

A Study of Singapore's Learning Support Programme

Educating from the Heart

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THIS RESEARCH PROJECT, which takes a sociocultural approach to the investigation of language and literacy, is a baseline study of pedagogy in Singapore's Learning Support Programme (LSP). The LSP is an early intervention programme for children with weak reading skills in English. The main aim of the project was to investigate how Learning Support Co-ordinators (LSCs) teach low-track students. Data includes a survey of LSCs, interviews with teachers and focal students, and video footage of classrooms from five schools. The findings reported here focus on questioning patterns of teachers and students, teachers' beliefs about bilingualism, level of student engagement, allocation of whole language versus code-based skills in the classroom, and interactional patterns in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on low-track students in the field of English language and literacy. Since reading skills in English are strong predictors of later school achievement, it is important that students with reading problems should be given early intervention so that they can cope with the demands of the mainstream curriculum. The Learning Support Programme (LSP) shows that Singapore is investing in the well-being of children who are struggling with English. More importantly, the significant level of student engagement in the LSP classes shows that teachers provide a caring and supportive environment for low-track students, hence the chosen subtitle, "Educating from the Heart".

At the same time, there is a need to work on increasing the level of oracy in the LSP classroom, balancing the allocation of code-

KEY IMPLICATIONS

- The current training for LSCs is based on an immersion approach to learning English, which, despite its strengths, is in need of customization given the diversity of LSP class. The LSP class includes children who speak English as a second language, foreign language, and/or children who speak only Singlish.
- Students and teachers should be taught to ask more speculative and process questions as opposed to factual and procedural questions.
- A balanced reading programme should be created with an appropriate emphasis on whole language and code-based skills throughout the three tiers of the LSP.

based skills versus whole language, and changing the pedagogy so as to provide optimal literacy acquisition in English for bilingual students.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Singapore's LSP is a nationwide early intervention programme in all primary schools. The goal of the LSP is to provide reading skills to children so that they can cope with the mainstream English-medium curriculum. The LSP is divided into Tiers 1, 2 and 3, which are developmental—children enter in Tier 1 and exit after Tier 3.

This project used both quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct a baseline study of the LSP. In the quantitative phase, a total of 270 Learning Support Co-ordinators (LSCs) were given a survey which yielded 96 responses. The items in the questionnaire were divided into three sections: background of the teacher; beliefs about bilingualism; and pedagogic practice. In the qualitative phase, 38 lessons were observed across 5 schools yielding 19 hours of video. In each of the 5 schools, 1 focal student was interviewed after the observations. Five LSCs were interviewed after the classroom observations.

There are three main data points for this project: survey results, videos of classroom observations, and audio recordings of interviews with teachers and students. Most importantly, this research project is a small-scale, case-based study of 5 schools. Though the survey results are fairly representative of the views of the LSCs, the classroom observations are not representative of all LSP classes. Thus no generalizations are made from the qualitative data, and all qualitative findings presented in this paper are case specific.

KEY FINDINGS

Teacher Beliefs Regarding Bilingualism

The findings show a significant positive correlation (p -value = .020) between years of experience and use of mother tongue to teach English in the LSP. If the LSCs have more experience as teachers, they are likely to believe in the use of the mother tongue as a resource in the teaching of English. On the other hand, novice teachers who have just joined the workforce take an immersion approach, in which pupils are immersed in the target language and proscribed from using their mother tongue. An

immersion approach to language learning is the opposite of a belief in bilingualism in that the teacher believes that immersion in the target language is the best way to learn that language.

One reason why novice teachers take this approach is because teacher training for LSCs emphasizes that immersion is the best way to teach English. Another reason is that the immersion approach creates parity—for instance, the teacher cannot privilege one group of students by using their mother tongue, to the detriment of others. The LSP class has children who come from diverse linguistic groups. The teacher is likely to know only one other language besides English. If she uses this language to help the children, she will be short-changing children who do not speak the teacher's mother tongue. The immersion approach thus creates parity as all the children have to use the target language.

However, immersion is unsustainable given the increasing diversity of the LSP class, which has students who speak English as a second language, as a foreign language (e.g., international students), and students who speak only Singlish. For this reason, the immersion approach is in need of customization, while maintaining parity of linguistic resources for all students.

Questioning Patterns and Oracy: Encouraging Students to Take Risks

Four main codes were used to categorize the data bank of questions asked by teachers and students: factual, procedural, speculative and process. Factual questions, also called closed or display questions, are those which require a predetermined answer and usually elicit recall of information already provided to students. Speculative questions, also called open-ended questions, elicit "opinions, hypotheses, imaginings, ideas" (Myhill, 2006, p. 26). Procedural questions relate to the management of a lesson, for instance: *Can you all see?* Finally, process questions ask students to explain their thinking, for instance: *How did you work that out?*

As shown in Figure 1, 50% of teachers' questions were factual in nature and 15% were procedural, both of which elicit limited oral responses from students. Speculative and process questions, which have the power to elicit extended oral responses, made up only 19% and 16% of teachers' questions respectively. Students model questions based on their teacher. Thus in keeping up with the teacher, 54% of the

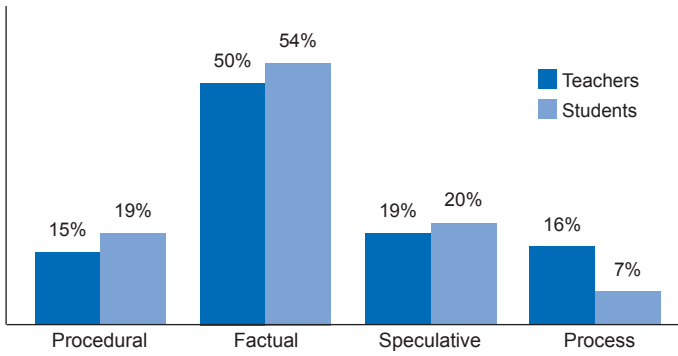


Figure 1. Types of questions asked by teachers and students.

questions that students asked were factual and 19% were procedural. Like the teacher, the students also asked very few speculative and process questions.

Asking and answering speculative and process questions requires a risk-taking disposition on the part of both teachers and students as these are more difficult questions that do not have predetermined answers. These questions and their answers require improvisation and the ability on the part of the speaker to think out of the box. It is these types of questions that provide students with the opportunity to use exploratory talk, which leads to language learning.

Student Engagement

Student engagement was measured by coding the videos for enthusiastic bidding, appropriate eye contact, high levels of student talk, and bodily display of excitement.

Figure 2 shows that overall engagement in the LSP was moderate. In School 2, there was moderate student engagement for all the classes that were observed. Similarly in School 5, the majority of the classes, or 90%, had moderate student engagement. In Schools 3 and 4, 71% and 70% of the classes observed had moderate student engagement. Finally in School 1, about half the classes observed, or 47%, had moderate student engagement. School 1 was at the top as 47% of the classes observed in this school showed high student engagement. Only 13% of the classes in School 1 had low student engagement.

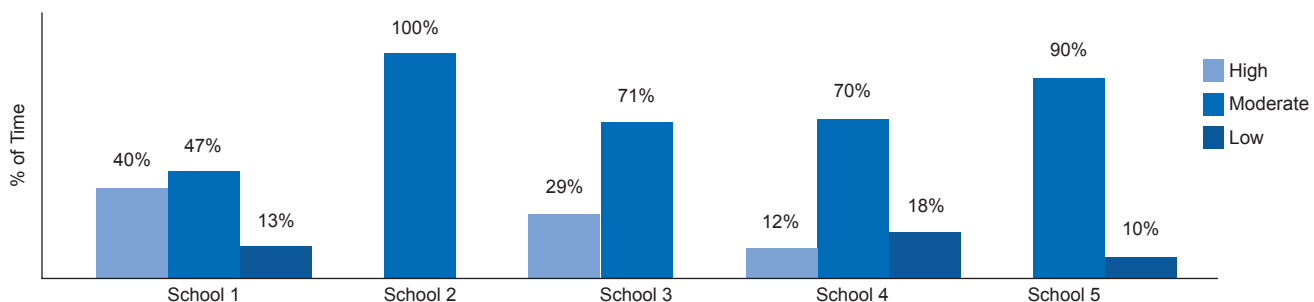


Figure 2. Student engagement across schools.

The percentages for classes which showed low student engagement were relatively small: 13% for School 1, 18% for School 4, and 10% for School 5.

Whole Language vs Code-based Skills

Whole language refers to a specific approach towards literacy in which reading proceeds from the whole text to its parts, meaning and comprehension are emphasized over phonics and students are supposed to self-correct miscues by guessing and predicting. On the other hand, code-based skills instruction emphasizes explicit instruction in phonics, and phonemic awareness. Not only are whole language and code-based skills statistically separable, but the sub-skills within each broad category can also be separated and correlated with later reading achievement (NICHD, 2005).

There is an imbalance between whole language and code-based skills instruction across the three tiers of the LSP. Research suggests that at-risk children with reading difficulties do not benefit from a solely whole-language approach to reading. They must be given code-based skills along with whole-language instruction.

As Figure 3 shows, the overall pattern across the 5 schools in which LSP classes were observed was that teachers spent most of the time on code-based skills. However, scholars have demonstrated that it is a balanced approach that results in optimal literacy acquisition (Donat, 2006; National Institute of Literacy, 2008).

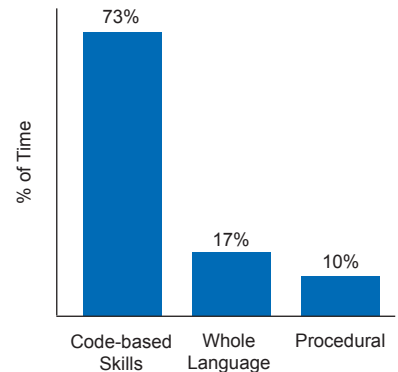


Figure 3. Allocation of time in the LSP classrooms.

The allocation of code-based skills and whole language depends on the tier of the LSP. Though there was more emphasis on code-based skills in

Tier 1, this was reduced as students moved onwards to Tier 2 and finally to Tier 3.

As Figure 4 shows, the percentage of time spent on whole language vs code-based skills depends on which Tier within the LSP we are looking at. In Tiers 1 and 2, the emphasis was mainly on code-based skills. However, as the children developed their literacy skills and became more proficient readers, the teachers increased the emphasis on whole language. This linear approach to literacy acquisition is contested by the National Institute for Literacy (2008). Scholars recommend a holistic approach in which listening, speaking, reading and writing are emphasized at all levels of development, as are phonics and comprehension.

IMPLICATIONS

For Policy

Intervening at the pre-school stage can create better school readiness for children. Though the LSP has strengths, it is offered only in Primary 1, which is too late. If appropriate intervention is conducted at the pre-school stage, it is likely that the number of children who are struggling readers in Primary 1 can be reduced.

For Practice

Teachers should be taught to increase the number of speculative and process questions they ask in each class. Also, they should allow children to use Singlish in the class and then recast the utterances in Standard English so that the class understands the difference between them. In other words, the pupils should be taught meta-language and encouraged to take the risk of asking and answering speculative questions.

There should be equal emphasis on whole language (e.g., comprehension) and code-based skills (e.g., phonics) in all LSP tiers. Also, there should be equal emphasis on listening, speaking, reading and writing.

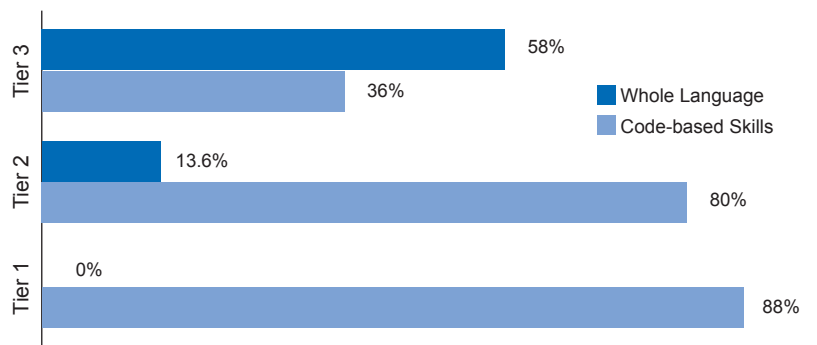


Figure 4. Percentage of time spent on whole language and code-based skills across tiers.

For Teacher Training

An immersion approach in the training of LSCs is not sustainable because of increasing diversity among students in LSP classes. These include children who speak English as a second language, as a foreign language, and/or are speakers of Singlish. Teacher education for LSCs should include a module on bilingualism which gives them strategies about when and how mother tongue can be used to teach English. In case the LSC does not know the mother tongue of the child, the LSC should be taught ways of collaborating with other mother tongue teachers in the school and involving parents.

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