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Teaching Reading Comprehension in Lower Secondary: An Examination of the New English Syllabus

Ng Chiew Hong

Introduction

The new English Language Syllabus 2001[primary and secondary] (Ministry of Education, 2001a) sets the directions for the teaching and learning of the English Language in Singapore for the new millennium. In 1997, PM Goh announced a “fundamental review of curriculum and assessment system to see how we can better develop the creative thinking skills and learning skills required for the future” (Goh, 1997). The syllabuses designed by the Curriculum Planning and Development Division, Ministry of Education, have been revised to incorporate the three MOE initiatives on Thinking Skills, Information Technology and National Education.

Six principles of language learning and teaching underline the new English Language syllabus at both the primary and secondary levels: *Learner Centredness*, *Process Orientation*, *Integration*, *Contextualisation*, *Spiral Progression* and *Interaction*. These principles are translated into biennial *learning outcomes* to be achieved. Learning outcomes are defined as “the expected attainment targets...which are specific, measurable, and/or demonstrable, attainable, relevant and time-referenced” (Ministry of Education, 2001a, p. 5). These are to guide teachers in their teaching approaches, lessons and curriculum materials so they can cater to learners’ needs and abilities, as the learner is considered the centre of the learning process.

To support the syllabus and provide additional guidance, the Curriculum Planning and Development Division (English Language) has also compiled the “Guide to the English Language syllabus 2001” [Primary 1–4] (Ministry of Education, 2001c) and “Guide to the English Language syllabus 2001” [Lower

Secondary] (Ministry of Education, 2001b). These Guides are sure to have a significant effect on the teaching of English Language, as teachers will refer to them closely, since approaches, skills and strategies are outlined in greater detail than in the new syllabus.

This article will look specifically at the teaching activities and strategies prescribed in the lower secondary syllabus and Guide and consider the implied theoretical assumptions and the implications of these for teaching reading comprehension for lower secondary.

Review

Reading Comprehension in the New Syllabus

According to Tierney and Readance (2000), the basic goals of reading are “to enable children to gain an understanding of the world and of themselves, to develop appreciations and interests, to find solutions to their personal and group problems, and to develop strategies by which they can become independent comprehenders” (p. 318). They go on to say that the major goal of instruction should therefore be “the provision of learning activities that will enable students to think about and react to what they read — in short, to read for meaning” (Ibid). This view of reading emphasizes understanding, thinking and problem-solving; and this is the view adopted by the new syllabus. The Guide states: “In teaching for understanding, teachers have to explain to pupils how reading for meaning and understanding constitutes a problem-solving activity which requires readers to interact with their texts” (Ministry of Education, 2001b, pp. 4–19), and this involves using several reading strategies at the same time.

The new emphasis on reading as a problem solving activity and the need for teachers to develop students’ cognitive strategies for reading can be seen in the larger context of the MOE Thinking Programme for schools (launched in 1998).

The Thinking Programme (Ministry of Education, 1999) adopts Marzano’s Dimensions of Learning framework (Marzano, 1992) as its “heart”. This framework represents an attempt to translate thirty years of research on the learning process into a practical model for curriculum, instruction and assessment (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. i). Core thinking skills to be developed are *focusing, remembering, organizing, analyzing, generating, integrating and evaluating*. Key strategies have been identified that facilitate the teaching of thinking — questioning, co-operative learning, and active learning. As part of the programme, students are

also taught the language of thinking, the establishing of positive attitudes and perceptions about learning, and the promotion of the habits of critical, creative and self-regulated thinking and learning (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. ii).

It is interesting to see how the skills and strategies highlighted in the new syllabus and the Guide match up with the general thinking skills outlined by Marzano. To this end, a comparison has been between the stated Learning Outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2001a, pp. 38–46) of the new syllabus and the skills/strategies in the Guide with Marzano's Dimensions of Learning and Core Thinking Skills (1992). The findings are represented in Table 1.

The table reveals that the learning outcomes do match Marzano's thinking model fairly closely, and that reading as "a problem solving activity" (Ministry of Education, 2001b, pp. 4–19) is indeed conceptualized in the new syllabus, as the development of thinking skills.

Reading Skills and Strategies as Thinking Skills

At this juncture, it will be useful to look in some detail at the Guide, where the learning outcomes for teaching reading comprehension are translated into reading strategies. These include: *using prior knowledge, making predictions, skimming for gist, skimming for details, making inferences, evaluating ideas, summarizing and self monitoring* (Ministry of Education, 2001b, p. 4–2). What are the underpinning theoretical assumptions for these teaching strategies? Are thinking skills implicated here, too?

According to the Guide, teachers are to show pupils how to "use background information, emotions, past experiences to predict/test/confirm/reject/modify their ideas as they read a text" (Ministry of Education, 2001b, p. 4–2). This activation of prior knowledge has its theoretical basis in the schema theory. Questioning, K-W-L (What I Know, What I Want to Know, What I Learnt) and semantic mapping are highlighted as strategies for activating students' prior knowledge (Ministry of Education, 2001b, p. 4–5). According to Marzano *et al.* (1988) K-W-L is a thinking strategy for teaching goal-setting which is subsumed under Focusing skills. Tierney and Readance (2000) also categorize K-W-L as one of the twelve reading strategies for the "improvement of reading comprehension and critical thinking, since the strategies focus upon "inside the head" processes" (p. 318). Semantic mapping "activates pupils' prior knowledge of a topic and key vocabulary necessary for understanding a text (Ministry of Education, 2001b, p. 4).

Table 1.
Learning outcomes as thinking skills.

Dimensions of Learning and the core thinking skills (Marzano)	Learning outcomes (MOE's new syllabus)	Skills & Strategies (MOE's Guide)
ACQUIRING & INTEGRATING KNOWLEDGE Focusing Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying Objectives Defining the Problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3 — Solve problems imaginatively and creatively e.g. identifying problems (pp. 42–43). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> K-W-L- teaching goal-setting (subsumed under Focusing skills)
Information Gathering Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formulating Questions Points of View 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3 — Give reasons to support a response/point of view/ an opinion (pp. 42–43). 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3 — Gather information using search options (e.g. subject, key words) (pp. 42–43). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Directed-Reading-Thinking-Activity (DRTA)
Remembering Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Associating Categorising 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1a — Recall, talk and write about books read (p. 38). 8.1, 8.2 & 8.3 — Recall information or details about descriptions, examples, explanations, visuals, opinions, characters, events, setting (p. 41). 	
EXTENDING AND REFINING KNOWLEDGE Organizing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comparing Classifying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3 — List, sequence, compare, contrast, classify information (pp. 42–43). 	
Analyzing Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyzing Parts & Whole Analyzing Patterns & Relationships Identifying Errors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7b — Use reading strategies to construct meaning through using knowledge of cohesive devices and text organization (p. 40). 7g — Use reading strategies to construct meaning through scanning for details (p. 40). 8.1, 8.2 & 8.3 — Identify gist/main ideas through using title, headings, sub-headings, key words, visuals, topic sentences, characters, settings, plot (p. 41). 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3 — Organize, summarize and synthesize information using a variety of organizational patterns: sequence, comparison, contrast, classification, cause-effect, chronology (pp. 42–43). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summarizing Scanning for details Questioning.

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Dimensions of Learning and the core thinking skills (Marzano)	Learning outcomes (MOE's new syllabus)	Skills & Strategies (MOE's Guide)
Generating skills Generating Possibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inferring: Induction • Inferring: Deduction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3 — Identify and analyse techniques used in different media to achieve a variety of purposes (pp. 42–43). • 7c — Use reading strategies to construct meaning through using contextual clues (pp. 40). • 8.1, 8.2 & 8.3 — Infer and draw conclusions about characters, their actions, motives, events, settings, culture, meaning, intention and meaning using contextual clues and prior knowledge (p. 41). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making inferences • Questioning • Bloom's Taxonomy • Prediction
Generating skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predicting • Random Triggers • Questioning Concepts • SCAMPER • Elaborating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7d — Use reading strategies to construct meaning through using prior knowledge (p. 40). • 8.1, 8.2 & 8.3 — Make predictions about content, development of ideas/storyline using contextual clues and prior knowledge (p. 41). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DRTA • Prediction • Wordsplash • Jumbled text • Skim • Questioning
Integrating Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abstracting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7a – Use reading strategies to construct meaning through using visuals (p. 40). • 7f — Use reading strategies to construct meaning through skimming for gist (p. 40). • 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3 — Organize, summarize and synthesize information using a variety of organizational patterns (pp. 42–43). • 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3 — Abstract ideas/themes from a text (pp. 42–43). • 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3 — Establish a set of criteria for a specific purpose: to carry out/evaluate a task (pp. 42–3). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarizing • Skimming for gist
Evaluating Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing criteria & Prioritising 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3 — Solve problems imaginatively and creatively e.g. identifying problems, generate and evaluate possible solutions and choose the best option (pp. 42–43). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DRTA

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Dimensions of Learning and the core thinking skills (Marzano)	Learning outcomes (MOE's new syllabus)	Skills & Strategies (MOE's Guide)
Evaluating Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verifying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3 — Evaluate information for reasonableness of ideas, truth, relevance, exaggeration or persuasive language. Evaluate sources of information for credibility. (pp. 42–3). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluating ideas
USING KNOWLEDGE MEANINGFULLY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision-Making • Creative Problem Solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3 — Solve problems imaginatively and creatively e.g. identifying problems, generate and evaluate possible solutions and choose the best option (pp. 42–43). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DRTA
HABITS OF MIND <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative Thinking • Critical Thinking • Self-regulated Thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7e — Use reading strategies to construct meaning through monitoring and confirming understanding of texts read (pp. 40). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • K-W-L • DRTA • Metacognition or Self monitoring • SQ3R • Active Comprehension • Three-Level Guide

The Guide asks teachers to “emphasize (to students) that good readers constantly make predictions and revise them as they interact with their texts” (Ministry of Education, 2001b, pp. 4–6). In teaching prediction, teachers are to use strategies like Wordsplash, jumbled text and DRTA. Marzano *et al.* regard the skill of predicting as a special type of inference (1988, p. 100). In making predictions, the teacher generally has students predict in connection with skimming titles and subtitles, examining graphics and illustrations, or responding to introductory statements. These steps activate prior knowledge and help establish a purpose for reading (Marzano *et al.*, 1988, p. 101).

According to Marzano *et al.*, making inferences is a thinking skill which “involve(s) using prior knowledge to add information to what is given” (1988, p. 97), and this is emphasized in the Guide. Summarizing can also be considered a thinking skill, as it “involves at least three cognitive activities — condensing information, selecting what is important (and discarding what is not), and combining original text propositions” (Marzano *et al.*, 1988, p. 104).

The emphasis on thinking in reading comprehension is highlighted in the Guide by the fact that questioning seems to be the main strategy advocated for teaching the activation of prior knowledge, the making of predictions and inferences. Questioning is recommended at both pre-reading and post-reading stages. When used as a pre-reading activity, “questioning serves to draw out from pupils the concepts they currently have, the gaps in their knowledge and even their misinformation” (Ministry of Education, 2001b, p. 4–4). As a post-reading activity, questioning “helps pupils to clarify and confirm their understanding of the texts they read” (Ministry of Education, 2001b, p. 4–4). The Guide states explicitly that “Questioning and dialogue between teacher and pupil and between pupil and pupil constitute a critical element for creating and encouraging thinking. Questions that probe for thoughtful answers extend and deepen pupils’ thinking” (Ministry of Education, 2001b, p. 4–4). In the Guide questioning based on Bloom’s Taxonomy is highlighted as a strategy to be used for the making of inferences. Marzano *et al.* (1992) also see the importance of questioning in promoting inference and analyzing skills.

DRTA (Directed Reading and Thinking Approach) is another strategy recommended for teaching prediction. The Guide points out that DRTA can be used as pre-reading or during reading activities to:

- teach pupils reading skills such as literal, inferential and evaluative comprehension skills,
- model thinking processes for pupils,
- direct pupils’ thinking as they read a text (Ministry of Education, 2001b, pp. 4–8).

According to Tierney and Readance (2000), DRTA is intended to develop students’ ability to read critically and reflectively as it equips the reader with the ability to determine purpose for reading (i.e. establishing criteria); extract, comprehend and assimilate information; suspend judgments and make decisions based on information gleaned from reading (p. 21).

Even the term “Active comprehension” used in the Guide, under the auspices of “Self Monitoring”, is based upon the premise that “Reading is a highly interactive process and good readers constantly ask questions and search for answers

before, during and after reading" (Ministry of Education, 2001b, pp. 4–20). The type of questioning suggested here is "self-questioning" which "makes readers think further about what they have read and helps them to understand their texts better" (Ministry of Education, 2001b, pp. 4–20).

Metacognitive "self monitoring" is now seen as an important strategy in the teaching of reading for understanding. Marzano (1992), refers to this as this as "being aware of your own thinking" (p. 133). The Guide stresses that "Good readers constantly apply self-monitoring strategies such as reading aloud, re-reading and reading on to modify their interpretations of a text" (Ministry of Education, 2001b, pp. 4–19). Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Revise (SQ3R); Active Comprehension and Three-Level Guide are approaches designed to develop these strategies.

From this survey it should be obvious that the skills and strategies recommended in the Guide promote reading as a thinking-focused activity. Even the strategies of skimming for gist — to help readers identify the main ideas or obtain an overview of a text on their first reading (Ministry of Education, 2001b, pp. 4–9) — and scanning for details to locate specific information (Ministry of Education, 2001b, pp. 4–10) can be subsumed under Marzano's generating and analyzing skills respectively. Marzano (1992) deems Self-Regulated Thinking, Critical Thinking and Creative Thinking as "attitudes and perceptions" which will permeate virtually every academic task students undertake (p. 134), and that "virtually all of the extending and refining activities are under critical thinking" (p. 134).

Discussion

Given the bias towards thinking, teachers implementing the new syllabus for reading comprehension need to have a strong grounding in the teaching of thinking skills. Teachers are also required to have an understanding of reading theories and strategies for their teaching, as the new syllabus is advocating the use of a range of strategies. If the new syllabus is to be successfully implemented, we need to find out if teachers have the requisite skills or strategies and knowledge, and whether their beliefs about the teaching of reading match their actual teaching practices, or pedagogy. Besides, with the change in the syllabus, teachers now have to independently decide on the textbooks to be used. To make wise choices, teachers need good knowledge of the thinking and reading strategies delineated in the new syllabus and the Guide.

If teachers have not been trained to utilize reading strategies effectively, one solution might be to follow Farrell's suggestion (2001) and have "follow-up-in-service courses that focus in a practical way on how to implement reading strategy instructions to give teachers a fuller understanding and enhanced skills in implementing strategy instruction" (Farrell, 2001 p. 642).

Another approach to In-service training is Cochran-Smith and Lytle's *knowledge-of-practice approach*. This entails professional sharing through formal or informal discussions, seminars and workshops where "teachers, invariably in community settings, construct their own knowledge of practice through deliberate inquiry, which may well involve ideas and experiences that emerge from their own practice as well as those codified as formal knowledge within the profession" (cited in Hoffman & Pearson, 2000, p. 37).

As Farrell (2001) reminds us, "strategy instruction for reading comprehension takes time" (p. 643). However, if the principle of *spiral progression* is implemented faithfully, i.e. if reading skills and strategies are 'taught and revised at increasing levels of difficulty and sophistication' (Ministry of Education, 2001a, p. 4), teachers will be reinforcing the suggested strategies through repetition, and this will have a positive impact on students' acquisition of the reading strategies.

Pre-service training also has to take into account the need to teach reading for thinking too. For example, Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) teacher trainees are taught "reading theories and teaching strategies and concepts such as: schema theory, the role of prior knowledge, psycholinguistic theory and reading, metacognition and self-monitoring techniques, text structure, techniques to promote the use of effective strategies, vocabulary teaching, actual lesson plan writing and critiquing" (Farrell, 2001, p. 642). Top-Down/Bottom-up processing, skimming, scanning, prediction, and jigsaw reading also feature in the course. These strategies are highlighted in both the syllabus and the Guide.

Despite the positive emphasis in the new syllabus on enabling students to be active thinking readers, there is a noticeable lack of emphasis on *aesthetic* reading. While reading for literary response is given as one of the three areas of language use, the syllabus clearly emphasizes *efferent reading* — when readers adopt a stance in which they are concerned with what *information* they can "take away" from the reading (Wilhelm, 1997, p. 20). This is a functional kind of reading, different from *aesthetic reading* — where the stance is maintained for the purpose of "living

through" (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 38) an experience that is enjoyed while reading. In fact only two of the learning outcomes deal with affective reading and they are:

- Learning outcomes 7 — a) Respond to a variety of texts and demonstrate a positive attitude towards reading and language b) Enjoy the creative use of language e.g. puns and metaphors c) Respond creatively and imaginatively e.g. recreate a text from a different perspective.

Teaching for affective responses is certainly an area to be further explored and emphasized. This is where the Literature curriculum for lower secondary can play an important role to encourage reading for affective responses.

Conclusion

The learning outcomes, skills and strategies delineated in the syllabus for reading comprehension are clearly focused on thinking development. Indeed the syllabus apparently highlights what Dole, Duffy, Roehler and Pearson (1991) have termed as "general processes of reading: determining importance, summarizing information, drawing inferences, generating questions, and monitoring comprehension" (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, and Pearson, 1991). The major focus of the new reading curriculum is encapsulated by Tierney and Readance (2000) who express the view that the major goal of reading instruction is "the provision of learning activities that will enable students to think about and react to what they read — in short, to read for meaning" (p. 318). To achieve this goal, the language learning outcomes and to promote thinking skills, teachers indeed need to develop a repertoire of strategies to enhance thinking and reading comprehension skills.

Implications

1. To implement the new reading curriculum, teachers need to have a strong grounding in the teaching of thinking skills as well as an understanding of reading theories and strategies (as reflected in Table 1). They have to shift from a product-focused approach to strategies and processes.

2. Five key strategies to implement reading as a thinking model are
 - activating students' prior knowledge, through *prediction*, *K-W-L*, *semantic mapping*, *wordsplash*, *jumbled text*, *DRTA*,
 - questioning,
 - summarizing,
 - monitoring — using metacognition, *SQ3R*, *Three-Level Guide*,
 - promoting critical thinking through *DRTA*.
3. Teachers need some preparation for teaching reading-for-thinking, through pre-service and in-service courses.

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