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A Country in Focus

Research in applied linguistics and language teaching and learning in Singapore (2000–2007)

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In this review of research in applied linguistics and language teaching and learning in Singapore, more than one hundred national publications for the period 2000–2007 will be reviewed. Since this period encompasses certain changes that were introduced in Singapore schools at the start of the new millennium, it would be appropriate to take stock of the studies that showcase these changes. These studies fall under five main areas of local research: norms, standards and models; English language curriculum and policy; reading and writing instruction and research; mother tongue teaching and learning; and the teaching of English to international students. In this review, representative work under each research area will be discussed, and this will be done within the broad historical and sociopolitical context of research in Singapore. The results of the review suggest that practical concerns assume priority over theoretical issues, which are relegated to secondary importance. This can be explained in terms of the role of the state in education reform and governance and its top–down decision-making processes, the impact of globalization on education, and the role of education in the management of race relations in the country.

1. Introduction

The most recent government statistics show that Singapore's total population is around 4.6 million (Department of Statistics 2008: 22), with the resident population (3.6 million) consisting of three main ethnic groups: Chinese (75%), Malay (13.7%) and Indian (8.7%) (25). Along with Chinese, Malay and Tamil mother tongues, however, the English language is also an official language not only due to the country's British colonial past, but also because English is seen as the pragmatic choice that can unite the different ethnic groups and make the country remain globally competitive. The role of education is critical in this balancing act between the three major local languages and English: the bilingual policy 'enables children to

be proficient in English, which is the language of commerce, technology and administration, and their Mother Tongue, the language of their cultural heritage' (p. 240).¹

To understand and appreciate the shape and practice of language teaching research in Singapore, it is imperative that we locate it within the broad domains of the political economy of bilingual education in the country. That is, language teaching and learning research published locally in Singapore should be understood within questions of state control of education, the relationship between education and globalization, the role of education in the management of social issues such as race and religion, and the primacy of English in bilingual education over the official mother tongues (Chinese, Malay and Tamil).

According to Gopinathan (2007), two key features need to be highlighted when we speak of the relationship between education and globalization in Singapore. 'The first is that as a small island with no natural resources except a strategic location, Singapore's survival has always depended on its usefulness to major powers' (ibid: 58). This explains how Singapore has moulded an educational system which caters to the demands of economic globalization, including the training of human resources for multi-national companies and industries in the 1970s and 1980s and, recently, the training of talented students (e.g. in biotechnological research) to power its knowledge-based economy in the 21st century. This also explains why English has occupied a central place in the educational system, with the teaching of 'Standard English' promoted as an essential educational initiative to make the country globally competitive.

The second feature that needs highlighting is that Singapore's policy-makers have also 'sought to ensure that Singapore is neither swamped by external forces nor in danger of becoming a client-state' (ibid: 59). Hence, the move to counterbalance the onslaught of what is perceived as the westernization of Singaporeans through the globalization of undesirable values and practices by insisting on the teaching and learning of the mother tongues (Chinese, Malay and Tamil) as second languages. This would ensure, they argue, that Singaporeans remain rooted in their local cultures and histories and steadfast in their respect for Asian traditions and values (Ministry of Education 2004; Ministry of Education 2005d, e). In short, the teaching of English guarantees its place in the fiercely competitive global marketplace of goods and ideas and the teaching of the mother tongues grounds its people in a cultural identity that is avowedly Asian.

This two-pronged response to globalization (open and critical) has made educational reform in the country 'primarily a way of retooling the productive capacity of the system' (ibid: 59). Thus, there is constant political, cultural and ideological tension in the educational initiatives being promoted by the state which, in turn, demonstrates its strong grip on most matters concerning education, including students, teachers and researchers. The close alliance between the state and teachers' unions and other professional organizations thus makes for a highly efficient implementation of policies and initiatives precisely with a view to 'retooling' the system in response to the demands of globalization. Given this context, it is inevitable that the agenda of language teaching and learning research be influenced by the state.

In this review, more than one hundred papers from journals, conference proceedings, government committee reports and books edited during the period 2000–2007 will be

¹ In the context of Singapore, the term MOTHER TONGUE does not necessarily mean the first language of speakers; it is simply the language assigned by the state to each individual according to his or her ethnicity.

reviewed. Since this period encompasses certain changes that were introduced in Singapore schools at the start of the new millennium, it would be appropriate to take stock of the studies that showcase these changes. An important caveat needs highlighting, however: this review defines the contours of local academic research in applied linguistics in Singapore through *LOCALLY-PRODUCED* publications. It therefore by necessity precludes research by local scholars published outside Singapore, especially in refereed journals and edited volumes with international circulation and partly explains why the extensive work done on child language acquisition in Singapore does not appear here.

2. Norms, standards and models

Research on norms, standards and pedagogical models revolves around two major concerns: (i) the legitimization of a particular variety of English as the appropriate norm for speakers in Singapore, one which is based on exonormative standards, usually British English (BrE) or American English (AmE), and (ii) the characterization of Singapore English (SE) in relation to this variety. A gradual shift of emphasis and orientation in the descriptions of SE is discernible, though. Early interest in SE typically concerned itself with compiling the linguistic differences between the English spoken in Singapore and Malaysia and standard British English, using an ‘error analysis’ approach and labeling these differences as ‘non-standard’. This was followed by a tendency to characterize SE as a non-native variety displaying variation along a lectal continuum (Platt & Weber 1980). More recent studies, providing new data and analysis for the description of SE grammar and pronunciation, build on this work but regard SE as a legitimate variety on its own terms. Notable among these is the work of Adam Brown, David Deterding and Ee Ling Low on various aspects of Singapore English usage, undertaken at the National Institute of Education.

Among studies focusing on questions regarding appropriate usage for speakers in the region and the attitude to be adopted by teachers and learners towards the local variety is Deterding & Poedjosoedarmo’s (2001) reference book on English grammar. The volume takes account of the multilingual ecology in which English is embedded within the region and includes chapters on the grammatical structures of the regional languages as a basis for motivating comparisons with English syntax, while alerting readers to a number of unresolved issues and discouraging a propensity for prescription or rigidity. In similar vein is Low & Teng’s (2002) collection of papers that focus on issues related to maintaining language standards in the teaching of English. The issues range from the teaching of grammar and pronunciation to testing via the computer and attitudes towards differing accents and closely mirror the concern with maintaining high standards of English in the 21st century as a viable goal for Singapore schools (Pakir 2002). Another useful contribution is Brown’s (2003) volume analysing the assumptions underlying several widely-held ‘myths’ about the English language. These long-held beliefs are authoritatively dismissed with evidence from literary works, reference books and corpus data to support the analysis.

The second category of studies is represented by Brown, Deterding & Low’s (2000) collection of 13 articles on the pronunciation of SE. Published in tandem with the launch of the Speak Good English Movement in Singapore, it stresses the importance of maintaining international intelligibility while focusing on specific aspects of SE pronunciation. The

primary aim of the volume is the use of empirical data analysis to substantiate or refute claims previously made impressionistically about the pronunciation of Singaporean speakers of English. For example, L. S. L. Lim (2000) reports on a study that used judgment tasks with 12 Singaporean subjects who were played conversations by 15 Singaporeans from three different ethnic groups, Chinese, Malay and Indian, to test whether they could identify ethnic sub-varieties of SE. Her study demonstrates that Singaporean listeners were able to identify ethnic sub-varieties of SE with a reasonably high success rate, with intonation being the distinguishing feature.

A parallel study by Deterding & Poedjosodarmo (2000), however, maintains that style of speech may be a crucial factor and contends that while the conversational speech of less well-educated subjects may provide clear clues to ethnicity, the ethnicity of the formal variety of the best educated speakers cannot reliably be identified in the same way. Low (2000) similarly invalidates previous claims which state that SE speakers place stress differently in multi-syllabic words and use a smaller pitch range than British English speakers. Previous observations about stress placement are shown to be related to phrase-final lengthening rather than stress placement *per se*.

A second thrust of the volume is a comparison of SE with other world varieties (mainly BrE and AmE) and, by logical extension, an examination of the appropriateness of the analytical systems used in descriptions of SE. One such study is Poedjosodarmo's (2000) analysis of young educated speakers of SE, whose pronunciation revealed increasing use of AmE features such as the postvocalic /r/, /æ/ rather than /ɑ:/ in words like *class*, and the flapping of intervocalic /t/, leading her to account for this in terms of the prevalence of AmE in foreign TV programs.

Deterding, Low & Brown (2003) contains 16 articles on various aspects of SE morphology and syntax. Published in tandem with the mounting of a national programme between 2000–2002 to re-train 8,000 teachers in the teaching of grammar, the volume was once again conceived as a timely response to the concerns over standards expressed by Singapore's political leaders. The articles examine various linguistic features of Singapore colloquial English. A sister volume to the above is Deterding, Brown & Low's (2005) collection of 18 research articles on the pronunciation of Singapore English, based on the NIE Corpus of Spoken Singapore English (NIECSSE), and focusing on two broad areas of phonetic research: features of SE pronunciation and the intelligibility of SE. Overall, the book provides a concise, up-to-date documentation of the pronunciation of SE, based on careful analysis and illustrated with extensive examples.

Low & Brown's introductory book on SE (2005) serves its aim well in providing a good overview of the history, status and features of SE in a straightforward, non-technical and reader-friendly style. Their work incorporates the results of research over the last two decades and draws implications for teaching. As stated above, what is notable about these studies is the change in perspective in accounting for the distinctive patterns of SE as legitimate variants in their own right within the paradigm of 'new varieties of English', and no longer as errors or deviations from 'Standard English'.

Symptomatic of this paradigm change is Ooi's (2001b) *Evolving identities*, a collection of 12 interesting articles that offer a range of perspectives on English in Singapore and Malaysia, arising from the research of many of its contributors who were originally involved in the

Times–Chambers essential English dictionary (TCEED2) project (Higgleton & Ooi 1997). The articles are organized under three broad categories: macrolinguistic issues, microlinguistic issues, and wider implications for recording descriptive (and prescriptive) norms in a dictionary. Underpinning these studies is the notion that the identity of the Singaporean-Malaysian English speaker is imbued with an essence of ‘interculturalness’ obtaining from the continual mediation between the various multilingual and multi-cultural forces that shape them in an ever globalizing world. For instance, Pakir (2001) sketches a macro view of the forces of globalization that have shaped and continue to shape the English language today. She predicts that the notion of standard English will eventually be ‘glocal’, one which is both global and local at the same time. As English is used as the language of contact between peoples of diverse backgrounds in order to demonstrate the richness of their cross-cultural ‘knowability and communicability’, new epicentres will emerge. Increasingly, English will be a lingua franca, having different identities.

The volume makes a commendable attempt to relate aspects of microlinguistic description to broader macrolinguistic issues. Articles dealing with microlinguistic features include L. S. L. Lim (2001) and Bao (2001) on the phonetics and phonology of SE, respectively, Alsagoff (2001) on tense and aspect, C. Y. Lim & Wee (2001) on the semantics of reduplication, and C. L. Ho (2001) on the cultural pragmatics of SE. C. L. Ho, for instance, maintains that while the use of SE in Singapore’s cosmopolitan and multi-cultural context can be characterized as reflecting certain Western influences, it also allows for the expression of Singapore’s own cultural and experiential realities. P. K. W. Tan (2001) explores linguistic innovation and nativization in Singapore and Malaysian lexis, and relates their use to claims of ownership of English by some Singapore and Malaysian speakers.

Ooi (2001a) addresses the question of maintaining standards in the construction of a more inclusive dictionary (i.e. *TCEED2*) that balances both internal and external norms and seeks to represent the sociolinguistic reality of English use in Singapore and Malaysia. He proposes a systematic analysis of computer corpora, both from native and non-native contexts, in coming to grips with questions concerning the interplay between intra-national (local) and international (global) standards and realities in formulating an effective framework, such as his Concentric Circles model, for constructing a dictionary of nativized Englishes for speakers of Singapore and Malaysian English (SME). Such a model is seen as being more relevant to newer varieties of English in maintaining cultural plurality and linguistic standards.

A recent volume (Tupas, Yuan & Nur 2007), comprising articles offering theoretical and practical insights on pedagogical grammar, bears testimony to Singapore’s continuing preoccupation with grammar. Hung (2007) examines four main dimensions of grammar teaching, namely, the nature of language, the linguistic structure of modern-day English, learners’ interlanguage grammar and teachers’ attitudes towards applied linguistics research. Alsagoff & James (2007) provide an overview of the changed notion of grammar and the shifts in teaching methodology that this entails. Advancing the view that grammar is inextricably tied up with meaning and context, they demonstrate how grammatical forms are meaningful only when used in texts, thus requiring teachers to exploit the meaning-making potential of language. The volume also features studies by Doyle (2007) on using the concordancer to explore grammatical patterns and their frequency of occurrence in a learner’s corpus,

and Pathak (2007) on problems that cause online platforms in grammar teaching to be user-UNfriendly and ways of making them more interactive.

3. English language curriculum and policy

The English language syllabus in Singapore has been revised roughly every ten years in response to developments in language study and pedagogy current at the time, national concerns, and the changing linguistic landscape in Singapore schools. Three or four distinct stages of innovation have been identified, corresponding to Singapore's larger educational reform agenda: a survival-driven stage (1965–78), an efficiency driven stage (1979–90), and an ability-driven education system (1991–2000). The more recent phase (2001 onwards), driven by a knowledge-based economy, aims to nurture talent and develop individual potential in helping realize Singapore's vision of an 'intelligent island' (National Computer Board 1992) and heighten its economic competitiveness. English language education plays a pre-eminent role within this agenda.

Ang (2000), S. C. Lim (2000, 2003, 2004) and Cheah (2002, 2004), present important historical descriptions of syllabus change from the 1950s to the present. The authors indicate that immediately after independence English language teaching in Singapore continued in much the same way as under British colonial rule, influenced by the classical tradition which emphasized the written text, grammar-translation, a set of canonical literary texts and explicit instructional procedures. The English language syllabus between 1959–1981, likewise, emphasized prescriptive grammar to the exclusion of real-life language use. The 1971 syllabus was characterized by repetition, drills and reinforcement in ensuring mastery of the grammar, though some balance was maintained by including an ENRICHMENT component of stories, poetry and drama. It was only in 1979, the above note, when the New Education System was introduced, that some of the most significant policy changes in Singapore's educational history were brought about, resulting in a pendulum swing from a structural syllabus to basic 'functional literacy'. However, as S. C. Lim (2003: 143) notes, this move not only led to a 'reductive' syllabus, reducing reading, writing, listening and speaking to the minimum core skills in the acquisition of basic functional literacy in English, but also to the unsatisfactory separation of form and function, exacerbated by the continued dominance of the structural syllabus and discrete item grammar.

Some of the developments between 1981 and 1991 that S. C. Lim highlights as noteworthy are the Ministry of Education's (MOE) *Reading and English Acquisition Programme (REAP)*, which introduced extensive reading and the use of literature, and the *Active Communicative Teaching (ACT)* project for upper Primary classes, which emphasized fluency over linguistic accuracy. These projects had a major impact on primary education and the changes brought in by them were subsequently incorporated into the 1991 syllabus and, a decade later, into the 2001 syllabus (Ministry of Education 2001).

By the 1980s Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) had made inroads into Singapore's educational landscape and the 1991 syllabus signaled a major paradigm shift from a preoccupation with formal accuracy and discrete grammar items to a focus on meaning and communicative fluency. Overall, a theme-based approach was adopted with an

emphasis on process over product. Significant changes proposed include: the incorporation of principles of learner-centredness, integration of content and skills, process orientation, contextualization, interaction, literature and culture. Cheah (2004), however, critiques the syllabus for its neglect of the basic literacy skills of reading and writing, as well as culture.

The most dramatic change in the 1991 syllabus was the role accorded to English as the first language in the national school curriculum under Singapore's unique 'bilingual education policy', which replaced vernacular-medium schools and designated the official 'mother tongues' a second language status. However, Cheah contends that while the 1991 syllabus introduced an ambitious plan to teach English at a first language level, was non-prescriptive, and provided more opportunities for teacher selection and choice, classroom practice did not always match the planned curriculum. Although the syllabus was meant to be eclectic, offering teachers greater freedom of choice in the selection of skills, functions, tasks and activities as well as textbooks, this well-intentioned move turned out to be misguided. With grammar no longer presented as a prescribed list of items to be taught, most teachers were unprepared and directionless and their classroom practices, driven by an examination-type literacy (Cheah 2004: 360–362). As a result, often what was intended as a feature of 'choice and variety became a burden rather than a gateway to teacher autonomy and freedom' (S. C. Lim 2004: 385).

Two other studies that critically review Singapore's experience with communicative language teaching (CLT) are Chew (2005, 2006) and L. J. Zhang (2006). L. J. Zhang's (2006: 15) paper points to mismatches between syllabus goals and their enactment by classroom teachers, due mainly to the inadequate skills and abilities that local practitioners brought to the language classroom, not to speak of their misconceptions or 'simplified and incomplete understanding' of CLT principles. Teachers' inability to handle the kind of flexibility inherent in a processes-based syllabus often led to skewed practice. L. J. Zhang stresses the importance of a contextually and culturally appropriate CLT which is based on ecological principles and strengthened by adequate teacher preparation and institutional support for successful curriculum implementation.

Based on an ethnographic study of teachers' attitudes towards CLT, Chew (2006) assesses the effectiveness of a communicative syllabus against the backdrop of Asian realities and identifies three major reasons behind the 'rise' and 'fall' of CLT in Singapore: (i) the downplaying of explicit grammar teaching, (ii) an examination-driven literacy deriving from Singapore's culture of meritocracy, and (iii) the importation of Western methodology which stressed student initiative at the expense of teacher authority and control. Chew concludes that a communicative methodology may not be suitable at all times and in all situations. In addition, she suggests that the frequency with which changes to the curriculum are carried out may be perceived as unhelpful and ineffective. In her view, real change may be hindered when it is too swift, too top-down and too short-lived.

The 2001 English language syllabus has retained most features and principles of its 1991 precursor, such as learner-centredness, process and integration and contextualization, and added some new ones like National Education, Thinking Skills and IT, with the primary aim of nurturing 'independent lifelong learners, creative thinkers and problem solvers who can communicate effectively in English' (Ministry of Education 2001: 2). S. C. Lim (2000) maintains, therefore, that despite representing a decade of tremendous educational change,

the 2001 syllabus' continuity with previous philosophies and practices in ELT makes it an 'evolutionary' rather than a 'revolutionary' syllabus.

The rationale, aims and principles of the 2001 syllabus are, to a large extent, informed by Halliday's (1994) functional view of language as discourse and reflect a genre-based approach to curriculum implementation. One of its distinctive characteristics is the use of TEXT TYPES in contextualizing the teaching of grammar. The 2001 syllabus also introduces for the first time a focus on literacy development as a life skill and a powerful determinant of pupils' academic progress, not just linguistic proficiency, with the aim of enabling them to 'make structural and linguistic choices to suit purpose, audience, context and culture' (Ministry of Education 2001: 3). As such, the curriculum, along with the kind of pedagogy the syllabus endorses, appears far better than its predecessors in dealing with the literacy demands of young Singaporeans even beyond school, one which, Kramer-Dahl suggests, might even be considered far more forward-looking than those of many 'core' Anglophone countries, aware as they are of the communicational demands for participation in an 'ever more globalizing world' (Kramer-Dahl 2007).

However, both S. C. Lim (2000, 2004) and Cheah (2004) note how the elevation of text types as the key controlling principle of lesson units has created a host of new difficulties for teachers. It required teachers to have a firm grounding in linguistic and socio-cognitive theories about language and literacy development, familiarity with the specific linguistic properties of relevant texts and genres, and the ability to set up, 'in increasing levels of difficulty and sophistication' (Ministry of Education 2001: 4), contexts for students to enhance the learning of socially valued forms of texts and discourse. In the absence of sufficient support by way of professional development, the only required support course being a 60-hour grammar course by the Ministry of Education, most school teachers did not see themselves positioned as agents in this process of syllabus change. Most importantly, as Lin (2003) notes, the retention of traditional metalinguistic terminology, associated with a more prescriptivist, rule-driven paradigm, led to prescriptive rigidity at the text level as well (Lin 2003: 241). He contends that this approach, reinforced by the backwash effect of examinations, which in his view is a major flaw of the 2001 English syllabus because few changes were made to the testing format, remains a strong inhibiting factor in promoting real change.

A more recent study of the implementation of the 2001 syllabus is C. C. M. Goh et al.'s (2005) investigation of teachers' knowledge, beliefs and reported practice on aspects relating to the syllabus, based on an extensive questionnaire survey conducted with 2,752 teachers from 150 schools and selective semi-structured interviews. The results suggest that the new syllabus presented a challenge for many teachers, not least because of a narrow interpretation of the syllabus goals, which tended to prioritize the teaching of text types and grammar, while privileging written over spoken discourse, and exacerbated by the uneven pedagogical content knowledge of some teachers. They also indicate that teachers' priorities and practices were heavily influenced by examinations. As a result, teachers did not substantially modify their teaching styles and approaches, focusing instead on changes in content only, thus clearly showing that accompanying changes to the examination system are crucial for any successful reform.

Worth mentioning also are country reports (W. K. Ho & Pakir 2000), documenting the vast diversity and changing directions of ELT policies and practices across several East Asian societies (see W. K. Ho & R. Y. L. Wong 2004a, b). The context is further extended to include China and Japan (Silver 2001; Silver, Hu & Iino 2002) in accounting for the variability of

educational practices that accord with the local cultural norms and ideological expectations of those landscapes. These studies show how, operating under the pressures of globalization and modernization, ELT curricula in these societies are constantly impacted by tensions between new knowledge and the traditional, the global and the local, and between voices from the INSIDE and those from the OUTSIDE.

The English language syllabus continues to receive tremendous attention from local politicians, the media and scholars alike, motivated typically by a normativity-driven agenda. Most studies limit themselves to descriptions of the implementation of the aims and goals of the proposed reform, identifying the challenges and constraints faced by teachers and students in adopting a particular innovation. Few, however, question the assumptions, beliefs and ideological rationalizations that motivate these reforms, tending largely to dwell on the means adopted rather than articulating a critique of the goals themselves. Similarly, few of these studies consider language-in-education policy and practice from the bottom up, from the perspective of classroom teachers as central agents of implementation, or attempt to investigate empirically how classroom practitioners cope with and negotiate innovation that is initiated from the top, as is inevitably the case in Singapore.

4. Reading and writing instruction and research

There are a few broad points to note in this section on reading and writing. First, the separate treatment of the two topics in this review is indicative of the somewhat similar tendency in the research literature to approach them separately. Despite the almost given assumption that reading and writing are intricately connected, work in this area largely ignores this connection. Second, the local literature on literacy skills development in the classroom in general is heavily biased towards writing, with much less emphasis given to reading. The third and last point to note in this section is the clearly local perspective of research on reading and writing. Like the rest of local research, it responds clearly to the changing political and ideological climate of Singapore, especially to recent state initiatives to promote critical thinking skills. There is less concern with theory building than with practical concerns in Singaporean classrooms. Though not always explicit, the discourse is on how best to realize the state's goal of incorporating critical and autonomous learning skills into the curriculum in order to promote learning as a continuous process. For example, Varaprasad's (2002) work on the teaching of reading through text organization and other related concepts takes on a similar discourse: 'If we want students to become lifelong learners, then it becomes imperative that they are trained to use a general set of reading strategies' (164). The same line cuts across the study of Wong & Saddah (2002) on types of questions in the primary classroom during reading exercises: they argue for open and frank classroom environments in 'meeting the national agenda of "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation"' (189).

4.1 Reading

There are two main strands in the work on reading and reading instruction. The first strand comprises a largely empirical descriptive group of classroom-based research articles which

attempt to address problems that surround the teaching of reading in the classroom. The second strand is concerned with the problematic understanding of the nature of reading itself and provides alternative ways of looking at it in order to make the reading experience of Singaporean students more critically-oriented and culturally appropriate.

Based on an empirical study of the realities encountered in reading lessons at the Primary 3 level in Singapore's neighbourhood (government) schools, R. Y. L. Wong (2005) reports on a major research project involving audio- and video-recorded data of classroom lessons and teacher and student interviews. It was found that the bulk of the time was spent reading aloud in class, that teachers pitched their instruction predominantly around decoding and comprehension skills, and concentrated on literal questions. Given an examination-driven syllabus, large classes, and the range of reading ability among students, instruction tended to be heavily textbook-dependent, content-based and product-oriented.

In another empirical study, C. L. Lim & Cheah (2005) report on a school which decided to innovate the way English was being taught in Primary 1 by revamping the beginning reading programme, REEL (Reading Effectively Enhances Learning), in order to ensure a strong foundation to literacy development and prevent problems of weak reading. This was done by combining phonics with extensive reading of texts and replacing the difficulty-posing prescribed textbook with a series of graded readers that allowed the integration of language work with the use of the theme in each of the readers. The change in scheme of work was accompanied by a change of assessment practices (e.g. requiring students to learn the spellings of common high-frequency words, especially words needed for writing, instead of struggling with the spelling of words they do not need). Students read a total of 50 books in the first year. It was found that the failure rates were considerably reduced and both the quality and quantity of passes increased by more than 50%. Most importantly, there was qualitative evidence of improvement in children's interest and skill in reading, while active involvement on the part of teachers in the preparation of resources in integrating the readers with classroom teaching enhanced their sense of ownership and gave them a sense of pride and achievement. C. L. Lim & Cheah (2005) stress the importance of continual reflection and review and a willingness to embrace an element of risk-taking in encouraging innovation and growth.

Farrell (2005) discusses the implementation of reading strategy instruction as ideally advocated by researchers and how one teacher attempted to incorporate strategy training in his secondary school English reading class in a case study that uncovers the difficulty of achieving this in reality. On the basis of an interview to elicit the teacher's beliefs about teaching reading before he began implementing strategy instruction and then various episodes of what actually happened in his classes and classroom observation data, Farrell describes how the teacher's well-meaning attempt turned out to be much more difficult than anticipated: he met with some successes and a lot of resistance. Farrell suggests that there may be a need to rethink how best to implement strategy training in order for it to be effective to particular students and offers some concrete suggestions for adjusting and adapting strategy training not only to meet students' particular needs but teachers' own teaching styles and personalities.

Regarding the second, more critical strand, Saravanan & Sripathy (2002) is a good case in point. The authors focus broadly on investigating literacy practices in the home with the aim of generating a far wider range of practices as helpful resources for both language teachers

and parents. The authors note how teachers and parents alike limit learners' range of options for learning by focusing almost solely on textbook-bound literacy practices 'driven by current and prevailing theories of reading and of reading skills and strategies in English that have been imported from the dominant training centres of America, Australia and New Zealand' (p. 145). These mainstream practices, according to the authors, assume that communities are homogeneous and monolingual when in fact, for Singapore at least, much language learning takes place in highly multi-cultural contexts. Saravanan & Sripathy advocate a more informed understanding of Singaporean language learners' home literacy practices in order not to marginalize what otherwise could be powerful and useful local practices of reading and writing.

Rahmat (2002) takes on a very similar stance towards literacy awareness and development, but this time the focus is on reading practices in Malay society. The paper is built on the assumption that different cultural groups have different configurations of literacy use, and that an explicit understanding of these configurations would help address education problems, such as underachievement among Malay students in Singapore. According to Rahmat, reading in Malay society is closely connected with the search for religious knowledge, with the reading of Quran as an essential part of every Muslim's life. Another crucial dimension to understanding Malays' reading practices is the fact that technological advancement came into Malay society later than most societies, thus there seemed to have been a fast transformation of reading practices from oracy to manuscript literacy, and then to oral literacy (p. 142) which proved to be very challenging to many Malays. With the use of information technology in the classroom accelerating for the past many years, Rahmat thus asks, 'Are the Malays really ready and are they able to face this new literacy world?' (p. 143).

Ng (2002) also explores the highly complicated nature of reading in the new millennium and ventures into its implications for teaching and learning. More specifically, the paper deals with the role of information technology in language teaching, summarizing key research results to do with the effect of computer-assisted instruction on writing and reading. Ng argues that while IT in general impacts the educational landscape in very significant ways, results are at best mixed concerning its positive impact on reading and writing. In fact, a growing consensus seems to be that while computer skills and other related skills will help students cope with the demands of learning today, students would still need basic reading skills to evaluate what they read on the Internet, identify important issues of the day, and synthesize all available relevant information (p. 119).

4.2 Writing

The amount of attention that writing instruction and writing research have begun to receive in Singapore mirrors the recent shift in focus onto the development of 'literacy skills to equip students for effective communication in English for lifelong learning' (Ministry of Education 2001), combined with the elevation of text types as the basic unit of classroom organization in the 2001 English language syllabus. As noted earlier, ESL writing instruction in Singapore is heavily influenced by the Australian model of genre theory which draws on Systemic Functional (SF) linguistic theory, especially as developed by Halliday (1994) and his fellow

scholars. Other studies are underpinned by the equally influential model of genre theory developed by Swales (1990). Many of the papers reviewed in this section therefore tend to be reflective of one or the other of these orientations, whether in focusing on aspects of classroom practice or reporting research based on such practice.

Chandrasegaran (2002) cites the ineffectiveness of grammar correction on the quality of writing as a basis for questioning just such a prioritization of grammar remediation by local teachers. She stresses the need to re-focus grammar teaching on discourse function rather than on form, together with rhetorical moves in developing students' rhetorical competence.

Lopez-Nerney & Binder (2004) assess the effectiveness of incorporating the use of portfolios and small-group learning in their 48-hour English for Academic Purposes writing class which aimed to make learning to write a more positive experience for Engineering students from ASEAN countries with low motivation and self-confidence. While small-group learning activities provided students with much needed support in the writing of paragraphs and long texts through a process-based approach, the use of student portfolios was found to be effective in changing their attitudes towards writing, making them feel more responsible for their learning and instilling pride in their work.

In a study describing an English for Academic Purposes course for undergraduate students from South Asia majoring in computing subjects in a Singapore university, Deng (2005) proposes a synthetic approach to the teaching of writing, which has its basis in process-based writing but is imbued with product and genre-based features and activities, as an alternative to the exclusive use of either one of these approaches. He illustrates how the use of portfolio pedagogy combined with reflection within the framework of this eclectic approach contributed to raising student motivation as well as to changing their conceptualization of how to write in positive and productive ways. Students became more confident writers, being sensitized to the writing process and the strategies they could employ in resolving their writing problems.

Tupas (2006) uses an exploratory study motivated by a simple practical question, namely, 'Why do my students write the way they write?', as a basis for raising some interesting theoretical and pedagogical questions about the teaching of professional business communication. Taking as his data 41 letters of refusal written by students in a Business Communication module, he carried out a rhetorical analysis of the 'moves' in them by comparing them with the rhetorical structure drawn from currently available theoretical frameworks of writing in the pedagogical and research literature. His findings revealed that not only did the students demonstrate a larger range and number of rhetorical moves than expected, but that buffers appeared almost everywhere in the letters and not just in the initial moves, at times preempting even closing moves, and that the letters were generally peppered with appeals for understanding, apologies, and/or emotional appeals for reconsideration not generally encouraged in such letters. He argues for a 'multiplicity of rhetoric' approach (Kubota 1997), which acknowledges the different rhetorical socializing experiences of students, the dynamic, hybrid or diasporic nature of rhetoric and writing, and the role of face and politeness in writing cultures as a means of overcoming the ethnocentric limitations of a cultural approach to understanding professional communication.

The operation of the rather nebulous notion of value in a text is not always obvious and probably even more opaque in student-written texts where the awareness of the need for

evaluative comments is not as keen as in professionally written texts. Wu's (2003) paper seeks to explain the qualitative difference between two reports written by first-year undergraduate students in terms of the evaluative language used by them to express opinion. She found that differences existed not only in the variety of statement types and the frequency of the modifying elements but also in the way the evaluative devices were used in the organization of the texts by the two writers. The results highlight the need to raise students' awareness of how opinions can be expressed in reports. In another study, Wu (2006) further explores the expression of value, defined as involving qualitative judgments along the good–bad cline, in identifying categories of value in argumentative essays written by first year undergraduates. The effectiveness of these categories of value in the construction of arguments is discussed with reference to comments provided by a content expert to gain a better understanding of their significance in the given written task. She suggests that an understanding of how value operates in essays on the part of both teachers and learners of writing may facilitate the negotiation between what academic readers expect and how students perceive and present this element of the writer's opinion.

The growing interest in the interpersonal dimensions of student writing, in particular how writers construct a personal voice for themselves, has also received some attention. Based on questionnaire data and an analysis of 35 General Paper² examination essays of students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) studying in a Junior College in Singapore, De Costa (2007) investigates students' perceptions of voice by having them identify elements that constitute writer voice and then determining how voice is established through linguistic features in their own argumentative writing. His findings (using overlapping categories) indicate that a collective voice (88.65%) is the most common, followed by detached voice (77.1%) and tentative voice (5.7%). He surmises that the overall strength of these PRC students' personal voice is eclipsed by the need to adopt a collective and conformist position in their writing, strongly influenced by a Confucian value system. He ascribes the struggle for personal voice to the quest for personal identity, which becomes a source of conflict for aspiring L2 Chinese writers straddling two different writing cultures. The pedagogical suggestions he offers for developing student voice include making the teaching of voice explicit and developing critical awareness among students through dialogue.

5. Mother tongue teaching and learning

In the teaching and learning of mother tongues, three research reports stand out: the separate language curriculum and pedagogy review committee reports on the teaching of Chinese (Ministry of Education 2004), Malay (Ministry of Education 2005d) and Tamil (Ministry of Education 2005e). Committee members who prepared the reports come from tertiary institutions, the media, schools, the Singapore Assessment and Examination Board, and the Curriculum Planning and Development Board. These reports, in turn, are based on

² The General Paper is a compulsory course of study, comprising a reading comprehension and an essay component, which forms part of the GCE Advanced (A) level examination administered by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate at pre-university (Junior College) level.

consultations with various sectors in society, including grassroots communities, parents and students, principals and academic scholars.

The three reports are pivotal research documents not simply because of their influence on curriculum development and implementation (this is expected), but especially because of the way they have been written in the first place. First, the reports each present pedagogical issues without recourse to discussion on how the teaching of the mother tongues generates overlapping concerns such as codeswitching in the classroom. Second, the reports articulate the same official state discourse on bilingualism in Singapore: for example, that bilingualism is ‘an imperative’ (Ministry of Education 2004: 1) and the ‘cornerstone’ of the country’s bilingual education policy (Ministry of Education 2005e: 1). Consequently, mother tongue teaching is essentially synonymous with the transmission of traditional culture and values. And third, the separately derived recommendations (because the consulted stakeholders come from different ethnic groups) translate into similar proposals: greater customization at the primary level and greater emphasis on oral communication and reading.

These reports are complemented by two other key types of research on mother tongue teaching and learning in the period under review. The first is policy-related while the second is practice-oriented. Policy-related papers situate mother tongue initiatives within the broad educational reform context of Singapore (Y. S. Goh 2000; Saravanan 2001; Gopinathan, W. K. Ho & Saravanan 2004), usually referring back to the All-Party Committee on Chinese Education (1956), which is credited with endorsing parity among the mother tongues as languages of education and thus paving the way for the present-day bilingual education policy.

Some of these papers are generally concerned with Singapore’s bilingual education but inevitably discuss mother tongue issues within such broad concerns (Gopinathan 2001; Silver et al. 2002; W. K. Ho 2006). These papers, in general, recognize the successes of Singapore’s bilingual education policy and affirm the wisdom of a policy where English is the pragmatic language and the mother tongues are the languages of cultural transmission.

However, Gopinathan et al. (2004) go beyond acknowledging the immense success of bilingual education in Singapore. Their paper is also unique because it is rare in the local literature to locate any discussion of Singaporean bilingualism within both the sociocultural context of the country and the international literature on multilingualism and multilingual societies. It questions the conceptual and pedagogical assumptions of the country’s bilingual education policy and proposes a modified model of education for Singapore schools.

The problem with the current policy is said to lie primarily with the state’s simplified ethnic categorization of Singapore, where language use and ethnicity in education and society are pre-given (e.g. the ethnic Chinese speak Mandarin, the ethnic Malay speak Malay, the ethnic Indian speak Tamil). The categorization is both ‘reductionist’, because it does not capture the complexity of the country’s multilingual realities, and ‘restrictive’, because ethnicity is bound to one mother tongue only (Gopinathan et al. 2004: 234). The authors’ modified model highlights the need for cross-cultural border crossings in education where both the teaching and learning of English and the mother tongues are not fixated merely on language skills but, more importantly, oriented towards meaningful cultural exchanges.

The authors contend it is doubtful that English has accomplished its proposed mission to serve as a bridge between the ethnic groups because of the focus on mastery of skills; it is also doubtful that mother tongue teaching would be able to promote cultural transmission through the pedagogy of skills which underlies it. In the modified model, the educational system is deemed to produce ‘speakers with inter-cultural competence and multilingual ability who are able to utilize a number of languages according to purpose, need and context’ (ibid: 244).

Practice-oriented papers, on the other hand, help bridge the gap between official policy and pedagogical implications. More importantly, papers in this category generally echo the official policy line by endeavoring to find out how best to implement government initiatives in the classroom through teaching approaches, classroom strategies and teacher development (e.g. Y. S. Goh 2001; K. Lee 2003; Shegar 2005). Thus, Kalaimani & Kahamoorthy’s (2007) paper on the use of IT to improve Tamil language learning skills among pupils falls strictly in line with the most recent state discourse on education:

Considering the fact that English is becoming the dominant home language, there is a need to review how we teach Tamil, especially at the primary level, so that students do not lose interest in the language. In particular, teachers need to focus on teaching oral communication skills to the younger generation so that they can communicate in the language more effectively and are motivated to use the language in a variety of domains. (ibid: 33–34)

The 51 research studies on the teaching and learning of Tamil in Singapore, published in four volumes (Ramiah 2000; written in Tamil but all abstracts are in English), were conducted by teachers undergoing advanced teacher training for the teaching of Tamil. Similarly, Ahmad’s (2000) study on the use of text types in the teaching of Malay is in response to state concerns about the deteriorating standards of Malay language teaching in Singapore. Hsu, C. H. Tan & Chan (2000) explore the possibility of integrating creative thinking through cooperative learning in Chinese composition, while Seet (2006) and Chai & C. L. Tan (2002) recommend promoting the use of Chinese as a pedagogical tool to foster critical thinking and creativity among students without losing sight of the need to promote cultural pride through the learning of the language.

Teachers and scholars also affirm the need to reinvigorate mother tongue teaching and learning through classroom strategies and approaches which best address the concerns articulated in the reports (Ministry of Education 2005a, b, c; Singapore Teachers’ Union 2006). For example, Y. S. Goh (2003, 2006) advocates a bilingual approach to the teaching of Chinese in the schools by drawing on the English language competence of the students. This is ‘unprecedented in the teaching and learning of Chinese in the Singapore context’ (ibid: 37), especially because of the growing number of Chinese students who speak English as their first language. In the case of Tamil teaching, on the other hand, Lakshmi (2005) also argues for an approach to focus on spoken, rather than written, Tamil to encourage students to learn the language with more enthusiasm.

Overall, much of the local work on mother tongue instruction in Singapore schools either elaborates on the government’s recent bilingual education initiatives or concretizes some of their relevant components through classroom strategies and innovative approaches to mother tongue teaching. Except for the critical study of Gopinathan et al. (2004), and perhaps a

few dispersed voices from practitioners who believe that mother tongue instruction must incorporate the teaching of thinking and creative skills (other than simply act as a conduit for cultural transmission; Hsu et al. 2000; Chai & C. L. Tan 2002; Seet 2006), the remaining work mainly focuses on how best to understand and implement recent state initiatives in bilingual education rather than question some of its basic assumptions.

6. The teaching of English to international students

One of the emerging research areas is the teaching of English to international students in Singapore, motivated perhaps by official policies which encourage talented foreigners to live and study in the country. The number of international students attending local universities in Singapore has risen dramatically in recent years and is expected to remain high in the coming years (J. Tan 2006).

At present, much research concerns students from the PRC because they constitute the largest group of international students. For example, the journal *Reflections on English Language Teaching* devoted a special issue in 2001 to research on Chinese students learning English in Singapore in conjunction with the Promotion of Standard English (PROSE) of the National University of Singapore (NUS), a pivotal programme of the Singapore government. Nevertheless, even with this attention accorded to the PRC group, research on the students' English language learning experience in Singapore since 1990 'is still scarce' (K. C. Lee & Chan 2003: 115), although greater interest in the topic is clearly emerging.

Research in the area generally focuses on a few essential assumptions that dichotomize ELT practices in China and Singapore. First, China is an EFL context, while Singapore is ESL. Second, China is 'English input-poor' (D. Zhang 2005: 83) while Singapore is 'English input-rich' (ibid: 84). Third, China is non-English-speaking while Singapore is English-speaking. Consequently, students come to Singapore with very little experience of real-life use of English and are very much dependent on textbooks and teachers (e.g. H. Goh & K. L. Tan 2001; C. L. Tan 2001). This explains why much research focuses on addressing the communicative weaknesses of these students and on finding ways to make them autonomous learners.

For example, the Communication Skills programme for PRC scholars at the National Institute of Education (NIE) is explicitly framed within 'a number of key principles in line with the communicative approach to language learning' (Kwah 2005: 31). On the other hand, pedagogical practice in similar programmes at the NIE as well as at the Centre for English Language Communication at the NUS is heavily oriented towards making students independent or autonomous learners of English (G. L. Lee et al. 2003; Kwah & Vallance 2005). In fact, whatever the focus of research may be, much work is geared towards finding out how students can become independent learners (S. Tan 2001; Young & Fong 2001; Liu 2005; D. Zhang 2005; L. J. Zhang 2005).

Several learner characteristics and problems specific to the PRC Chinese learner are raised in the literature. For example, team or collaborative work is a foreign concept among Chinese learners. They are also purportedly examination-oriented, very passive, and heavily influenced by the culture of rote-learning, memorization and grammar teaching (L. Ho 2003: 128).

What emerges from the characterization and problematization of PRC students of English is a picture of young adult learners of English in Singapore who are deficient in their knowledge and use of English, and who were taught by equally deficient English teachers in China. In other words, local research starts with the main assumption that the PRC English language learner in Singapore is a problem that must be solved. The issue is not so much whether the valuations of Chinese learners above are true or not; rather, the issue is that they are presented as a purely PRC learner problem, even if other groups in Singapore (and elsewhere) are described in local research as having similar problems, such as being examination-oriented and teacher-dependent (Lopez-Nerney & Toh 2000).

Thus, while Chinese students 'had to be 'weaned' from a teacher-centred approach to learning independently' (K. C. Lee & Chan 2003: 130), the new context within which they are supposed to learn independently is one where examinations, according to a university handbook for teachers, are 'the single most important motivational force' (Pan 2008: 9). These students are thus characterized as being unwilling 'to take risks and engage in discovery and independent learning' and having 'narrow perspectives, with interests largely limited to what is within the syllabus and examinable' (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, against the backdrop of the stereotypical characterization of PRC students in some research, some scholars have attempted to provide fairly nuanced analyses of the students' English language learning practices and beliefs in Singapore. For example, Fong's (2006) empirically determined profile of 151 PRC senior-middle school students enrolled in a pre-matriculation intensive English course in the NUS reveals a 'puzzling' finding (p. 15), which shows that the students, on the one hand, feel they are not yet ready to set their own objectives and select activities for their course while, on the other, also believe that teachers should not direct students' learning inside and outside the classroom. Fong provides a number of possible reasons for this seemingly conflicting response, but notes that it may indeed be possible that 'the students had. . . become more independent in their learning' and had gradually moved away from 'the Chinese culture of learning' (e.g. Jin & Cortazzi 1998) 'where the teacher is seen as one of the main sources of knowledge' (Fong 2006: 15).

Similarly, Wachob (2004) argues that 'western' approaches to learning should not be viewed as completely foreign to Chinese students in general, thus resulting in a rather superficial dichotomization of learning styles between 'western' students and those from a 'Confucian Heritage Culture'. She writes along this line after being involved in the teaching of English in Xi'an, China, for three years, noting that the students do have their own concepts of group work which are akin to notions of cooperative groups in communicative language teaching. Independent adult learning is also very much embedded in Confucianist thought, thus 'western' models of independent learning are not necessarily unfamiliar to the students.

Meyer (2003) seems to support this more nuanced view of Chinese learners. The two groups of PRC students in her study, who have a favourable view of group work in language classes, believe that open confrontation is acceptable behaviour in group work and are generally candid in their opinions, even if these contradict others in the group (*ibid.*: 79). Meyer concludes that 'we cannot necessarily base our expectations of PRC students' behaviour on the stereotypical Asian behaviours of prioritizing group harmony and acting to save face', or it 'may also be that the traditional stereotype of Chinese behaviour is too crude to provide good predictions of how Chinese students will behave in all specific contexts' (*ibid.*: 87). In Jaidev's

(2003) study of Singaporean and international first-year Engineering students in a critical thinking and writing course, PRC students may not have been very familiar with group work, but they recognize the importance of it in the workplace. They share with everyone in the course the belief that group work is desirable and that dissensus is a natural part of it.

Feng (2000, 2001) and Hu (2005) do not discuss PRC students in Singapore *per se*, but provide useful overviews of English language teaching and, more generally, the educational system in China which can help teachers and researchers in Singapore understand and contextualize their work with the students. The articles, in fact, are written with the intention of providing a broader context for the understanding of English language learning practices of PRC students in Singapore. Feng (2001) discusses ELT methodological history in China, noting that the recent slogan *Bo Cai Zhong Chang* ('assimilating merits of different teaching approaches for our own use') has sought to develop a methodological tradition that rightly suits the specific sociopolitical realities of the country. Feng contends that despite the influx of communicative practices into China, the fact remains that the 'intensive reading model' continues to dominate ELT practice in the country. This model is usually referred to as the Chinese version of the grammar-translation method because of its emphasis on vocabulary and grammar learning through teacher exposition.

It is therefore easy for many to pick out weaknesses in Chinese language learning practices through this approach (e.g. PRC students are passive, silent, grammar-oriented, uncritical), but Feng (2000) contends that there are deep cultural values that underlie these practices, such as empirically identified expectations of good teaching as ability to impart knowledge and good learning as attentiveness to the teacher. These are embodied in what is referred to as a theory of Chinese characteristics which Deng Xiaoping initially articulated in the 1980s as part of a political consolidation of state energies and resources to build China out of proven local practices and knowledges. In the context of ELT, this would mean the incorporation of so-called Chinese values into the crafting of curricula and syllabuses (ibid: 45).

Hu's (2005) overview, on the other hand, focuses on Basic English language education in China, which produces a wide range of proficiencies among students. The more proficient ones usually come from more developed urban and coastal regions, while the less proficient ones learn English in less developed inland and rural areas. Similarly, varying degrees of proficiency seem to correlate with types of secondary schools, with the most proficient usually coming from general senior schools. Hu also discusses several recent changes in the curriculum, syllabuses, learning materials, and instructional practices in English language education, including the introduction of content-based English instruction, the shift from an ideological to a pragmatic view of English, and an increasing openness to foreign language teaching methodologies, especially the Communicative Approach, thus explaining the closer alignment of textbooks along international trends. Hu argues that the impact of these changes has been uneven across socioeconomically different regions; thus, it is imperative that Chinese students of English be treated as 'individual beings' who have 'differing needs, backgrounds, beliefs, attitudes, objectives, strategies, and expectations' (ibid: 22).

Nevertheless, while Feng and Hu call for a deeper understanding of PRC students of English in Singapore through a more penetrating awareness of their educational, social and regional backgrounds, the rest of available research mostly has not taken up the call. As discussed above, dichotomous views of ELT in China and Singapore as well as stereotypical

assumptions of Chinese learners underlie such research, even if it is admittedly honest in its desire to help PRC students achieve a level of English language competence that will help them succeed in their academic and professional endeavors in Singapore.

7. Conclusion

As was mentioned at the beginning of this review, research in applied linguistics and language teaching and learning in Singapore can best be appreciated if located within the unique political landscape of the country. It responds to local problems and needs, while theoretical issues are relegated to secondary importance. The omnipresent hand of the state in matters concerning the educational system in general is reflected in the literature's preoccupation with practical classroom issues, especially with matters on how best to appropriate national programmes and syllabuses in specific classroom situations. Scholars and teachers in general are less interested in questioning the very assumptions of the nature of the bilingual education system within which they operate.

It is worth noting, however, that the critical dimensions of the research literature are largely articulated within the local context of criticality as well. That is, the critical literature – for example the view of bilingual education as reductionist, of mainstream literacies as limited and inappropriate, and of national syllabuses as both enlightened and constraining – emerges from local notions of what it means to be critical. Real and lived limitations of state-led initiatives and programmes are thoughtfully examined by researchers and practitioners, which leads to a critical valuation of deep-rooted assumptions of some key features of bilingual education in the country.

There is clearly an emerging trend in the opening up of spaces of criticality in applied linguistics research in Singapore, with the collective work of the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) and the Learning Sciences Laboratory at the National Institute of Education leading the way. Established in 2002, and charged with spearheading new areas of study through a rigorous research programme aimed at enhancing classroom practice in Singapore schools in the areas of language and literacy, mathematics and science, and information and communication technologies, the CRPP has embarked on over 100 ongoing research projects, some of which have been reviewed in the earlier sections of the paper. Its Core Research Program, comprising a multi-level analysis of Singaporean schooling, and premised on the belief that a systematic study of teachers' and students' work in everyday classroom contexts is the necessary starting point for pedagogical change, is intended to provide a rich multi-disciplinary evidence base for educational policy (Luke et al. 2005).

Similarly, in the next few years work on the use of technology in the classroom may become a broad platform for the formation of critical voices against the normally celebratory articulation of the transformative powers of information technology today. Currently almost single-handedly generated by the informed skepticism but balanced stance of Towndrow (2001) and Towndrow & Vallance (2004), it is hoped that such work paves the way for the creation of critical spaces in technological development practices in education in the near future.

It remains to be seen how criticality will be shaped in the context of Singapore. It is even more doubtful if a local character of critical work will generate mainstream ideas in

the field of applied linguistics and language teaching and learning in Singapore. But what may be observed at this point is that local scholars and teachers struggle with formidable constraints in their desire to improve their own pedagogies, perhaps the same struggle the rest of Singapore faces amidst the power of the state to control their lives and its desire to transform able bodies of today into creative and critical minds of the future.

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