

1982

STUDIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING & LEARNING-1

CONTENTS :

An overview - Amy Sobrielo & Ho Wah Kam

1. The status of reading in primary 1,2 & 3 in Singapore
- Ng Seok Moi
- (2.) A measure of reading : report of a survey - IE Research Team
3. Reading levels in English in Singapore schools - I C Johnston
4. The reading habits and difficulties of primary 4 pupils - J B Heaton
5. Language transfer in the use of English - Irene F H Wong & Lim Saw Choo
6. How people react to certain types of errors in written English in Singapore - Catherine Lim
7. Some developmental aspects of first and second language learning - Isa Moynihan
8. Developing a word list for English-Medium primary schools in Singapore - Belinda Ng Chay Buay & Amy Tan Quee Neo
9. The basic vocabulary skills of Pre-University Chinese-Medium students - Tan Siok Hoon
10. Factors affecting the learner of English in a semi-rural school - Pakir Maideen bin Abdul Majid
11. Factors affecting language learning - Toh Tong Jit
12. The language problems of Chinese-Medium students converting to an English-Medium Pre-University Programme - Dorothy Ng Ik Kin
13. Questioning strategies and pupil response - Koh Leng Leng
14. Students' participation in class and the quality of written work - Teo Choon Lung
15. A comparison of composition marking techniques - Nadeson Suppiah

AN OVERVIEW

by
AMY SOBRIELO &
HO WAH KAM

INTRODUCTION

It is most appropriate that the first issue of REACT should focus on studies in the teaching and learning of English. It is widely known that many of the learning difficulties faced by pupils in our schools can be traced to a poor command of English. Fortunately, there is a pool of local studies on the English Language Teaching (ELT) situation in our schools. and since we suspect that not many people know about these studies, it seems to us important that some of these studies should be brought to the attention of many more people, especially classroom teachers.

From this pool of local studies. we selected 13 reports for "abstracting", and we also included 2 non-local studies because their findings are quite pertinent to our ELT situation. In most of these studies, the attention is characteristically on the *learner* – this shift in focus (from the *teacher* to the *learner*) is significant if we are to understand fully the problems of ELT. It is also significant that 7 of these studies were carried out by practising classroom teachers, so the label "teacher-researcher" can be appropriately applied to them.

The 15 studies may be broadly grouped under six themes. We will now introduce to you the themes and the abstracts.

PUPILS' READING INTERESTS AND THE TEACHING OF READING

In the context of ELT, it is important that pupils read beyond the textbooks if they are to build on what is taught in the classroom. So, in the late seventies at IE, there was renewed interest in collecting

information about the reading interests of our pupils. Heaton's study and they were conducted at about the same time; the latter surveyed a sample of primary six pupils, while Heaton's study was based on interviews with primary four pupils. Both studies have confirmed a rather dismal picture of the reading interests of schoolchildren. Some of Johnston's conclusions about the reading levels of primary and lower secondary schoolchildren may be regarded as rather controversial especially when they are based on a comparison of the scores of local children with norms for children of the same age level but whose mother tongue is English. Dr Ng Seok Moi's project is different from the earlier surveys. To find out the status of reading in primary schools, she studied the reading programmes of a sample of primary schools and the reading ability of pupils in these programmes.

ERRORS IN THE USE OF ENGLISH

Experienced teachers of English in Singapore and elsewhere have always collected pupils' errors in English usage to be used as material for remedial work in class. Error analysis, as the study of errors has come to be known, has been a useful teaching tool. However, attempts to study errors systematically (i.e. to identify errors and to explain or guess at their source) have taken on a more scholarly complexion. Interest in the systematic study of errors in pupils' oral and written English has stemmed from studies in the psychology of second language learning.

Irene Wong and Lim Saw Choo studied the errors in the written work of two groups of pupils whose home languages are different. Part of the plan was to see how strong the "pull" of the mother tongue was on their written English learnt in school as a second language. The study by Dr Moynihan, carried out in New Zealand, was concerned with the developmental aspects of the language of very young children – she analysed the spoken English of children (native-English-speakers) and that of Samoan children of a similar age range. Her study certainly provides fresh insights into the normal language development of children of different language backgrounds. It appears that some of the mistakes the children in her sample made are quite similar to those made by our own pupils. Catherine Lim in her study tried a different tack – she was interested in finding out the attitudes of Singaporeans and others to some "deviant" features of written Singapore English.

DEVELOPING WORD LISTS

Perhaps the best known word list is Michael West's *A General Service List of English Words* (1953), selected on the basis of word frequency, that is, how often a word appears in selected texts.

Belinda Ng and Amy Tan used this criterion to draw up their two word lists. However, a point to remember about such methods of developing classroom word lists is that the wider the range of texts used (and also the greater the number of texts) the less useful the count. Having decided on the words one wants to teach, how does one go about teaching them? One might want to try the method used by Tan Seok Hoon in an experiment in which a group of pre-university students were taught to *infer* the meanings of words from a variety of contextual clues.

FACTORS AFFECTING LANGUAGE LEARNING

Successful language learning is often said to depend on at least three factors, namely, aptitude, motivation and *opportunity*. Aptitude is probably the least subject to manipulation. Motivation

~~English the wider opportunity is the factor over which the teacher has~~

the most control at least in the classroom. Dorothy Ng's study takes into account motivation and opportunity, among other factors. The lack of home support (another form of opportunity) for the learning of English is one of several factors highlighted in Pakir Maideen's investigation of the reasons for the poor performance of pupils in English in a semi-rural primary school. Toh Tong Jit in his project paid special attention to the influence of home background, aptitude, attitude and motivation on the learning of English. His subjects were primary school pupils, made up of "repeaters" and "bright" children.

LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

As mentioned earlier, opportunity is a factor that teachers have most control over in the classroom. Do teachers normally give their pupils maximum opportunity to use English in the classroom? One way of finding out is to analyse the interaction between the teacher

and his pupils in a teaching situation, as Koh Leng Leng did in her study. Such studies are based on the principle that pupils should be encouraged to participate and draw on their own experiences and knowledge and that the teacher's questioning should be more concerned with stimulating thinking rather than eliciting factual information. Teo Choon Lung designed a study to find out the relationship between pupils' participation in class and the quality of their written work. The results are quite interesting.

MARKING COMPOSITIONS

Finally, we come to the theme of grading and marking compositions. With composition marking, the main problem is one of reliability. as two or more markers may differ widely in the marks they each give

to the same composition. Compositions may be graded by "impression" marking or "analytic" marking. There is evidence that if the compositions are marked by three or four "impression" markers, the total marks are far more reliable than the marks given by one "analytic" marker. On the other hand, the marks given by a single "impression" marker are less reliable than those awarded by one marker using the "analytic" method. Nonetheless, what is the cost in terms of time taken to carry out the marking? In his study, Suppiah looked at the marking of English compositions in the Primary School Leaving Examination in the light of the two methods of composition marking.

A CONCLUDING WORD

There is considerable effort under way to develop a tradition of research in the teaching of English in Singapore. The local research identified in this issue of REACT represents only a small proportion of the local and regional research material available in our libraries.

As you read each abstract, you may find that the richness of detail is somewhat lost. This is inevitable as each abstract or summary provides no more than an outline (of the original) written, we hope, in a way that is highly readable. You are therefore encouraged to read the original reports, most of which are deposited in the RELC Library or the IE Library.

THE STATUS OF READING IN PRIMARY 1,2 & 3 IN SINGAPORE

by
DK NG SEOK MOI

ANY READING PROGRAMME EMBARKED UPON
MUST BE BACKED BY A STRONG PROGRAMME
TO HELP THE CHILD ATTAIN ORAL PROFICI-
ENCY IN ENGLISH.

The aim in our reading programme is
not merely so that children can "bark
at print.", but that they are able to
understand what they are learning to
read. (p. 37)

Abstract by Judith Lucas

Dr Ng Seok Moi shares the concern often expressed by teachers and parents that Singaporean children are not reading as well as they should. According to her, understanding what they read is crucial and children who have not developed a good oral grasp of the language will be handicapped in learning to read. She suggested that two years of pre-primary education which stresses the spoken language may help many children.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The study, which aimed at identifying problem areas in the teaching of reading in lower primary schools, involved 12 randomly selected schools. In each school, a reading lesson was observed in 36 Primary 1, 2 and 3 classes.

The 36 participating teachers were interviewed as a part of the study,

- . to get factual information about their reading programmes,
- . to see if they were aware of weaknesses,
- . to evaluate their understanding of the processes involved in the teaching and learning of reading.

in each class, 3 pupils (rated by the teacher as Good, Average and Below Average in reading) were tested.

As they read a familiar text, running records were made so as to determine their reading accuracy.

Standardised tests were also used to assess their reading abilities and to compare their performance with British children in reading accuracy and comprehension skills.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE RESULTS?

SOME BAD NEWS

- . Although not unexpected, Singapore children in the English-medium schools were performing about one grade below British norms, while those in Chinese-medium schools were about one grade below their counterparts in the English-medium schools.

26% of the children had difficulty reading their texts, making more than 1 error in 10 words - they were operating at what is known as the frustration level of reading.

- Most teachers were unclear about what was involved in learning to read and unaware that reading is a very complex process, eg 13 teachers thought that word recognition was the only skill required.
- 7 out of 12 classes were taught without grouping. Where grouping was used, the most common situation was that of 3 groups, followed by treatment of the class as a whole.
- The most common methods used were chorus reading (observed in 23 classes) and whole class reading after the teacher has read (in 28 classes). Methods that are most useful in helping children to read better, such as silent reading and reading by individual children, were used infrequently.
- Flashcards were the most frequently used teaching aids (in 28 classes), confirming the over-emphasis on word recognition. The more "creative" aids, such as slides, dramatization, the tape recorder, word games, pictures and drawing, and concrete examples were seldom used.

SOME GOOD NEWS

- Although the comprehension scores for Primary 1 children were well below those of British children, they caught up very quickly in Primary 2 in reading accuracy. The problem, however, is that reading accuracy is largely a mechanical process and not as important a skill as reading comprehension.
- Most teachers were aware of their own shortcomings in methods of teaching reading. They were therefore keen to undergo in-service (but not crash) courses to learn different techniques for teaching reading, including training in the use of audio-visual equipment.

WHAT CAN THE AVERAGE TEACHER DO?

All of us can begin to provide opportunities for the children to speak more in class. Plan small group exercises and projects that require the children to speak to each other in English.

We can also plan more interesting and stimulating lessons with lots of pictures and other teaching aids.

We need to work with pupils in small reading groups and on a one-to-one basis.

If help is needed in planning for the groups, perhaps the senior assistant and principal can plan a training session for you or put you in touch with agencies like IE and MOE, which organise in-service courses in reading.

- Meanwhile, of course, a little reading up on your own couldn't hurt either.

Copies of this Report, "The Status of Reading in Primary 1, 2 & 3 in Singapore", may be purchased from the Bursar's Office, Institute of Education.

A MEASURE OF READING: REPORT OF A SURVEY

THE RESEARCH TEAM

Abstract by Robert Heath

Broadly, the team found that while schools had done a good job in teaching pupils how to read, there was cause for concern about their desire to read. The amount and quality of reading were areas which would need improvement.

SETTING UP THE SURVEY

It was planned as a follow-up to an earlier survey carried out by the former Teachers Training College. The team set out to measure the amount and the type of reading done by Primary 6 pupils in first and second languages. 18 schools were selected and a total of 1157 pupils were given questionnaires to complete. Essentially, pupils reported on their reading experience in the month previous to the survey.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCH TEAM FIND?

The team found that

For L1

- 38% read no books in English.
- 43% read no magazines in English.
- 58% read no comics in English.

For L2

- 43% offering Chinese as L2 read no books.
- 67% offering English as L2 read no books.

The quality of reading was equally low, with a preference for comics such as "Beano" and "Dandy".

ANY GOOD NEWS?

Yes, 95% reported reading the newspaper regularly (though the research team did not examine which sections were read).

- Also, there was evidence of encouragement from teachers, parents, brothers and sisters (though some parents refused to let pupils read anything but textbooks).

IF THEY DIDN'T READ, WHAT DID THEY DO?

83% watched television for more than an hour a day.

- Figures for doing homework, games, hobbies and helping with housework were also high.

This survey, then, showed the same trend as the Whitehead survey in Britain (1974) which showed that "the decline in reading goes along with a swing towards other social activities . . . or other media".

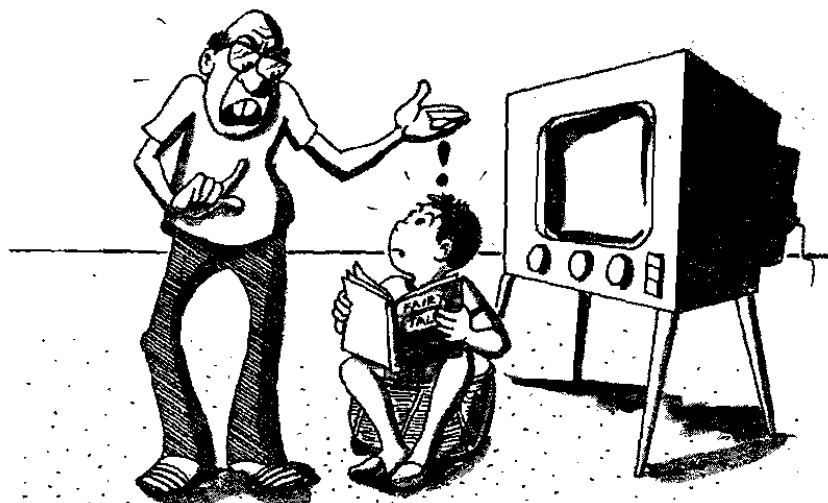
WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Schools should

- make library periods part of the timetable at every level.
- ensure easy access to the library at other times.
- make daily newspapers available in the four official languages.
- make sure they have adequate and varied stocks of books and magazines.
- provide a variety of book-based activities in which the emphasis is on enjoyment.

Individual teachers should

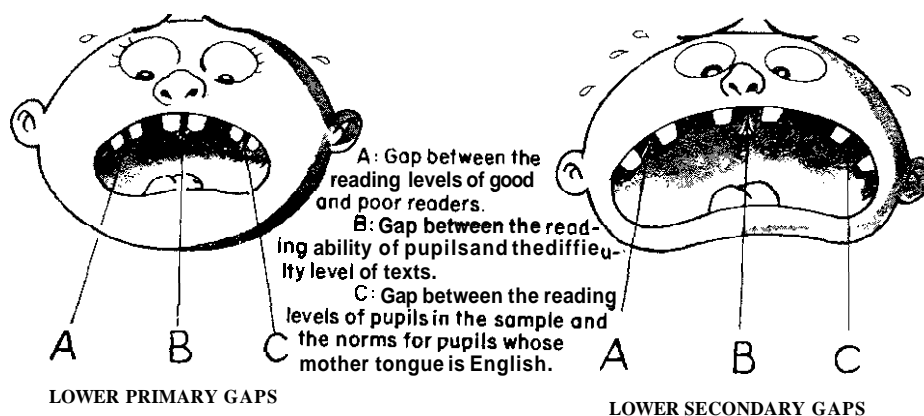
- be enthusiastic readers themselves and be seen by the pupils to be keen about books.
- encourage pupils to read widely.
- try to wean pupils from inferior materials.
- provide opportunities in school time for extensive reading.



I PAID GOOD MONEY FOR THAT TV SET...
SO DON'T LET ME CATCH YOU READING AGAIN

READING LEVEES IN ENGLISH IN SINGAPORE SCHOOLS

by I C JOHNSTON



Abstract by Ng Kim Beng

Johnston's preliminary survey of the reading levels of a sample of Singapore pupils reveals a number of disturbing gaps which seem to be widening as pupils become older. His survey also shows that texts used in the schools are difficult and beyond the reading capability of most pupils. Moreover, the texts used are not differentiated by level of difficulty, and consequently the needs and capabilities of poor readers within each grade level are not adequately catered for.

HOW WAS THE SURVEY CONDUCTED?

The survey involved 432 pupils randomly selected from 61 different classes in schools distributed throughout Singapore. The pupils were from 6 different grade levels (Primary 2 to Primary 5, and Secondary 1 to Secondary 2). The information was collected by a group of student teachers of the Institute of Education working under the supervision of the author.

Procedures used included testing the pupils in word recognition (ability to read aloud words from a given list).

- . A sample of texts used at the 6 grade levels was assessed for their "readability" level (level of difficulty).
- . The results of the pupils' performance in word recognition at each grade level were then compared with the norms set for the "readability" levels of the texts.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE FINDINGS?

Within each grade level, there were wide gaps between the reading levels of "good" and "poor" readers. For instance, among pupils in Primary 2, there was a gap of 4 different reading levels between the "very good" and "very poor" readers. At Secondary 1, the gap widened to 8 different levels, and only 12 out of 95 pupils were above the average reading level of that cohort.

Pupils generally were strong in word recognition (p.3) and consequently obtained slightly higher scores in the standardised tests conducted.

Most of the texts used at every grade level (up to Secondary 2) in the schools were above the average reading capability of the pupils. For instance, only 15% of the Secondary 2 texts were suitable for the average, or below average pupil (p. 1).

- . Pupils from Primary 1 to Primary 4 progressed, on the average, at a rate equal to three-quarters that of an average native English-speaker.
- . From Primary 4 to Secondary 2, the average progress was less than half that of an average native English-speaker.

More than one-quarter of the Secondary 1 pupils, having passed their Primary School Leaving Examination, were reading below the level of a 9-year-old native English-speaker.

A CAUTIONARY NOTE

The author admits that the procedures used in his survey are not as rigorous as they should have been. He suggests that a major survey will have to be conducted to confirm or reject his preliminary findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Among the recommendations suggested by Johnston are:

- the development of reading level tests for Singapore pupils.
- . the development of local tests for assessing the "readability" level (level of difficulty) of texts used in the classrooms.
- the introduction of a system whereby the "readability" level of all texts used in the schools are made known to all the teachers.
- the use of a variety of interesting and graded reading materials or texts appropriate for the differing ability of the pupils.

RELEVANCE TO CLASS TEACHERS

This preliminary survey reveals a need to review and reassess existing reading programmes and the way pupils are grouped. Teachers might, as a start, address themselves to the following:

- . assessing the reading level of the pupils with a view to grouping them according to their reading ability.
- assessing the readability of the texts used.
- . selecting suitably graded reading materials and texts for each ability group.
- . employing alternative oral strategies (other than reading sentences or passages aloud) to improve their reading levels.

Full title of the Report: "Reading Levels in Singapore Schools: A Preliminary Skirmish" (A copy of the Report is in the IE Library)

THE READING HABITS AND DIFFICULTIES OF PRIMARY 4 PUPILS

by
J B HEATON

"It would be of considerable help if existing teacher attitudes to reading could be changed. Few teachers seek to promote reading as an enjoyable activity." (p.34)

Abstract by Terence Dwyer

Heaton and his team found a number of problems with Singapore pupils' reading and they put much of the blame on the methods of teaching.

WHO WERE SURVEYED?

Primary 4 pupils from a wide range of schools. Pupils selected ranged from those with a low level of proficiency in English to those with a high level of proficiency and considerable scholastic ability.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE FINDINGS?

- . Most homes use no English at all but many homes use Mandarin as a second language. There was little evidence to show that parents and neighbours ever use English in one-to-one conversations with the children.
- . Not enough parents help their children with English. Help and encouragement given to pupils by parents fall far short of what is desirable. Only half of the parents in the survey bought books for their children to read.
- Not much English is spoken outside the classroom. Paralleling the wide use of Mandarin as a second language in the home is the use of Mandarin among pupils at school. Pupils are likely to use English only when they are in the school buildings but not when they are out in the playground.

HOW MUCH READING DO PUPILS DO?

- Very little. Most prefer doing their homework, watching television, going to the cinema, playing games and even sleeping to reading.

The report finds that few teachers do enough to encourage pupils to read for pleasure. Many pupils read only their textbooks.

- Apparently reading difficulties deprive many pupils of the ability to enjoy reading books because more pupils said that they preferred listening to stories in English to reading stories in English.

WHICH BOOKS ARE READ?

Story-books are most popular but three-quarters of the pupils surveyed also read at least one comic book or magazine each month.

English fairy tales (such as "The Three Little Pigs") are the most popular kind of stories read. These stories are easily available, short and written in simple English. Such reading is considered too immature for ten-year-olds.

WHAT CAN THE TEACHER DO?

Keep a class library to make pupils read more.

Reduce reading aloud in class. The survey found that the average primary school teacher still equated an ability to read aloud a text with the ability to understand it. As a result, many pupils have developed the habit of "barking at print", ie. reading a passage aloud without any real understanding of its content.

Organise individual and group reading programmes; for example, use reading laboratories containing reading cards at different levels and different sets of reading books.

Use popular material related to television shows.

- Instead of having only fairy tales in the library, include more of the graded, simplified readers produced for learners of English as a second or foreign language. The content of these readers will be more suitable for ten-year-olds.

Build up spoken English before teaching reading.

- Use good translations of Chinese, Malay and Tamil folktales.

A copy of the Report on Reading Habits and Difficulties Of Primary IV Pupils is in the IE Library.

LANGUAGE TRANSFER IN THE USE OF ENGLISH

by IRENE F H WONG & LIM SAW CHOO

Abstract by Clive Scharenguivel

The authors attempt to identify errors in the use of English made by Chinese and Malay pupils in Malaysia, which could be traced to mother-tongue interference.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The study involved two groups of Form 4 (Secondary 3) pupils in Malaysia, viz. Malay pupils in a semi-rural school in Alor Star (Kedah) and Chinese pupils, mainly Hokkien-speaking, in a school in Klang with 6 years of Chinese Primary School education and an additional year of intensive instruction in both Malay and English.

For both groups, English is a foreign language, and is seldom spoken outside the classroom.

The pupils were asked to write a free composition about themselves, and errors made by these pupils were analysed and compared to show the effects of interference or translation of Malay or Hokkien on their use of English.

INTERESTING POINTS MADE BY THE AUTHORS

The major sources of error were mother-tongue interference and language learning strategies used by the child.

Although the literal translation of stock phrases in colloquial Hokkien or spoken Malay in the pupils' use of English is hilarious and somewhat naive, it provides an extremely useful means of understanding and analysing the errors made by our pupils.

Ai chia gnorchan ahsee wanchan
eh seehau, gua t'pai tio hor gua
eh lauboo may.

When the time to lunch or dinner
I always must give my mother scdd



Ibu juga marah saya kerana saya
tidak membuat apa-apa untuk
memenuhi masa lapang saya

My mother also scold me because
I do nothing to full my free time.



EXAMPLES OF ERRORS MADE BY THE CHINESE AND MALAY PUPILS RESULTING FROM LANGUAGE TRANSFER

- . Omission of the plural noun suffix, e.g. I have four sister and two brother.

Omission of the verb suffix for third person singular in the present tense, e.g. She go to school by bicycle.

Omission of "be" as an auxiliary and as a main verb, e.g. That all about my family.

Omission of "do", e.g. I like my teacher very much but some of them I not like because they all choose a girl for them to affection.

Confusion in the use of articles, e.g. I have a long and straight hair. I'm Form 4 students.

Use of "have" in "there is/are" constructions, e.g. My family has six members.

Confusion in the use of tenses, e.g. She have leave school in 1979.

- . Confusion in the use of pronouns, e.g. My mother is a housewife. He stay at home to cooking and to look after my sisters.

These pupils also make a lot of mistakes in the use of prepositions. This could again be attributed to either mother-tongue influence (since parallels can be found in both Malay and Chinese) or "intralingual interference", that is, wrong generalisations based on partial knowledge of English.

Pupils also depend on the transfer of sentence structures from their mother tongue to aid them in their use of English. When teachers realise this, they can understand why some Hokkien pupils, for example, place the verb at the end of a sentence which is a pattern occurring very often in colloquial Hokkien.

e.g. This year he come my school teach.

My two friends are very good in the class reading.

CONCLUSION

The authors admit that the study is "far from conclusive" and that the data is restricted and not comprehensive, since the samples did not cover all errors. However, the study is very interesting and should provide insights for teachers teaching English in both primary and secondary schools in Singapore and Malaysia.

Full title of the Report: "Language Transfer in the Use of English in Malaysia: Structure and Meaning."
(A copy of the Report is in the RELC Library)

HOW PEOPLE REACT TO CERTAIN TYPES OF ERRORS IN WRITTEN ENGLISH IN SINGAPORE

by CATHERINE LIM

Abstract by A Wharton

Catherine Lim saw that some researchers had already investigated errors in English and that opinions about such errors abounded in Singapore. Instead of relying on hearsay and personal accounts, she set out to record these attitudes and opinions in her study.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

Samples of **formal** written English were collected (ideas of correctness are strongly linked with educated written English).

- A trial questionnaire was constructed based on features of grammar and style found in the sample and tried out on 44 people.
- The questionnaire was then modified to find out the attitudes of people to Singapore English. 30 items of grammar and style were chosen for testing as well as general questions on the standard of English in Singapore.

100 people were selected to answer the questionnaire. The sample included Singaporeans and Malaysians in the field of education, Singaporeans and Malaysians not in education, and expatriate **native-**speakers teaching in Singapore.

- Information about those questioned was gathered (age, qualifications, experience, etc).

It was thought that more "locals" (**ie.** Singaporeans and Malaysians) than expatriates would consider aspects of Singapore English acceptable. Rejection by expatriates would indicate violation of Standard English; acceptance by "locals" would show that the language item had taken root in Singapore.

WHAT DID THE STUDY FIND?

Generally speaking, "locals" accepted many more sentences with errors than expatriates, the local non-educationists being more "tolerant" than the educationists.

Older, more qualified and experienced educationists tended to be more optimistic about standards of Singapore English than the younger teachers. About 90% of those questioned thought that standards of English would and should be improved through written exercises.

- Those interviewed said that children should read more, that there should be better teacher-training provision and that there was not enough emphasis in schools on grammar (or different ways of presenting grammar).
- Local teachers thought that expatriate teachers were not necessarily better language teachers.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

- Reading by pupils should be encouraged.

Editors of newspapers, magazines, local literature and textbooks should try to maintain high standards of English.

Correctness in formal written English is necessary in Singapore for international communication. Teachers of English as well as those teaching other subjects in English should therefore pay more attention to the correct use of English. It is essential, particularly at the primary school level, for this to be done.

- A list of errors ranked according to their degree of seriousness should be compiled for English teachers.

Full title of the Report: "The Reception and Impact of Some Stigmatized Features of Singapore Written English". (A copy of the Report is in the RELC Library)

SOME DEVELOPMENTAL ASPECTS OF FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

by
DR ISA MOYNIHAN

Interference from the mother tongue is not an important factor for younger children who are learning a second language.

Abstract
by
Dr Isa Moynihan

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

100 schoolchildren, aged 7 to 8 years, were tape-recorded individually while talking to an adult. 60 of the children were native-English-speakers, and the rest were children whose home language was Samoan.

The purpose of the study was to find out:

Whether the native-speakers were still finding difficulty with certain areas of English grammar;

Whether the non-native-speakers made different mistakes from those of the native-speakers and, if so,

Whether these mistakes were caused by interference from the children's first language, or whether they were due to other factors as well.

Similar studies have been carried out in the USA and are now (1982) being repeated in Singapore.

It is possible to relate language development to age level by using what is called a developmental grammar. This grammar covers several areas of language, viz.

Determiners and Pronouns,

Main Verb and Secondary Verb (Infinitives, Participles, Verbal Nouns),

Conjunctions,

Negatives and Question Forms,

This grammar is easy to use because it can be shown on a single page in the form of a grid. It lists all the words or the structures in each area, and it gives a weighting which shows the order of development. For example, the conjunction "and" has a weighting of 3 because it develops early in native-speaking children, but conjunctions like "as soon as" and "as if" are given the top weighting of 8 because children do not master their use until much later.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE RESULTS?

Both groups of children made exactly the same kind of mistake in certain areas. Therefore the mistakes were age-related, and part of normal language development.

The most important of these areas was the Main Verb. The most frequent mistake was to use the incorrect form of the simple past tense and past participle of irregular verbs, e.g.

They used:

threwed
threwn
hreaked
bitten
ranned

Instead of:

threw
thrown
broke
hit
run

Only the Samoan children, however, made the following mistakes:

Omitting the auxiliary is and are when using the present continuous form, e.g.

she sitting, they building, he driving.

- Not sounding the -ed of the regular past tense, e.g.

lift, bump, crash, start, punch.

Omitting the -s which marks the third person singular, e.g.

he say, she start, he tell.

WHAT DO THE RESULTS SUGGEST?

That certain mistakes are made by all pupils learning English - no matter what their mother tongue is. (All of the mistakes described above, for example, are also made by Singapore children.)

That children have to learn and practise the forms of the irregular past tense and past participle. The practice should be oral as well as written.

- That similar practice should be given in all the forms of be (am, is, are, was, were, being).
- That children sometimes do not hear the -s and -ed endings in ordinary speech, when they are often combined with the sound which follows.

Examples:

he walked to the shop, she dropped the money,
he's sitting down, she's singing.

That many later mistakes in "grammar" are due to difficulty in sorting out and practising the sounds which mark tense, number, possession, etc.

(The sound s/z, for example, has six different grammatical functions!)

That listening and speaking are, therefore, very important in the first two years at primary school. For many children this is their first exposure to spoken English and for many their only opportunity to practise will be in the classroom.

DEVELOPING A WORD LIST FOR ENGLISH-MEDIUM PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN SINGAPORE

by BELINDA NG CHAY BUAY & AMY TAN QUEE NEO

Abstract by Ooi Hui Pin

Research studies on vocabulary show that textbooks tend to make pupils learn a great number of words which will be of little use to them. Teaching time can be saved if there is a list of most frequently used words, as the most frequently used words are the words worth teaching most. This list should be based on the speaking and reading vocabularies of children.

ADVANTAGES OF A WORD LIST

This list will

- . provide teachers with a ready selection of words to be taught for permanent retention.
- . provide inexperienced teachers with a check list.
- serve as a source list for teaching and testing basic sight words.
- serve as a guide for writing programmed materials or self-instructional materials.

An examination of well-known word lists indicates that these lists are not strictly relevant to Singapore schools.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The study involved

- a count of words most frequently used in 16 English, Mathematics and Science textbooks recommended for Primary 1 and Primary 2 classes in Singapore schools.
- . a count of vocabulary items available. This was the result of a test based on 16 "centres of interest", given to 400 Primary 6 children from 6 schools.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE RESULTS?

NEGATIVE POINTS

- It was not possible to compile a single list.
- . No agreement could be reached on the ranking of words in order of difficulty.

No attempt was made to divide words into groups for various levels in the primary school.

The ability to learn vocabulary would vary from child to child.

Any division of words into groups would only serve as a guide.

POSITIVE POINTS

Two word lists have been compiled:

- A Word Frequency List which represents the vocabulary pupils are most receptive to at the Primary 1 and Primary 2 levels in English-medium schools in Singapore. This list is made up of words which Primary 1 and 2 pupils must be familiar with in their school work.
- A Word List compiled from the study of the vocabulary which Primary 6 pupils in English-medium schools are capable of producing. This list consists of words easily learnt and easily recalled relating to their centres of interest.

These two lists complement each other and are equally important in the development of a Common Word List.

A copy of the Report, "Developing a Word List for English-medium Primary Schools in Singapore", is in the RELC Library.

THE BASIC VOCABULARY SKILLS OF PRE-UNIVERSITY CHINESE-MEDIUM STUDENTS

by TAN SICK HOON

Abstract by T A Kirkpatrick

This report describes an experiment designed to find out whether non-English medium students could be helped to learn the meanings of new words by presenting new words in a variety of contexts.

HOW WAS THE EXPERIMENT CARRIED OUT?

- 1 A questionnaire was sent to 75 English (EL2) teachers at 4 junior colleges and 8 pre-university centres. The questionnaire sought to find out
 - . how much time the teachers spent in teaching vocabulary each week, and
 - . what methods they used to teach vocabulary.
- 2 Students at the junior colleges and pre-university centres were then asked to take a vocabulary test.
- 3 About 70 students of the original group were then divided into 2 groups. One group was given a series of 8 lessons spread over 10 days while the second group received no instruction at all. These 8 lessons taught students how to infer the meanings of words from a variety of contextual clues. These included the contextual clues of
 - . cause and effect,
 - . comparison and contrast,
 - . restatement,
 - . summary, and
 - . experience.
- 4 The students from both groups were then given another vocabulary test.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE RESULTS?

The group of students who had received no instruction showed no improvement in their scores in the second vocabulary test over the first vocabulary test.

- Of the students who had been given the series of 8 lessons, the ones who did best in the first vocabulary test did only marginally better in the second vocabulary test.

BUT

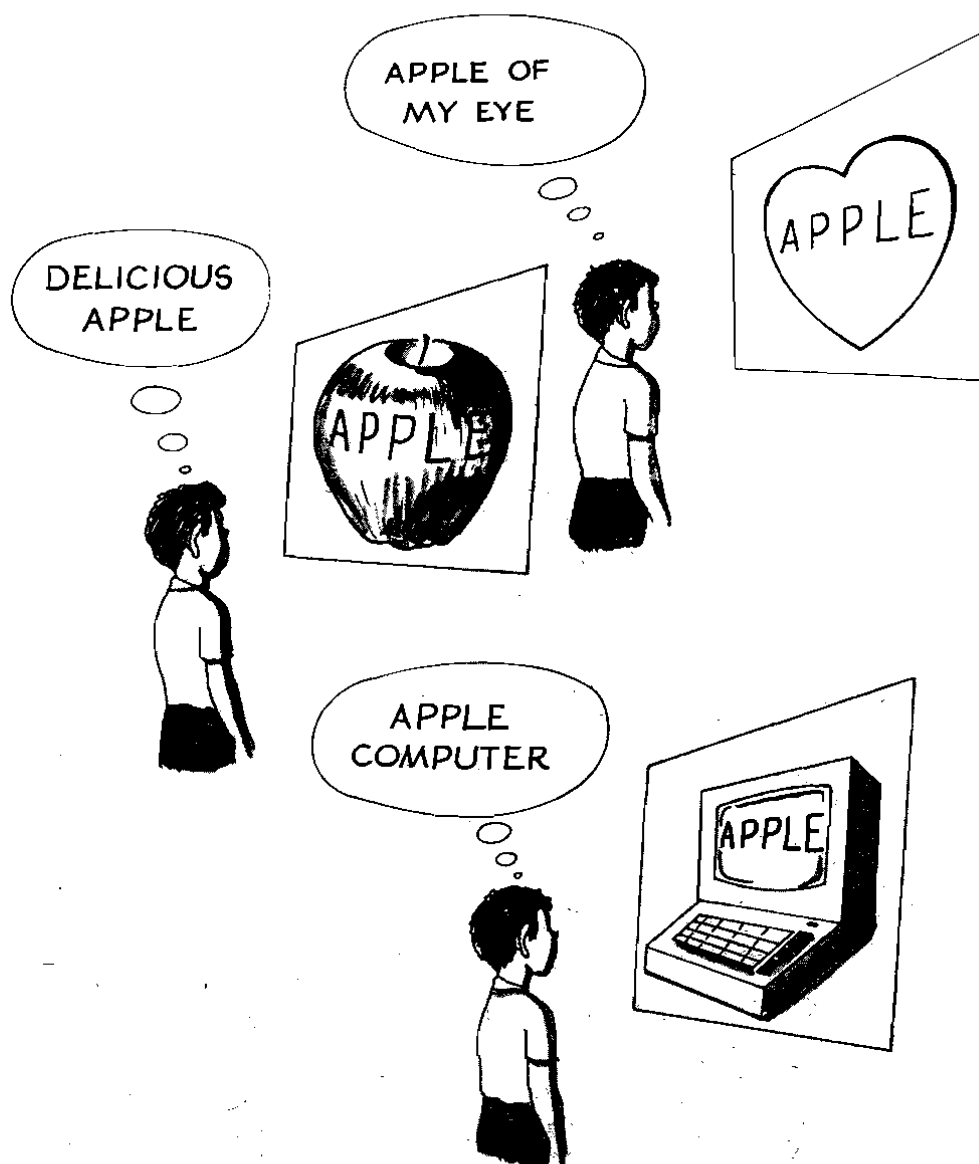
- The ones who had done badly in the first vocabulary test did much better in the second vocabulary test.

WHAT WERE THE CONCLUSIONS?

The ability of weaker students to infer the meanings of new words is significantly increased after they have received lessons on how to infer meanings using contextual clues.

- One of the signs of language proficiency is being able to infer meanings of new words by using contextual clues.

Teachers should always teach words in context rather than in isolation.



FACTORS AFFECTING THE LEARNER OF ENGLISH IN A SEMI-RURAL SCHOOL

by
PRKIR MAIDEEN BIN ABDUL MAJID

"Since the weakness in the language is basically the result of a poor reading habit, it is vital that the reading habit is further encouraged. Children should be motivated and not compelled to read. This area should be given top priority at school . . . Once we can kindle their interest for reading, all other problems will slowly vanish." (p. 28)

Abstract by Christopher Fry

Pakir Maideen was concerned about the low pass rate in English at his school and, therefore, conducted a survey to ascertain the underlying causes for both the pupils' failure in examinations as well as their general lack of interest in and poor motivation towards English language learning.

THE SURVEY

The survey covered the pupils of Primary 2, Princess Elizabeth Estate School, and their parents. Information about the parents and the home background was available in school records, whereas information regarding exposure to and attitudes towards English was gathered by means of a questionnaire. A total of 172 pupils and 344 parents took part in the survey.

THE FINDINGS

- The majority of parents held unskilled or semi-skilled jobs and had not previously achieved a high level of education. They belonged in the main to the low income group and tended to live either in 1 - 3 room HDB flats or in government quarters, private rooms or wooden huts.
- At home, in the neighbourhood and the playground, pupils preferred to use their ethnic language or dialect rather than English.
- Pupils, however, listened to and watched a number of TV programmes in English. These were mainly American cartoons or adventure series.
- Pupils read very few books written in English.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- As parents have great influence on their children's language development, there should be greater liaison between parents and the school. They could work out plans with teachers to improve their children's studies.
- The teacher should pay more attention to ways of motivating children to learn English. Audio-visual aids can be of help in this respect.
- Reading is of paramount importance in language development and, therefore, should be given top priority at school.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

- 1 English will be used by pupils for formal purposes specifically related to their education in school and not in intimate and informal situations. When English is used in the classroom, it should be of a fairly formal variety (~~not~~ "Singlish") and be related to the other subjects (eg. Science, Mathematics) studied in English.
- 2 Teachers must face the fact that English is not commonly used outside the classroom. If the only exposure to English is going to be in the classroom, then the organisation of lessons must be much more efficient. This means
 - moving away from teacher-dominated lessons so that the pupils, not the teacher, get the practice in using English;
 - using activity-based lessons (possibly incorporating audio-visual aids) to motivate children to learn English without realising it. At the primary level there should be no formal ~~grammar~~ teaching.
- 3 Contrary to what Pakir Maideen says, reading is not primary in language learning since reading assumes the prior acquisition of oral skills. The Primary Syllabus for English quite rightly emphasises the importance of oral work. Reading will support and build upon this.
- 4 Time and space should be set aside in the classroom for children to read silently and without interruption. A classroom library can be set up so that children can select from different titles.

Full title of the Report: "Factors Affecting the Learner of English in a Semi-Rural School in Singapore". (A copy of the Report is in the RELC Library)

FACTORS AFFECTING LANGUAGE LEARNING

by TCH TONG JIT

Abstract by Joan Cardno

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The study involved two contrasting groups of pupils selected from Primary 5 and 6.

Group A consisted of 11 Chinese pupils. They were all "repeaters" - 5 of them from the Chinese stream and 6 from the English stream. They all failed in English language, but 9 of them passed their Chinese language in the final school examination the previous year. For purposes of contrast, Group B consisted of 21 Chinese pupils and 1 Indian pupil. These were considered bright pupils. All of them passed English and Chinese in the final term school examination the previous year.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS? WHAT FACTORS SEEM TO AFFECT THE LEARNING OF A SECOND LANGUAGE?

Group A pupils were the "repeaters" who had failed English language.

What could be the causes?

- . Language background.

Unsuccessful bilingualism.

These children appear to have been able to master Chinese but have not been successful with English. They do not appear to have low IQ's.

- . Linguistic environment.

At home they use **dialects** and they hear Mandarin at school. They do **not** have much opportunity to practise their school languages after school.

- . Socio-economic status.

The children come from homes of low **socio-economic** status and belong to large **families**. The parents are burdened with the **responsibilities** of a large family.

Attitudes of parents towards education.

The children are free to do what they like at home. Parents appear to think of education as confined to the school only.

-Attitudes towards English language.

The children think that English will give them better prospects. Those with Chinese-educated parents think Chinese is easier to learn.

Reading habits.

The parents and teachers do not appear to be fully aware of the importance of cultivating the reading habit. Their homes do not have story-books and in school they do not make full use of the library.

.Methods of learning languages.

The children were not equipped with the strategies and techniques of language learning.

Motivation.

The children were found to have low expectations of themselves and were not well motivated by parents and teachers.

Attention and care.

Parents were handicapped in English and unable to help their children. The teachers were occupied in class room teaching of large classes and this prevented close relationships with the children. The children, therefore, kept the problems to themselves and the problems remained unsolved.

- Teachers can do better.

Children with poor academic results need more help to solve their problems. It appears that pupils seldom seek help from their teachers.

WHAT CAN BE DONE IN THE SCHOOLS?

Teachers could look at:

- . the language environment and its effects on language acquisition and think of ways of compensating for this.
- . the time given to learning languages and perhaps work out ways of increasing pupils' exposure to the language.
- the suitability of syllabuses for language teaching and learning.
- . the effectiveness of current teaching methods.

Full title of the Report: "A Survey of a Small Number of Children Aimed to Isolate some of the Factors that Affect an Individual's Language Learning Process." (A copy of the Report is in the RELC Library)

THE LANGUAGE PROBLEMS OF CHINESE-MEDIUM STUDENTS CONVERTING TO AN ENGLISH-MEDIUM PRE-UNIVERSITY PROGRAMME

by DOROTHY NG IK KIN

Abstract by Winnie Ng

Dorothy Ng looked into some of the factors influencing the learning of English as a second language. She hoped that the reasons for high as well as poor achievement in English could be identified, studied and made use of to help the poor achievers improve in English.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The study was carried out in two schools, involving 54 Pre-University Two Chinese-medium students who received either a P1 or P2 grade in English Language (EL2) in the GCE 'O' Level examination or passed the special English language test given to them by the Ministry of Education.

These students were asked to fill in an eight-page questionnaire in English specially designed for this study. To make sure that the students understood the questionnaire thoroughly, a bilingual teacher translated (orally) the English sentences into Mandarin for them before they started writing.

The items in the questionnaire were grouped under the following broad categories:

- Exposure to English
- Attitude towards English and the culture of English-speaking people.
- Amount of motivation for learning English.
- Study habits.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE RESULTS?

There is a definite link between the degree of exposure to English and language achievement.

A favourable attitude towards English and the culture of English speakers leads to better achievement. This attitude, however, is often affected by the home background of the learner.

Students who are willing to put in more effort in studying English tend to reach a higher level of achievement.

Good language learners have their own methods or "strategies" in learning, and those who have a more positive attitude to study are better achievers in English.

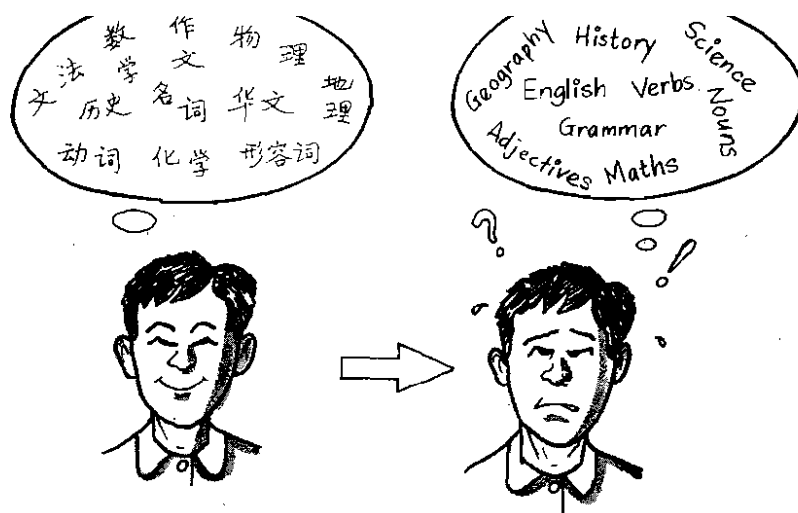
WHAT CAN THE TEACHERS OF CHINESE-MEDIUM STUDENTS DO?

We should not only focus on improving language teaching methods and materials but also make an effort to help the students develop a personal interest in learning the language by highlighting the interesting and useful aspects of English culture.

We must give the classroom activities a meaningful context so that the students get a chance to practise using English in more realistic situations rather than learning to use sentence patterns and rules of grammar.

It is important to have a programme of exposure to English within the classroom, for we cannot do anything about the amount of exposure the students have at home. This can be done through films, taped talks and plays, games, role-playing activities and magazines. The emphasis should be on enjoyment.

Lastly, we must be sympathetic and understanding in order to help these students overcome their problems.



Full title of the Report: "A Study of the Language Problems of Chinese-Medium Students Converting to an English-Medium Pre-University Programme."
(A copy of the Report is in the RELC Library)

QUESTIONING STRATEGIES AND PUPIL RESPONSE

by
KOH LENG LENG

"How the teacher behaves inevitably affects what the pupils learn. This is so because the teacher determines the pattern of pupil behaviour in the class. The teaching strategies he adopts are important factors which determine the success or failure of teaching."

Abstract by V Saravanan

WHY WAS THE STUDY DONE?

Some teachers label their pupils as intelligent, diligent, and cooperative or slow, lazy and uncooperative on the basis of verbal participation in class. Such descriptions of pupil behaviour are often seen as separate from teacher behaviour. A study was carried out to find out to what extent the teacher's style of teaching had an effect on verbal communication with the pupils and pupil behaviour.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

- One teacher was observed teaching English Language to three Secondary 3 classes rated as Good, Average and Below Average respectively.

Audiotapes were used to record the teaching strategies employed.

- Models of the teacher's questioning strategies and pupils' participation were used to analyse their performance.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE RESULTS?

The highest amount of pupil talk took place when

- the teacher did not start off asking questions
- the teacher based her questions on pupil talk

- 2 There was very little pupil participation when
the teacher lectured.
the teacher's influence was rigid.

- 3 Pupils were highly motivated when
- the teacher used praise as a strategy.
 - the teacher used and acknowledged pupils' ideas expressed during the lessons.
 - the teacher allowed pupils to correct their friends' errors and their own errors.
- 4 There were more factual than reasoning questions.
- Reasoning questions were asked only in the higher ability classes.
- Most of the questions drew chorus answers. They left no room for pupils to reflect and express their own ideas. The answers suggested rote learning or mechanical responses.

WHAT CAN THE TZACHER DO?

All of us should allow pupils to carry out more independent and less teacher-controlled work.

Pupils will find lessons more stimulating and challenging if we use more r e a s o n i n g s in good and weak classes.

- . We could encourage more pupil participation by encouraging and accepting pupils' ideas.

We need to plan small group discussion sessions so that pupils become less teacher-dependent and discover their own strengths and weaknesses.

Full title of the Report: "A Study of Teaching Strategies of a Specific Teacher and ~~How~~ These Affect Classroom Interaction in Different Graded Classes."
(A copy of the Report is in the RELC Library)

STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN CLASS AND THE QUALITY OF WRITTEN WORK

by TEO CHOON LUNG



Abstract by Goh Soo Tian

Most teachers would like to get their pupils to take a more active part in class discussion. Is there a direct relationship between a pupil's participation in class discussion and his or her written work? What are some factors which contribute to pupils' active verbal participation in class? These are the main questions which this study tried to answer.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The study involved 22 students in a re-university Two class in a junior college. A 90-minute lesson on the General Paper was taped in which the class discussed the topic, "The most important kinds of teaching and where they take place". The transcript was then analysed using a system developed by Arno Bellack to analyse language in the classroom.

Students were scored according to the number of times they spoke and divided into High and Low Participation groups.

For performance in their written work, an average mark was calculated, based on compositions and comprehension exercises done in class and in the first year final examination. Each student's verbal participation score was correlated with his score in written work.

Information on pupils' background was collected after the lesson through a questionnaire.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE FINDINGS?

The study showed that those who do well in their written work are not necessarily those who participate actively in class.

Interpreting the results in the light of the students' home background, the author found that those students who use English most frequently at home are not necessarily the active participants in class.

As expected, the study showed generally that those who write good English also speak good English.

Although those who use English most frequently at home are not necessarily the active participants in class, they generally do well in written English.

The father's level of education does not seem to have any significant relationship to the degree of verbal participation of the student in class.

However, the father's medium of education relates positively with the student's verbal participation in class. Expectedly, a higher percentage of students in the High Participation Group have fathers who are English-educated

The father's level of education has a high correlation with the quality of the student's written work. All the high scorers in written work have fathers who are educated to at least the secondary school level.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

Teachers should try to ensure that their pupils speak good English, since there is a positive correlation between good spoken English and good written English.

Teachers teaching at other levels can also carry out their own studies to see if their conclusions agree with those arrived at in this study.

In particular, teachers can identify the active participants and non-participants in their classes and try to see what factors in these pupils' home background could have any direct relation to the situation.

Full title of the Report: "A Study of the Relationship Between Students' Participation in Class and the Quality of Written Work". (A copy of the Report is in the RELC Library)

A COMPARISON OF COMPOSITION MARKING TECHNIQUES

by NAJESON SUPPIAH

Abstract by Glenda Smith

Suppiah has tried to find a way of making the marking of compositions in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) more reliable, while at the same time keeping the system workable cost-wise and time-wise. He identifies 2 ways of marking: (a) analytic in which various aspects of writing such as content, arrangement, expression and mechanics are isolated and the marker awards marks for each or deducts marks from given totals, and (b) impressionistic in which markers are asked to award marks on a fixed scale of points, basing their judgement on their impression of the performance of the candidate as a whole.

The study aimed at answering these questions:

- 1 What degree of marker reliability does the present system of analytic marking provide? Answer: Very low.
- 2 Would an impressionistic system of marking, or a combination of an analytic and an impressionistic system, with several people marking each script achieve higher marker reliability? Answer: Yes.
- 3 If (2) is true, would this be feasible cost-wise and time-wise for the Singapore PSLE? Answer: Yes.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

A try-out was conducted over one and a half days.

Teachers from 97 primary schools took part.

7 different marking schemes were used: 2 analytic and 5 impressionistic.

- . A set of 25 scripts was marked under each system using each of the 7 schemes.

3 minutes per script was allotted for each impressionistic scheme and 15 minutes for the analytic schemes.

The scripts were a random sample from the 3000 scripts taken from the 1970 PSLE.

The scripts were handwritten and cyclostyled so that each marker could have a fresh copy of each script.

The marks were recorded on tally sheets and the results analysed by computer.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

Impressionistic marking is time-saving; in fact three assessments (with a proportionate increase in reliability) would be possible in the time taken for a single analytic assessment.

Whatever system is used, reliability increased with the number of markers per script.

- . The greatest increase in reliability comes from the increase from 1 to 2 markers; a little less from 2 to 3. After that the benefits are negligible.

The most reliable system was an analytical assessment of expression.

- . The least reliable was an impressionistic assessment of punctuation and spelling, with an impressionistic assessment of sentence structure and vocabulary and grammar close behind. This seems to indicate that an impressionistic assessment of features that can be measured quantitatively, eg. punctuation and spelling, is not successful - though this may have been because the markers were trying something they had never done before.

On the other hand, an analytic assessment of content was less reliable than an impressionistic assessment and it took three times as long.

In impressionistic assessments, an overall single assessment is more reliable than a number of separate assessments for components such as content, arrangement and style.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ABOUT IT?

Suppiah offered two alternatives, though one was seen to be much more acceptable in the Singapore context.

- . Each script should be marked by 4 markers: 3 to assess for content on an overall impressionistic system, marking on a 5-point scale; 1 to assess for expression on an analytic system, marking on a 20-point scale.
- . The markers should be organised in groups of 6 each, with 3 markers in each group using one of the two systems. All the 3 impression markers would mark each script and hand it on to only 1 of the 3 analytical markers, who would require more time.

This would mean that in a six-hour marking session the group would have marked 180 scripts - as opposed to 75 under the present system.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE TEACHER?

If you're involved in PSLE marking, it will take less time and be more reliable.

But remember

Classroom composition lessons are not examinations - they are opportunities to help the pupils do better, to encourage them to write creatively.

Detailed error-hunting is no longer the chief object of the exercise, so pupils need not suffer the depressing effects of over-marking. Instead, the teacher should analyse his pupils' errors and deal with them in planned remedial lessons.

Full title of the Report: "A Comparison of Composition Marking Techniques for the English Language Examination in the Primary School Leaving Examination (English-medium) in Singapore", (A copy of the Report is in the RELC Library)