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English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Singapore

The National Institute of Education in Singapore (which is part of the Nanyang Technological University) is the leading national pre-service and in-service teacher training tertiary institution. It offers diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The academic departments are called Academic Groups (AGs). The English Language and Literature (ELL) AG has over 70 academic staff with very diverse research interests. The sheer size of the AG results in several clusters of research interests in language teaching methodology and curriculum, language teacher training, language learning, literacy issues, classroom discourse, and sociolinguistic issues of relevance to Singapore and other parts of Asia. In this report, I highlight some of the recent research, completed in the years 2008–2009.

Language teaching, methodology, curriculum and testing

In an exciting series of papers, Caroline Ho and collaborators (Ho & Ong 2009; Ho, Rappa & Chee 2009; Jamaludin, Chee & Ho 2009) reported on the use of SECOND LIFE (an immersive 3D internet-based virtual environment developed by Linden Lab, Linden Research Inc.) to teach Singapore pre-university students critical thinking and writing through argumentation and role play. The participating pre-university students worked in groups and their role-play tasks gave them the opportunity to expound on their own ideas as well as critique other groups' ideas. One important finding is that although students were able to express their own

views with a strong awareness of other views too, they have yet to learn how to qualify the attitude and expression of their views with sufficient use of heightening and softening devices.

Working with lower-primary school children, Rita Silver investigated the use of peer work as a teaching tool (Silver 2008a, b; Towndrow, Silver & Albright 2009). One important finding is that in their peer discussions, the children avoided code-switching and tended to use English mostly. In their peer negotiations, they used clarification requests, repetitions and reformulations. Overall, the intervention encouraged teachers to select and use more peer work in their teaching, but there was insufficient evidence to conclude that these teachers were now convinced of the theoretical underpinnings and pedagogical value of peer work.

To promote oracy development through group work in primary and secondary school classrooms in Singapore, Lwin, Goh & Doyle (2009) investigated the frequency of use of group work and the quality of teachers' verbal scaffolding in contextualizing impending group work. In the classroom, this contextualizing occurs in the transition from teacher-centred teaching to group work. This understanding of the incidence and the contextual conditions of transitions will pave the way for the next stage of their proposed intervention studies.

Continuing the focus on peer work, Hu & Lam (2009) examined the efficacy of using peer review as a tool in teaching writing in the second language (L2), but their subjects are mainland Chinese postgraduate students from China studying in Singapore. They found that significant improvements to earlier drafts of writing were linked to peer feedback. Interestingly, they also found through interviews that there was a general acceptance of peer review as a tool for teaching writing. This seems to echo in part Macknish's (2009) observation (see below) about the myth of Chinese learners being passive and uncritical.

In the field of language testing, Anthony Seow and collaborators (Chew & Seow 2008; Lim, Chew & Seow 2008; Seow & Chew 2008) are currently working on a project that involves computer-assisted assessment (CAA) in 11 primary schools. Their findings so far provide support for the feasibility of using CAA as a mode of assessing primary school children's performance in English. Current work involves the training of teachers to use, adapt and create appropriate CAA items and to interpret the CAA results.

Moving out of the Singapore context, Hu (2008; 2009) reported on curriculum changes in China which seemed to have a far reaching impact on the entire country. This involved a nation-wide curriculum change promoted at the turn of the century that entailed using English to teach non-language school subjects to majority-language students. In a critical review of China's content-based English language teaching (widely known in China as CHINESE-ENGLISH BILINGUAL EDUCATION), Hu problematized the current discourse on the advocacy of bilingual education and argued that the current discourse had misled the stakeholders of bilingual education.

Language learning

In two recently completed projects, Hu and collaborators (Hu & Bai 2008; Zhang, Gu & Hu 2008; Gu, Hu & Zhang 2009) gained valuable insights into the English language learning strategies used by more than 3000 Singapore primary school children. They found that

successful children had greater control over a markedly larger range of language learning strategies and used them more frequently than less successful children. They also found that well-designed strategies-based instruction helped foster children's strategic competence as well as their reading and writing competence in English.

In a series of papers, Phillip Towndrow and collaborators (Towndrow 2009; Towndrow & Vallance 2009) explore the issue of what happens in English language and literature learning in Singapore schools when every secondary school student in a particular class has a computer in the classroom connected wirelessly to the internet. The early stage of their research suggests that teachers are open to and curious about how their existing teaching practices will be affected by the additional mode of representation. Another early finding is that the additional mode of representation necessitates further planning and modification to teachers' existing teaching materials and design. A more profound ongoing issue emerging is how teachers can balance these other concerns with the demands of print-based teaching and assessment practices.

In addition to studies involving Singapore school children, there is also interest in the performance of young foreign learners of English in Singapore. In a study commissioned by the British Council, Wong & Yio (2008) report the learning experience of several children from Asian countries (Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines, China and Sri Lanka) studying in Singapore public schools. Apart from the expected difficulties children will have with learning English in a new and unfamiliar environment, their report raises other pertinent issues – foremost, in my view, is the impact of the students' home literacy background on their learning and the difficulties faced by parents in providing a supportive academic environment for success. Several suggestions for providing greater support to such students and their teachers are made by the researchers.

Another interesting area of research in language learning is a recently completed study of the learning of critical reading (CR) amongst mainland Chinese students from China involved in a pre-university L2 English reading course in Singapore (Macknish 2009). CR is defined as a set of social practices that include analytical evaluations of texts and critiques of power relations. By analyzing transcripts of students' group discussions that involve critical reading of texts, Macknish found that, even in the early stages, mainland Chinese learners exhibit – in various degrees under different conditions – signs of CR, dispelling the oft-held notion of the uncritical Chinese learner.

Moving away from the confines of Singapore, Cheung (2008, 2009) investigates the first-time publishing experience of six non-native English-speaking doctoral students in Hong Kong universities in the field of applied linguistics. Her study reveals that these students found the experience difficult and were, in general, lacking in confidence and motivation. In particular, the students found the writing of the introduction and the discussion sections very difficult, and expressed concerns about their own perceived lack of control of English grammar and vocabulary. The importance of this research lies in its comprehensive and insightful treatment of psychological variables (like confidence and motivation) that impact on students' academic writing and the publication process, and in its suggestions of strategies that can help and support novice student writers in academic publishing.

Teacher education

Two of our colleagues, Chiew Hong Ng and Lubna Alsagoff, were recently involved in writing the country section (Singapore) of a UNESCO-sponsored report on the status of teacher education in the Asia-Pacific region (UNESCO 2008). The Singapore section of the report highlighted basic facts and crucial information about Singapore's national policies, issues and problems in teacher education, strategic plans for teacher education, and the organization and implementation of teaching training.

Employing narrative inquiry as her methodology of research, Spilchuk (2009a, b) investigates the experiences of teachers in Singapore as they reflect on their evolving teaching practices and the way new recollections have the potential to change how their teaching story told today will be lived out tomorrow. Her research uncovers compelling accounts of how, for example, a recently promoted head of English department of a primary school comes to grips with the constant tension between his personal and professional value systems and the examination culture within his school community. Only by understanding more about the lives of teachers as lived through their stored experiences is it possible for us to come to a greater understanding of the nature of teaching as lived within the schools (Connelly & Clandinin 1990).

Finally, where many countries struggle to produce enough trained teachers in their public schools due to the high attrition rate, Shih's (2008) work on the life stories of Taiwanese EFL teachers brings some reprieve to the ailing situation. Shih's findings suggest that the majority of these EFL teachers are committed to their jobs and have no plans to leave. The reason for this high job satisfaction index is attributable to a combination of personal, family, economic, social and educational factors.

Sociolinguistics, discourse and language description

Using a corpus-based approach, Li Bo Guo, Annelise Kramer-Dahl and collaborators investigated the language that Singapore primary and secondary school students used in their written work in classroom activities (Wang & Guo 2008; Guo & Hong 2009). For instance, in Secondary 3 students' writing in two subjects, English and Social Sciences, it was found that students studying English used more nominal clauses and restrictive relative clauses whereas students of Social Sciences used more grammatical metaphors (i.e., they used the nominal form rather than the verbal form of the word). In the following example, a Social Sciences student wrote, 'territorial dispute was the most important cause of international conflicts', where he adopted the nominal forms 'dispute' and 'conflicts' rather than the equivalent verbal forms in order to facilitate the development of the argument.

Analyzing selected narrative texts found in English textbooks used in Singapore lower-primary schools, Lee (2009) investigated the use of pronouns, drawing on Halliday & Hasan's (1976) notion of co-reference. He found that, although the texts were simple in terms of the story and vocabulary, the co-referring expressions used were complex, in that the antecedent did not necessarily provide a straightforward way in which subsequent anaphoric pronouns

could be interpreted. For example, in the following extract, ‘Grandma knows I miss Mother very much. She tells me stories about Mother when she was young to comfort me’, taken from a Primary 2 English textbook, some of the weaker students are unable to infer that the first ‘she’ refers to Grandma whereas the second refers to Mother. This illustrates in part the commonly held perception that some students have problems inferring the intended referent of pronouns even when the texts look simple.

Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) has been the subject of many studies in the past few decades. Ludwig Tan’s research (L. Tan 2009) adds to this well-established work, and is important because it is the first comprehensive study on topic and null arguments. To illustrate what Tan means by topic and null arguments, if an SCE speaker asks another, ‘Do you like travelling?’, a typical SCE reply might be, ‘No, Ø don’t like Ø’ (meaning ‘No, I don’t like it’), where Ø denotes the pronouns *I* and *it*, both of which are null (hence becoming null arguments) because they are the topics of the exchange and recoverable from context. One of the important findings is that the notions of topic, topic prominence and topic-chains are crucial to an understanding of null arguments in SCE. This led the author to conclude that topic plays both the role of licenser as well as identifier of null arguments in SCE.

In a refreshingly bold and original book on lingua francas, Chew (2009) critiques existing paradigms of World Englishes (including Kachru 1985) and offers a new model based on a detailed analysis of Arabic as a lingua franca in the 8th and the 9th centuries. The premise is that in order for us to understand the current development and position of English as a lingua franca, we need to go back in time to examine how Arabic developed and functioned as a lingua franca previously. To demonstrate the explanatory value of the model further, Chew offers several case studies involving Hokkien and English in Singapore, and Putonghua and the Southern Min language in China.

Similarly, S. I. Tan (2009a, b) offers an innovative account of the influences of Chinese and Malay on the lexicon of Malaysian English. She argues that Kachru’s (1985) model does not account for all linguistic changes, and that a multivariate model encompassing theories of language maintenance and lexical borrowing, and an understanding of processes of second language acquisition can provide us with a fuller account of language changes in new Englishes.

The above report highlights some of our current research. We hope to draw readers’ attention to other areas of research when the next opportunity arises.

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Symposium – Perspectives on Motivation for Second Language Learning on the 50th Anniversary of Gardner & Lambert (1959)

Held at the Association canadienne de linguistique appliquée/Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics Conference, Ottawa, Canada; 28 May 2009.

With the 50th anniversary of Robert C. Gardner and Wallace Lambert's seminal paper 'Motivational variables in second language acquisition' (Gardner & Lambert 1959), we paused to reflect on the contributions the work has inspired and the state of the art in the study of motivation research. There were five papers presented in the session:

- 'Gardner & Lambert (1959): Fifty years and counting' by R. C. Gardner (University of Western Ontario) (available at publish.uwo.ca/~gardner/docs/CAAL0ttawa2009talkc.pdf)
- 'Diversity and globalization: Language effects and bilingualism' by Richard Clément (University of Ottawa)
- 'From "Because I have to" to "Because I want to": A longitudinal study of the internalization of language learning motivation' by Kimberly Noels (University of Alberta)
- 'Learning languages in a world of English' by John Edwards (St. Francis Xavier University)