A STUDY OF CHINESE LANGUAGE ORAL COMPETENCE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS
Exploring the Effectiveness of the Newly Implemented Curriculum

Zhao Shouhui, Wang Chu Meng and Huang Meng

TO MEET THE CHANGING needs of a student population that is increasingly diversified in terms of the language spoken at home, the new Chinese Language (CL) Modular Curriculum was formally launched in Singapore primary schools in 2007. Under the modular approach, students are streamed into three modules according to their language proficiency and exposure to CL. This project aimed to provide a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of this curriculum with a special focus on students’ oral communicative skill (OCS). The project’s findings reveal the effectiveness of the new curriculum in terms of students’ oral performance and feelings towards the learning environments of CL classes; teachers’ views about the implementation and impact of the new curriculum; and improvement of students’ OCS from Primary 1 to 4.

INTRODUCTION
A classroom observation study entitled “Chinese Language Pedagogical Experiment: A Comparative Study of Classroom Practices in Singapore Primary Schools” was commissioned by the Ministry of Education in 2006, during the pilot phase of the new Chinese Language (CL) Modular Curriculum. This study, completed in 2007, found that the new curriculum was more student-centred. The study, however, focused only on the pedagogical practices and did not evaluate students’ actual language ability, especially their oral communicative skill (OCS). A more comprehensive evaluation was deemed necessary to gauge the effectiveness of the newly developed curriculum.

KEY IMPLICATIONS
• The new Chinese Language curriculum is more effective for students from an English language background.
• High oral proficiency test scores seem to be associated with better perceptions of the CL class environment and students’ motivation, which were found to be positively correlated.
• Students’ interest in using Mandarin has been somewhat enhanced under the new curriculum, but students’ proficiency in actual language use has yet to improve, suggesting that greater efforts are required in this area.
RESEARCH DESIGN

As an extension of the earlier project, this project modified and applied the major research tools used in the previous study. A mixed approach was used for data collection, including an oral proficiency test (OPT) for students, a students’ questionnaire, teachers’ survey, teachers’ focus group discussions (FGDs), and a comparative study of students’ incremental acquisition of CL vocabulary.

The following analytical tools were used in this study:
1. The OPT was administered to a total of 304 Primary 4 students from four primary schools, which represented the experimental group. Their tests were marked twice by both experienced teachers and our researchers, and the inter-rater reliability reached as high as .800 (Pearson value). These OPT scores were first compared with the result obtained by the control group of 273 students from the previous project, and then compared across school backgrounds and modules (Reinforcement, School-based/Core, and Enrichment) within the experimental group.
2. A Chinese Language Class Evaluation Survey (CLCES) for students was developed based on Chua's Chinese Language Classroom Environment Inventory (2004), which was adapted from Fraser et al.’s “What Is Happening In this Class?” inventory (1996). The CLCES comprised 48 items under 7 scales (of which 11 items were on the aspects of instrumental materials and curriculum design were designed for item analysis): Student Cohesiveness (4), Teacher Support (5), Investigation (4), Co-operation (5), Task Orientation (5), OCS (4), and Learning Motivation (10).
3. Teachers’ FGDs were conducted with a total of 45 teachers from 8 schools. Each FGD lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour, and the entire session was audio-taped and transcribed. The discussions were moderated via a structured interview guide revolving around five major topics: student OCS, learning outcomes, changes in learning interest, difficulties and issues, and strategies or pedagogy.
4. A survey was also completed by the 45 teachers, and was designed to quantitatively examine teachers’ perceptions of students’ classroom performance and their actual CL capacity in terms of OCS.
5. A comparative study of students’ incremental acquisition of CL vocabulary was conducted to illustrate the improvements made by students from an English language (EL) background after studying under the new curriculum for 3 to 4 years.

KEY FINDINGS

Students’ Oral Proficiency and the New Curriculum

A comparison of OPT scores between the experimental and control groups by school background shows that the new curriculum may be more effective for students from mission/EL background schools than those from neighbourhood schools (see Table 1).

For neighbourhood schools, the outcomes between the two groups recorded a negligible difference of 0.42. However, for mission/EL background schools, the experimental group performed much better than the control group. The mean difference reached 10.88, which is significant at the 0.01 level.

Comparing across the three modules within the experimental group (see Table 2), there were no significant differences between the two school backgrounds for each module. However, the finding is intriguing, given that mission school students are perceived as more likely to be from English-speaking families (e.g., Goh, 2007). The results show that after 4 years under the new curriculum, students from an English-speaking background are able to speak CL as well as or better (for the reinforcement module) than those from a Chinese-speaking background.

Moreover, for the reinforcement module, the standard deviation

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Table 1. Comparison of OPT scores between the experimental and control groups (with reference to school background).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Background</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
<th>M diff.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>66.916</td>
<td>13.8697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission/EL</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>66.833</td>
<td>13.2174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>66.875</td>
<td>13.5295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)
for neighbourhood schools (17.65 points) is almost double that for mission/EL background schools (9.56 points). This indicates that neighbourhood school students have a wider range of oral competencies while students from mission/EL background schools are a comparatively more homogeneous group.

**Students’ Perceptions and Motivation to CL Class**
The survey revealed that there was no significant difference in perceptions towards CL class by students from both groups. They showed the same level of motivation for whichever curriculum they read. On the other hand, after testing the connections between each of the CLCES scales and students’ OPT scores, students’ perceptions and their motivation were found to be positively correlated with their OPT scores. The correlations imply that high scores in the OPT tend to be associated with better perceptions towards the CL class environment and a greater motivation to learn CL.

Among the seven survey scales, three were found to have significant differences (at the 95% confidence level) between students from both backgrounds. Students showed positive attitudes on the aspects of OCS, task orientation and co-operation. Moreover, children from neighbourhood schools tended to hold more optimistic opinions than those from mission/EL background schools. However, if both module and school background are factored in, then no obvious difference is observed among these seven scales.

In response to the concerns of the curriculum developers, items focusing on the new curriculum development were analysed. The results indicate that the textbook is widely accepted by students from both backgrounds as the majority of students (75%) claimed that they enjoyed doing listening exercises. With regard to the acceptance of the modular approach, more than half of the students considered it to be effective. As for the content being different from what was learned in other CL classes, more than half of the respondents (56%) indicated that they did not mind this.

**Teachers’ Views about the New Curriculum**
The teachers’ FGDs yielded a large amount of rich analytic information. The teachers’ responses showed that the new curriculum has had a largely positive effect on students’ oral competency. In general, they agreed that students’ interest in using Mandarin has been somewhat enhanced but their proficiency in language use has not necessarily improved.

Corresponding to the FGD findings, the survey results showed disparate views regarding students’ learning motivation and OCS. On one hand, the teachers are positive about the new curriculum’s role in fostering students’ learning motivation and engagement. Based on their teaching experience with the experimental classes, however, it appears unconvincing that the new curriculum is effective in producing a clearly observable improvement in OCS.

The findings imply that what concerns CL teachers most is how to help students develop their spoken Mandarin to be more syntactically sophisticated and culturally appropriate. Information obtained from the FGDs also indicates the need for descriptive linguistic and cultural paradigms that define oral competence in an operational way, so that teachers are able to train students to improve their OCS in a more targeted and systematic manner.

**Oral Improvement of the Tracked Students**
The subjects of the comparative study consisted of 31 EL background children who were the weakest in OCS, in terms of CL vocabulary output, when they were interviewed by the research team in 2005.

The quantitative analysis of lexical development and the linguistic description of developmental details

### Table 2. Comparison of OPT scores across three modules within the experimental group
(with reference to school background).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Background</th>
<th>Reinforcement</th>
<th>School-based/Core</th>
<th>Enrichment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>53.595</td>
<td>17.6548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-5.25</td>
<td>(p = .226)</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Comparison of OPT scores across three modules within the experimental group (with reference to school background).
of these tracked students provide us a picture of how progress was made by the purportedly weaker students over 3–4 years of studying under the modular curriculum.

It is commonly agreed that children who learn a language different from the one spoken at home face an enormous challenge, thus their oral proficiency is expected to improve slower as compared with average students (Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee [CLCPRC], 2004).

The results revealed that there were no significant differences between the tracked and experimental groups, implying that the tracked English-speaking students eventually caught up with the average students in oral proficiency, in both conversational skills and narrative skills.

**IMPLICATIONS**

*For Curriculum Development*

The number of Chinese students entering Primary 1 who speak predominantly EL at home has risen rapidly, and “this trend of Primary children having little exposure to CL in the home will continue” (CLCPRC, 2004, p. 2). The research findings indicate that the new CL curriculum is more effective in improving students’ oral performance and learning interest, particularly for students from an English-speaking background. It can thus be considered a successful beginning in meeting the needs of a student population that is increasingly diversified in terms of language background.

*For Classroom Teaching Practice*

The high OPT scores indicate that students had better perceptions towards the CL class environment and greater motivation after the implementation of the new curriculum. While findings from the teachers’ survey and FGDs supported this, teachers felt that there is room for improvement in students’ actual oral competence, particularly in grammatical accuracy and syntactic complexity.

The discrepancy between students’ actual oral performance and their motivation appears to suggest that a more unrelenting commitment is needed in order to achieve a general improvement of students' communicative skills.

*For Teacher Professional Development*

The teachers’ FGDs raised a series of issues, among which professional support was an important one. Information obtained from the FGDs informs us about teachers’ preferences for the development of teacher training programmes and specific teaching skills that are vital in ensuring the successful implementation of curriculum innovations such as this one.

**REFERENCES**


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