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Local Language-related Research: Some Trends and Issues

Ho Wah Kam

Although this issue of the *Singapore Journal of Education* defies any attempt to state a "theme", common threads can be drawn from the variety of topics and approaches in the articles and research reports. A Special Section is devoted to language-related research, which is partly "thematic" in three directions, namely, (a) the socio-psychological aspects of language learning, (b) language use and varieties of English, and (c) writing.

On the subject of language-related research, one is struck by the diversity of approaches used in this area of work. Many of them will fit into the context-process-product tradition of educational research, although of late processes in the language classroom have become a popular area of study, leading to what is called classroom-oriented research. *Process* variables relate to the activities of teachers and pupils in the classroom — what teachers and pupils do — and their interactions, and the type of learning environment engendered. Such activities are meant to bring about desired changes in pupils, and any evaluation of these activities should therefore take into account the *product* variables. These product variables are the outcomes of teaching and learning which may be cognitive or affective. However, research on the relationship between process and product variables has produced rather inconsistent results. *Context* variables, as defined by Michael Dunkin and Bruce Biddle (in *The Study of Teaching*) to include such factors as community, school, classroom and pupil characteristics have been introduced into the research model, but several problems remain.

In a general sense, the context-process-product model of research would accommodate the five language-related studies reported in the Special Section. Two of the studies obtain measures of selected aspects of student characteristics (context

variables of motivation, attitude, etc) and correlate them with students' language attainment. The two studies, carried out by Soh Kay Cheng and Kamsiah Abdullah separately, have been developed within the well-known tradition of socio-psychological research started by Wallace E. Lambert and R.C. Gardner, which takes into account the affective variables that have a role in second language learning. Given the social context in which a second language is learnt, there is every reason to believe that affective factors are involved in second language learning. However, the affective domain has turned out to be problematic for research purposes. There are complex conceptual and methodological issues to be resolved, such as (a) the distinction (and the relationship) between integrative and instrumental motivation(s), (b) whether the relationship between affect and language learning is correlational or causal, and if causal, in what direction, and (c) the role that language proficiency plays in self-reported affective data.

Soh's study is an important contribution to the discussion on the methodological issues in this area of research as it confronts two of the issues (namely, whether the two types of motivation, extrinsic and intrinsic, as he calls them, are independent of each other, and whether another variable intervenes between motivation and language attainment). Soh "controls for" language proficiency in the study, as some researchers think that in a second language situation affective measures can well be proxies for measures of language proficiency.

In the main, Soh concludes that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation variables are independent of each other and that language use is a likely intervening variable, since the correlation between motivation and language proficiency drops somewhat when language use is "partialled out".

Kamsiah Abdullah's study takes a slightly different tack and is also useful within the bilingual education framework. She measures students' attitude to, and motivation in, learning both Malay and English. A conceptual distinction is made between attitude and motivation and these variables are measured separately. Students' motivation to learn English is high, confined to what she calls the "peripheral" aspects of that attribute. Such motivation is largely integrative. There is a certain amount of commonality in the motivation to learn Malay and English, i.e. students who are highly motivated are motivated to learn both languages. This can be seen as an example of what Wallace Lambert has called "additive bilingualism", which describes a situation in which a language is added on to the basic language to the advantage of both languages.

The home-school language switch phenomenon (an important context variable) is vividly outlined in Eddie Kuo's article on the patterns of language use in Singapore, based on the 1980 census data. Despite certain limitations, self-reported data (on language use) collected in censuses provide very useful information on the *relative* status of different languages used here. Although there has been a major upward shift in the use of English, the Chinese dialects still dominate in the home. The cross-tabulations used in the analyses to "control for" different variables provide a very complex picture of the linguistic profile of the population.

S Gopinathan and Vanitha Saravanan have skillfully summarized the descriptive research done on Singaporean English, but they take the reader further into considering the implications for teaching purposes. The discussion revolves around the issues of description vs prescription, accuracy vs fluency and form vs meaning (in teaching methodology). At the pedagogical level, the position is clear: the variety of English to be taught should be "internationally intelligible". In practice, teachers must adopt some sort of attitude to usage. In a situation where English is essentially taught as the students' second (non-native) language, it seems logical for teachers to adopt a more prescriptive attitude than is the case in a first language situation. At the same time, this attitude of prescription is best tempered with an awareness that languages change, especially English.

In the last few years there has been an increase in interest in studying units of language beyond the sentence, as in the analysis of discourse. Rita Skuja's study may be seen against this background of a growing interest in discourse analysis among

researchers in writing. The product that she looks at consists of compositions written by pre-university students and expatriate teachers. She is interested not only in the product (the surface structures) but also in the processes (the units of thought) which shaped these compositions. In other words, she takes an interdisciplinary approach combining cognitive psychology *and* linguistic theories of discourse. In essence, her study focuses on the effect the level of abstraction involved in the type of writing has on the nature of the composition process and the product, and also on the differences in rhetorical maturity in the essays of students and adults. A number of implications can be drawn from the findings, the most important of which is the need for composition teachers to pay attention to conventions implicit in a genre of writing, audience awareness and cognitive skill development.

The other articles in this issue fall into three sections. In the main section, David Clark and Pang Eng Fong in their article examine the effective demand for adult education (divided into what they have called the "unfinished business" variety and the "follow-up" variety) and the response to this demand made by the government and its agencies, using data collected from a study initiated in 1981. Joy Chew Oon Ai in her paper examines primary school teachers' attitudes to innovations, taking into account some of the factors which characterize school organization, namely, its authority structure and teacher culture. These factors inevitably influence teachers' perceptions of what can or cannot be done in a school. The findings, consistent with observations made on the school as a workplace by sociologists like Robert Dreeben and Dan Lortie, provide useful insights into the social organization of the school.

Elena Lui Hah Wah reports on the use of the Short Form of the Self-Esteem Inventories with a sample of secondary school students. She concludes that with some modification the self-esteem measure is suitable for use in local schools.

Finally, two research studies are briefly reported on in the third section and the final section presents three reviews of books recently published. The research report by Ong Hoon Liong and his colleagues is on the difficulty of measuring teachers' workload, while that by Poh Sui Hoi and associates describes the results derived from the norming of five well-known tests.

The articles brought together in this issue reflect the variety of research efforts taking place in Singapore. Researchers in language education have been

most prolific, although much of the work remains to be systematically disseminated. Dissemination is essential. Given the readership of *SJE*, which includes academics, teachers, school administrators and postgraduate students working in different disciplines, communication among these groups and

across disciplines is crucial to the development of theory and research in education. *SJE* serves well as an avenue for the dissemination of educational research findings and as a forum for an informed discussion of these findings. ■