75
Total	40	400	32	300	32	300

Table 2. Ethnicity and socio-economic status of participants

Our sample is stratified by race and socioeconomic status (SES). Due to anticipated difficulties in getting enough families to fill each cell, we have decided not to include the ethnic category "Others" in our study. The four SES groups are based on the following census categories: high, upper middle, lower middle, and low.

Nearly 15 schools from diverse neighbourhoods have volunteered to participate in this study and we hope to involve many more. However, the administration of the survey will take place in the home.

Though both Goh (2001) and Xu, Chew, & Chen (1998) used only self reports without any stimulus, **The Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore** uses scenarios in the form of audio recordings that will be played to the children on the basis of which they will answer questions on language attitudes and ideology. These scenarios are in English, Malay, Mandarin, Singlish, and Tamil, and will be administered in keeping with the ethnicity and linguistic background of the children by bilingual researchers who are insiders of the different linguistic/ethnic communities.

How this affects you and me

We hypothesize that the languages and registers that children bring to the classroom might have an impact on their educational achievement. For instance, a child who speaks mainly Malay and Singlish at home might deal with the curriculum differently compared to another child who speaks only Standard English at home. One of our concerns is to explore whether this differential linguistic capital that children bring to school leads to differential educational outcomes.

We hope that this study would provide constructive data that can inform Singapore's

bilingual education policy and language teaching.

<< Start < Prev 1 **2** Next > End >>

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The Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore

This project attempts a baseline sociolinguistic survey of language use and users in Singapore. Significant changes have occurred since the last study, done in the 1970s by Kuo (1976), and it is important to find out exactly what these trends are so as to inform and influence curriculum and pedagogy in the classroom as well as language planning at the national level.

This project hopes to use an ecologically balanced mix of research methods that includes both the qualitative and the quantitative. Using **Panel 1** of CRPP's Core Research Program as a data source, a large-scale quantitative household survey will be conducted. The questions in the survey will elicit information on language use in the major domains and sites in which the family engages.

Analyses from this data will also be used to estimate the linguistic consequences of government policies and, in the opposite direction, the impact of language trends on political, social and economic conditions. In addition, this project will attempt to systematically collect data on code switching and code mixing between the various languages and dialects in the community.

Project Brief

Project Number:

CRP 22/04 AL & 23/04 AL

Research Focus:

Language & Literacy

Keywords:

Mother tongue;
sociolinguistics

Start Date: Jan 2005

Status: Completed Dec 2008

Project Team

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**Project
Publications**

Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 11 ▶ Voices

Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

PDF Version

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

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What's the difference between protecting kids from negative media and sheltering them from the real world? Siblings Cherian George and Mary Cherian have found the answer in *What's Up*, an award-winning newspaper for students that would make life easier for teachers.

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Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 11 ▶ Voices ▶ Don't Teach Your Kids to be Afraid of the World

Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

PDF Version

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

VOICES

Don't Teach Your Kids to be Afraid of the World

| Print |

What's the difference between protecting kids from negative media and sheltering them from the real world? Siblings Cherian George and Mary Cherian have found the answer in *What's Up*, an award-winning newspaper for students that would make life easier for teachers.

Never has it been so difficult to introduce children to the world we live in. As teachers, we are painfully aware that training students for the future also means helping them understand what's going on in the present. And as stories on sex scandals, suicide bombers and recession flood the headlines, one can't help but wonder how much we can really achieve in the classroom.



So what is the "right way" for young students to learn about current events? A good answer or resource would be *What's Up*, an award-winning newspaper which aims to report news in ways that are appropriate for young people. Founded by siblings Cherian George and Mary Cherian, *What's Up* advocates the idea that children can learn about what's happening in the world and still feel hopeful and optimistic about life. They do so through thought-provoking articles that's interesting and compelling for young people.

Sounds too good to be true? *SingTeach* talks to Mary about the tricky task of helping children deal with current events and how *What's Up* can help teachers go about it.

Q: Aside from getting students to read, how can current events help students learn about language?

A: When students are engaged in reading about current affairs, they absorb the nuances of language used to tell the stories. This provides us with opportunities as educators.

First, when we introduce and explain concepts that the stories illustrate, students learn not only these concepts but also how to use language to describe them. Take, for instance, the concept of "soft power". We've written about how countries use soft power effectively. Students may pick up the term itself as well as words and phrases that are used with it. It's not just a matter of growing vocabulary – the words and phrases bring with them an understanding of an alternative type of power that applies both at the global and personal levels.

Second, as a matter of policy, we try to be diversity-sensitive and inclusive in our language throughout *What's Up* and our websites. For example, we alternate male and female pronouns where appropriate; we say "wheelchair users" rather than "wheelchair-bound", and so on. Using diversity-sensitive language can also raise the student's awareness about what it means to be inclusive as a person.

Third, we sometimes carry news stories about languages. Recent examples include information about an endangered language in Siberia and a dying language in Canada. We hope this deepens students' appreciation of their own languages: the value of keeping them alive and well.

Q: How do we maintain the balance between values-driven journalism and

"sheltering" kids from the real world?

A: When we say we practise value-driven journalism, we mean that our selection of stories and how they are written are driven by values about what's appropriate for children to read and what they need to know. We won't include stories or pictures merely because they are juicy or titillating, even if they're splashed across grown-up media.

Neither are we blind to the negative influences in advertisements. There are adult newspapers that carry the occasional educational article promoting healthy lifestyles and positive body image – but then accept an endless stream of ads for dubious diets and slimming centres, regardless of how they may hurt impressionable youth.

In that sense, we are indeed sheltering students – but only from what would be abusive to expose them to. Fortunately, the path we tread is well lit. There's ample international research that suggests that children and young teens can be traumatised even by second-hand exposure to violence just by, for instance, what they see on a screen. To grow into confident, resilient adults, children need to feel safe and secure in this world.

Do we have to worry about over-protecting them? Not really. The reality is that children and teens should be sheltered far more from some of the harsher realities of adult life than they are these days. Primary school children are not yet emotionally equipped to deal with much of it and that leaves them feeling fearful about growing up.

We must add that we don't exclude stories that are potentially the stuff of nightmares. If it's important for children to know what happened or if the story presents a teachable moment, we work hard to write it up in a child-sensitive way. For instance, we reported the violence in Sudan, the Bombay rail and London underground bombings, the Iraq war, the Virginia Tech shootings and child abductions for slave labour in China. So, in fact, we probably have more serious, "real world" news than any other children's medium. We refuse to condescend to children by confining them to fantasy and entertainment, but neither will we sidestep our responsibility to give them something positive to believe in.

One reader recently said to us, "We're the generation that has been taught to be afraid of the world!" As professionals who care about children and teens, our challenge is to reduce that fear and help instil a sense of hopefulness and trust that there is more goodness than evil in human beings.

Q: What are some of the ways teachers can use *What's Up* in the classroom?

A: Many of our partner schools use the paper as a supplementary reader for English language lessons, with some teachers developing their own comprehension questions for *What's Up* stories that they assign for students to read. It's also used for whole-level reading programmes.

We also offer activity ideas on our website, www.newsforkids.com.sg IDEAS is a free teacher resource where teachers can download ready-to-print files of written exercises, project guidelines and other handouts. Every month, there are English, social studies, science, maths, CME (Civics and Moral Education) and NE (National Education) activities linked to *What's Up* stories. At times, there are also art, drama, music and even PE activities.

Mother Tongue teachers who teach CME can use *What's Up* along with the CME activities at IDEAS. The IDEAS handouts are in English but are easy to translate. Every month, there is also a PowerPoint presentation that teachers can download and use in the classroom. Typically, it facilitates a whole-class discussion of a *What's Up* story.

What's Up is also a way to encourage students to write. Most often, it's for the Letters page. We deliberately set the hurdle low to let as many students as possible see their names in print. Those who have the interest and a flair for writing can contribute longer articles. Although *What's Up* is meant to be a newspaper for children and not by children, we've had some marvellous student contributors over the years. We should add that, in all these cases, they didn't need their teachers to intercede: the students took the initiative to approach us of their own accord.

Q: What advice can you give teachers who feel unprepared to answer children's questions on sensitive issues such as terrorism, racism and genocide?

A: As adults, how do we answer even our own questions about such horrors? Terrorism,

racism, genocide and other human atrocities have been around for centuries but how do we explain our inability to stem their intrusion into the 21st century? Teachers who believe in giving honest answers should let students know that there are many questions that adults struggle with as well.

There are some assurances we can give students: that for all the bad news that they hear, the majority of countries enjoy peace and the vast majority of people are good to each other. There is also comfort in knowing that there are attempts at practising justice, ranging from war crime tribunals at the international level to zero tolerance policies against aggression at school.

One of the most pressing questions that students tend to have is how they can protect themselves. That's an opportunity to reiterate the importance of taking Total Defence strategies very seriously. As a nation, we've resolved to take care of each other. Having tangible tasks to do in preparation can actually reduce children's anxiety considerably.

Beyond that, teachers can enable themselves to answer even the most difficult questions by turning to each other and to experts: like-minded professional peers and mentors at school, NIE faculty with the relevant expertise, publications such as SingTeach and other valuable resources.

Mary Cherian is a former faculty member of the National Institute of Education. She is currently the director of allied health professionals at the [Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore \(MINDS\)](#).

Cherian George is a former Straits Times journalist who is now acting head of the Division of Journalism and Publishing at NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information.

> Click [here](#) to learn more about *What's Up*.

> Download a full version of the interview [here](#).

Published in SingTeach, March 2008

Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 11 ▶ Voices ▶ Building a Good Structure

Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

PDF Version

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

VOICES

Building a Good Structure

| [Print](#) |

An action research study shows that teaching oral communication skills can simply be a matter of finding the right structure.



When [South View Primary School](#)'s principal pointed out that the students' oral communication scores were a concern, Yeow Mun Ching was not surprised.

"There's not much time in class to learn how to express yourself, let alone sustain it for five minutes!" she says. "Many of them are tongue-tied and lack the confidence to articulate their ideas. They don't know where to start or where to focus."

While some may consider this a simple case of students having nothing to say, Mun Ching felt that it was a question of providing the right guidance.

By using a step-by-step approach to teach oral expression, she found that students were not only more confident in expressing their thoughts but starting to be aware of the moral issues in the situations they encounter.

Finding the steps

Mun Ching admits that she first thought of developing a new approach because she wanted to "kill two birds with one stone". With the school implementing Oral-Practice Tutorials to help P6 students taking their PSLEs, combining the task of improving her students' oral skills and making them practise describing pictures (a typical question often asked during oral examinations in PSLE) seemed like a good way to save time and maximise school resources.

However, she was determined not to follow the usual method of "initiation-response-evaluation" – where the teacher's only role is to ask questions and assess the student's answer. "I thought it wasn't very helpful leaving students on their own," she says. "I wanted to explore a teaching strategy that would make learning more meaningful, less stressful and had greater retention."

The result is what Mun Ching calls **Directed Oral and Thinking (DOT)**, an approach which gives students a step-by-step process to follow when discussing a given situation. Using the catchy phrase, "Let's DICE it up!" (see box), students are encouraged to refer to four easy steps that can guide the way their answers "flow". According to Mun Ching, this gives students a structure to fall back on instead of grappling for words to say.

Does it work?

Before they started using DICE, students were often limited to simply describing a picture's elements. If they felt that a picture depicted something "wrong", they were unable to explain why they thought so in the first place. In a way, the DICE framework addresses this problem by providing a path which goes from interpreting a situation to making a judgement about what they see. "It's not only evaluating what is right or wrong but coming out with justifications and moving forward to give recommendations," explains Mun Ching.

Let's DICE it up!

Four easy steps to help your students communicate their ideas

Describe
Interpret
Comment
Evaluate

Mun Ching chose to use pictures which depict moral dilemmas, giving the DOT approach elements of values education as well. And while she doesn't expect every child doing the activity to be morally upright, she hopes to make an impact on the way students think about such issues in the future. "If we look at our role as teachers, education is not just intellectual development," she says. "I try to find every opportunity to inculcate values in pupils."

So far, feedback from students and fellow teachers has been encouraging. "They feel that they have something to talk about. Finally!" Mun Ching says proudly. "They are also a lot more confident during the oral exams. They have something to bring with them instead of not knowing what to expect."

Still, the DOT approach does not provide answers to all the difficulties students encounter in developing their oral skills. For students with limited vocabulary, Mun Ching recommends providing them with a list of words to help them express themselves more thoroughly. "If they say something is 'good', I ask them, 'What is good about it? Is he being considerate or civic-minded? Is he showing care or concern?'" . Putting a little more effort into giving students extra support can go a long way.

Spreading the word

With the DOT approach now implemented schoolwide, Mun Ching is happy to share her resources with more teachers. One step towards this was the NIE [Redesigning Pedagogy](#) conference in 2007 where she presented her findings to teachers from schools across Singapore.

And if you're wondering if the DOT approach will work for your classroom, Mun Ching has a simple word of advice, "Teaching is a contextual art so sometimes there is no best solution for all classes. Adaptation is something we have to do constantly. First, identify the gaps in your pupils' learning then maybe you can come up with your own activities to help them."



Yeow Mun Ching has been teaching primary school since 2004. She is interested in authentic assessments and holistic learning.

For more information or resources on the DOT approach, email her at yeow_mun_ching@moe.edu.sg

Note: *South View Primary School's Oral-Practice Tutorials are out-of-curriculum tuition sessions where teachers help P6 students hone their oral communication skills using resources that are consistent with those used in the PSLE. Teachers are given the freedom to choose their own teaching approaches. Mun Ching's DOT approach was developed from the OPT.*

> Interested in learning more? Click [here](#) to read about a CRPP study on teaching oral communication.

Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 1 ▶ Ideas ▶ Drama and Oral Communication

Archives

Issue 1

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Enrich

Relax

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

IDEAS

Drama and Oral Communication

| Print |

Read about how the use of drama has helped to improve the oral communication skills of Secondary 4 Normal (Technical) students from four neighbourhood schools.

It is often assumed that drama activities have a direct impact on oral communication skills and can therefore be used as strategies in English language learning. There has been little research to investigate this, especially in the Singapore context, where English may be the second or even third language in regular classroom interactions.

This project was conceptualised as a case study to investigate the impact of using process drama as pedagogy for teaching oral communication. The investigation focused on Secondary 4 Normal (Technical) [N(T)] students from four schools in Singapore. Students participated in 10 "process drama" lessons led by trained facilitators, and were tested prior to and following the intervention.

Process drama (Haseman , 1991; O'Neill, 1995) is a genre of drama education practice which focuses on collaborative investigation and problem solving in an imaginary world. Process dramas use "pre-texts" (photographs, newspaper articles, music, artefacts, etc.) to "frame" the investigation and raise questions for the students. The process drama approach contextualises and sequences specific drama conventions into a cohesive structure. Such planned dramas provide opportunities for authentic pedagogy which mirrors real-life situations.

Process dramas can be devised for a range of learning contexts and may be invaluable in facilitating interdisciplinary links by using drama to frame learning while drawing on content and concepts from various subject areas. While working through process dramas, the students are learning *in* and *through* the art form simultaneously. Teachers who are trained in this area may integrate content, concepts, and processes from a range of disciplines into an extended learning experience.

What we did

Teachers and schools proposed that N(T) students be the focus of this study, as it was felt that they were in need of opportunities for language development and would respond positively to the alternative ways of learning that drama offers.

We constructed a pre-test, modelled after the MOE oral communication examination syllabus for N(T) and tested 36 students from both the control (C) and intervention (I) groups. The students were randomly selected by a computer program. All results were recorded and compared against the results for the same 36 students at the end of the drama interventions.

Ten drama lessons of one hour each were planned and implemented, in most cases during regular curriculum time. Each school was encouraged to choose the most suitable times for implementation and offered combinations that best suited their needs.

In addition, at the end of the interventions, we interviewed the English teachers of the intervention classes, the facilitators of the workshops, and a random selection of students who had participated in the study.

What we have found so far

Statistical analysis of the student results showed that the effect of the process drama intervention on the total scores of students from I groups was highly significant. Not only did the students' overall scores improve, there were also measurable improvements

in each of the following areas:

Clarity (the correct pronunciation of sounds and words)
Vocabulary (range of words used)
Relevance (connection to the topic)
Interaction (engagement with the examiner)
Prompting (the need for assistance or ideas during the conversation)

Students from C groups showed no change in their pre- and post-test results. In addition, early analysis of interviews with students and teachers indicated: Improvements in confidence and collaborative skills; and increased enjoyment of the learning process.

There were also some indications of improvements in communication across ethnic groups both within and outside the drama classes. This was commented on by the English teachers who noticed changes in behaviour in their own classes.

Where we go from here

Following these positive results, a new intervention project was launched in January 2005 at a local secondary school. The research team is working with all Secondary 1 and 2 English Language and Literature classes and their teachers to develop a model of practice that is transferable to other schools in Singapore.

To find out more about this project, please click [here](#) .

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Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 11 ▶ Share

Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

PDF Version

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

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Get teaching tips and advice as we share our reviews of books, websites and teaching aids, written especially for the Singapore context.

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Teaching is as Easy as A to Z

Dindean Abalihin reveals where she finds the best tips on classroom management.

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Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 11 ▶ Share ▶ SingTeach Recommends

Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

PDF Version

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

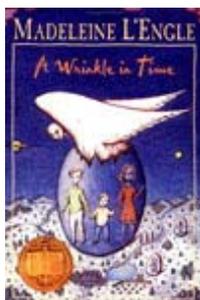
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Reading need not be dull, dreary, or even solitary. *SingTeach* approaches five well-read individuals to recommend books you can enjoy with your students.

"We read to know we are not alone," said celebrated author C. S. Lewis. Indeed, there is nothing that quite compares with a good read. To get us all started on some fruitful reading, SingTeach asks five well-read individuals to help you choose that perfect book you can enjoy and share with your students.

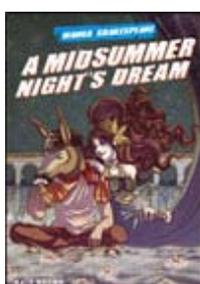
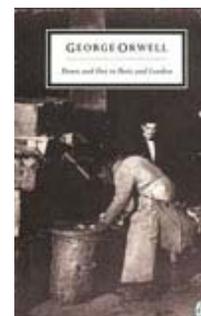


"*A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle is a classic work of fiction for young adults. As a work of science fiction/fantasy, it neither patronises the imagination nor shies from the problems in the real world. The characters are extremely interesting and the ideas in the plot are thought-provoking."

~ Aaron Lee, prize-winning poet and author of *Five Right Angles*

"George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* brings journalism and 'live' investigative reporting to its extreme. Orwell gave up his comfortable life to be a tramp in the streets of Paris and London for 3 years. He did that because he wanted to know and write about how 'advanced and civilised societies' treat their poor and destitute. Through Orwell's eyes, *Down and Out* presents to us another perspective of life in a city."

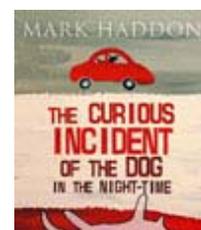
~ Kenny Leck, co-owner of *Books Actually*



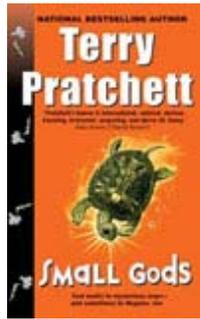
"I recommend the *Manga Shakespeare* series published by SelfMadeHero, UK. Teachers can use these texts as an initial introduction to the themes and language in Shakespearean plays such as *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The manga format is visually engaging and appealing especially to youths. Teachers may also encourage students to compare and contrast the manga version with the original text version and then to discuss the effectiveness of different formats for storytelling."

~ Suzanne Choo, Teaching Fellow, National Institute of Education

"At first glance, not many of us can relate to Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, a tale of an autistic teen's search for his long-lost parent. Told from the protagonist's point of view, Haddon weaves a poignant, funny and heartbreaking story of, really, a teenager's search for meaning and place in this world. This book will entertain and enlighten the most cynical and sceptical of teenagers."



~ Lim Yi Lyn, Manager of Artistic Development at [The Arts House](#)



"Terry Pratchett has the distinction of being the most 'shoplifted' author in Britain, and is the second most-read author in the UK. His Discworld novels are hilarious but behind the farcical comedy are razor-sharp social commentaries camouflaged as light entertainment. *Small Gods* is his subversive take on religion and faith. As you laugh at his jokes, you suddenly pause and think, 'Hey! That makes sense.'"

~ Dark Orpheus, blogger

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Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 11 ▶ Share ▶ Teaching is as Easy as A to Z

Archives

[Issue 1](#)[Issue 2](#)[Issue 3](#)[Issue 4](#)[Issue 5](#)[Issue 6](#)[Issue 7](#)[Issue 8](#)[Issue 9](#)[Issue 10](#)[Issue 11](#)[Inspire](#)[Ideas](#)[Voices](#)[Share](#)[Relax](#)[PDF Version](#)[Issue 12](#)[Issue 13](#)[Issue 14](#)

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Teaching is as Easy as A to Z

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Dindean Abalahin reveals where she finds the best tips on classroom management.



Being a preschool teacher sure has its ups and downs but one thing is for certain—you should be on your toes at all times because no one could predict how and what would pique these children's interest. And as teachers, we know once you've lost your children's interest in the classroom, it could only mean one thing—CHAOS!

Experienced teachers may find this easy to deal with, but what about the greenhorns? I'd say WING IT! And by that I mean draw out the best strategy you could think off the top of your head, implement it right away and yank your students back into the lesson. One website you may find useful in helping you develop these strategies is A to Z Teacher Stuff.

A to Z Teacher Stuff is a fabulous site for all things "teacher-y". Browsing through the site is a breeze. Different aspects for being a teacher are categorised accordingly. And what makes me visit the site often is the abundance of articles on classroom management and teacher sharing. For example, you can find articles like Robert Stahl's "Using Think-Time and Wait-Time Skillfully in the Classroom" which gives tips and discusses the importance of that "silent moment" for thought process to maximise learning in class.

One particularly useful feature of the site is the way they organise their material. One could immediately go directly to a particular category—whether for printable worksheets, teaching and classroom management tips, and fun teaching tools.

And although most of the subjects, themes, and links found on the site are American in orientation, it's easy to localise the topics by replacing subject matters with those your children are currently interested in—INTERESTED being the operative word here. Because no matter how well you plan your lesson, if you don't pique their interest, there is no point carrying on. So don't feel bad about throwing your lesson plan for the day out the window. And practice winging it!

About the reviewer

For the past four years, Dindean Abalahin was in charge of "entertaining" a bunch of rowdy two-year olds, five days a week, in a self-contained class at a small preschool in Manila. She is currently a Research Assistant for the Graduate Programmes and Research Office at the [National Institute of Education](#).

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Home ▶ Archives ▶ Issue 11 ▶ Relax

Archives

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

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Ideas

Voices

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PDF Version

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14

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Issue 2

Issue 3

Issue 4

Issue 5

Issue 6

Issue 7

Issue 8

Issue 9

Issue 10

Issue 11

Inspire

Ideas

Voices

Share

Relax

PDF Version

Issue 12

Issue 13

Issue 14



Artwork by Yasmin Ortiga

Let us know

Any other ideas on what your fantasy faculty room looks like? Send us an email at sgteach@nie.edu.sg and the best suggestion wins a Popular voucher!

Did you get this one?

Congrats to those who sent us the answers to the [Issue 10 cartoon](#)! To those who haven't figured it out, the "teachers" are: William Shakespeare,

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