

Chapter 2.9

Developments in Singapore's Education System and English Language Policies: 1950s to the Present

Wai Yin Pryke

Although a young country, Singapore's education system has undergone many changes. The changes can be divided into phases, namely, the survival-driven phase (independence to 1980s), efficiency-driven phase (1980s-1990s), and ability-driven phase (1990s-2000s).

Before we discuss the various phases of education and its impact on English language policies, it would be useful to first understand the historical background that led to English being adopted as the lingua franca for Singapore.

Singapore had a very inauspicious beginning. Ruled by the British for almost 150 years, Singapore was divided into ethnic enclaves according to what was widely known as the Raffles Town Plan. Consequently, despite the rude interruption by Japanese rule for three years (1942-1945) in the Second World War, the education system that emerged from years of British colonial rule was a fragmented one with English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil schools.

When Singapore became independent in 1965, the government of the day was faced with the difficulties of a fragmented population, divided by ethnicity and religion, a fast rising population, and a need to provide employment quickly for its people. The situation was rather dire, with hopes of leveraging the Malayan hinterland for economic development and Singapore being a part of "one Malaya" being up in smoke. It had to find a way of uniting the populace, as well as to leapfrog the region.

To put it in the words of Mr Lee Kuan¹:

How would Singapore make a living? With barely 700 sq m of land, agriculture was out of the question. Trade and industry were our only hope. But to attract investors here to set up their manufacturing plants, our people had to speak a language they could understand. That language had to be English—since World War II ended, the English language had spread. It was the language of international diplomacy, the language of science and technology, and the language of international finance and commerce. Singaporeans would have increased opportunities if they had a strong mastery of English. For political and economic reasons, English had to be our working language. This would give all races in Singapore a common language to communicate and work in. (Yew 2012, 59)

Thus the decision was made to use English as the lingua franca, and the working language for government and business. To ensure that the English language policy succeeded, there was a need to reform the fragmented education

system, and to ensure that English was more widely taught in all schools, including the vernacular schools. Given the historical-political context of that time, this was a bold move. In the 1960s, nations that shook loose of their colonial heritage wanted to have as little to do with the language of their previous political masters as possible. Singapore was to be an exception in that political climate. Until today, Singapore was the only country in the region to use English language as a working language.

One heritage of the colonial legacy was the deep-seated mistrust of Chinese schools for English-medium schools and the resentment held on the part of the non-English educated. This was because vernacular schools were funded largely by community support, and as the dominant race group in Singapore, the Chinese were fiercely protective of their schools, seeing that as a way to perpetuate their roots and culture. The solution therefore was for the government to adopt a policy of bilingualism, which demanded that each student should be proficient in English and the mother tongue.

This policy is a cornerstone of the Singapore education system and remains in place still today. The rationale for bilingualism, and still upheld today, is best summarized by a speech made by then Education Minister Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam in 1986²:

Our policy of bilingualism that each child should learn English and his mother tongue I regard as a fundamental feature of our education system . . . Children must learn English so that they will have a window to the knowledge, technology, and expertise of the modern world. They must know their mother tongues to enable them to know what makes us what we are.

Survival-Driven Phase (Independence to 1980s)

The 1960s marked the beginning of what is known as the “survival-driven” phase of education. By making English a compulsory language to be learnt in schools, the government faced opposition and the challenge of developing curricular materials that would be used by vernacular schools. In view of these challenges, the process of reforming the education system had to be gradual, starting with making it compulsory for all secondary schools to offer a second language in 1966.

This meant that English-medium schools had to offer a mother tongue language for study, while vernacular schools had to offer English. There was also the attempt to introduce integrated schools, where teachers and students from two or more schools of different language streams came under one principal and administration. The idea was to let students of different language streams mingle and have opportunities to practise linguistically but this did not take off as students continued to gather in their language groups and did not mix socially.

The reality was that vernacular schools were ill equipped to provide instruction in English. Hence, the curriculum had to be centrally directed and needed to meet two pressing problems, which were to build national cohesion and economic survival, ensuring that students could speak, read, and write in simple

English. As a matter of necessity, the English Language curriculum was highly prescriptive and centrally directed. Separate syllabuses were developed for English language teaching in English-medium and vernacular schools⁷, ensuring that learning was pitched at a level that was appropriate for the different types of schools.

This trend of a centrally directed curriculum, accompanied by teaching resources developed by the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS) continued till the 1980s when a significant development took place that changed the Singapore education system into an English-medium system in which all subjects began to be instructed and learnt in English.

Efficiency-Driven Phase (1980s-1990s)

The 1980s saw an efficiency driven phase that started to move English as the medium of instruction in all schools. What turned the tide was economic reality as parents began to see the value of an English-medium education since business and commerce were conducted in English. The popularity of vernacular schools fell drastically, with parents preferring to enrol their children in English-medium schools. Even the most ardent Chinese-medium schools had to offer English language streams within their own premises. Eventually in 1987, English became the medium of instruction for all schools.

With this change, the focus was on helping students to achieve a proficiency level that would allow them to transit to learning subject content in English and from functional literacy to effective communication in oral and written forms.

The education system was also becoming more fine-grain in terms of streaming. In a bid to reverse attrition rates and ensure teaching catered to students with different learning needs and pace of learning, streaming was introduced. Thus new syllabuses were designed for the different streams, with English Language being no exception.

While still being centrally directed, the move was for more teacher autonomy as teachers who were recruited had higher qualifications and were better trained. Correspondingly the focus on teaching English moved, with an emphasis on reading and active communication. The aim was to build a strong foundation for communicative competence and make English come alive through actively using and listening to English being used.

Ability-Driven Phase (1990s-2000s)

The 1990s saw a move into the ability-driven phase, which had higher aspirations for English Language teaching. The English Language syllabus of 1991 stated the status of English as the first language and an integrated approach was adopted in both the primary and secondary syllabuses. Given that it had been the medium of instruction for a number of years, English was seen also as a tool for developing

thinking skills and learning to learn skills. Besides the global economic focus, there was now a cultural focus as well to help Singapore students' function in an interconnected world. Like English Language teaching elsewhere in the world, Singapore adopted the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, which emphasised language learning through exposure and interaction.

In line with the globalization process in the 1990s, especially with the burgeoning of the Internet, the Singapore education system made further changes. The focus of learning emphasised new skills for a more uncertain future, where "learning to learn" was deemed important, together with creative thinking and entrepreneurial skills. In 1997, the "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" (TSLN)³ initiative was launched, which aimed to ensure a more student-centred and process-centred approach to education, and an emphasis on the fact that learning should take place nation-wide, not just in schools.

Similarly, as articulated in the Desired Outcomes of Education (DOE), also developed in 1997, every student is to be "a *concerned citizen* who is rooted to Singapore, has strong civic consciousness, is informed, and takes an active role in bettering the lives of others around him."⁴ Thus there was also an emphasis on National Education, which recognised the importance of staying rooted to Singapore while helping students to develop the Information Technology (IT) skills that would enable them to be connected to the wider world.

With the impetus of TSLN and DOE, the 2000s saw two syllabus revisions for the English Language, one in 2001 and the other in 2010. The English Language syllabuses incorporated the teaching of thinking and IT skills, and National Education. The syllabus document in 2010 also emphasised effective communication skills, in recognition of the system-wide push for twenty-first century competencies of "Critical and Inventive Thinking," "Information and Communication Skills," and "Civic Literacy, Global Awareness, and Cross-cultural Skills." By this time there was also greater confidence in teacher capacity and the top-down approach gave way to more teacher-driven approaches for language learning, for example, greater teacher autonomy in the selection and development of materials.

At the same time, emphasis was placed on helping students become more confident communicators in English, with the STELLAR (Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading) Approach being developed for primary schools. This approach emphasises teacher modelling and student participation in reading and writing.

English Language Institute of Singapore (ELIS)

In all the changes to the syllabuses and pedagogies for the English Language that have been detailed in this essay, the underlying concern is to ensure that Singapore retains its competitive advantage in English. The teaching of English has always been influenced by global and national concerns, the changing role of English in Singapore and the world, the needs of Singaporean students, and research in language and language pedagogy. The English Language syllabus has

correspondingly undergone revisions and reflected these changes. The changes also entail teachers undergoing continuous professional development.

The language-learning environment in Singapore continues to be complex and challenging. English is not the native language of many Singaporeans, with other languages and dialects being spoken. To add to the complication, a version of English that Singaporeans are comfortable with has gained traction, with Singapore Colloquial English, also known as Singlish, being widely spoken. Nevertheless, Singlish is not easily understood by people outside of Singapore and there is a need to preserve a high standard of English in Singapore, which must be internationally understood.

At the same time, the global emphasis on twenty-first century skills demands that Singapore students not just be good learners of the language, but effective communicators, able to speak and write with confidence. This means that English Language teaching must continue to change and improve, and teachers play an important role in role modelling effective communication skills in English.

It is to drive excellence in the teaching and learning of English in Singapore schools that English Language Institute of Singapore (ELIS) was set up, and launched in September 2011 by Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

At the launch of ELIS, the important role of teachers in nurturing effective communicators in English was spelt out in unequivocal terms:

The launch of ELIS is timely. You, the educators, must be the standard-bearers of the language. You need to encourage, stimulate, and challenge your students to be excellent communicators in English, able to hold their own at home and abroad. You must, yourselves, constantly seek to improve your own command and appreciation of the language so that you can engender in your students the same love and appreciation of good English.

Our teachers must have a strong sense of mission, and a desire to prepare our young so that they will upgrade their skills and you have to upgrade as teachers your skills and competency in English, so that you can play an important role in grooming future generations (Mr Lee Kuan Yew, speaking at the launch of ELIS, September 2011).

The vision of ELIS is “to be a premier English Language institute of international standing, which provides thought leadership in English Language instruction in a multilingual context based on deep expertise and research.”⁵

Correspondingly, its mission is “to drive excellence in the teaching and learning of the English Language in Singapore schools, in order to support the wider strategic objectives of raising the general command of both spoken and written English Language among all our students, while achieving the best international standards among our most able.”

To do this, ELIS will play the following roles:

- Develop deep expertise anchored in world-class research;

- Establish networks to build and strengthen Singapore’s capacity in the use of English;
- Cultivate deep pedagogical expertise;
- Facilitate the growth of vibrant learning communities; and
- Build effective communication skills in English.⁶

Since its launch, ELIS has focused on building the professional identity of English Language teachers by focusing on the strengths of our teachers and providing platforms for their involvement in building a learning community. It has also provided in-service professional development for English Language teachers and piloted an approach that focuses on deeper learning through application of what is learnt. This is by providing post-course support and working alongside teachers in schools to ensure transfer of learning.

Similarly, as effective communication emerges as a key twenty-first century competency, ELIS has also been tasked with promoting effective communication in English across all classrooms. This is done through a focus on subject literacy. Given that all lessons are taught in English with the exception of Mother Tongue languages, ELIS has launched a “Whole School Approach to Effective Communication,” which works with school leadership to provide an environment conducive for promoting and using good English in every classroom. Although this is a voluntary program, increasing numbers of schools have shown interest in coming on board. By the end of 2014, ELIS would have reached more than half of Singapore schools.

Conclusion

Singapore’s education system is an evolving story, the desire for continuous improvements being a key driving force. There have been some indications of success in its efforts at promoting literacy in English evident from the outcomes of international benchmark tests. For example, Singapore was placed fourth in the 2011 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).

Nevertheless, it is a continuing quest for excellence, in ensuring that Singapore students read, write, and speak confidently and effectively in English. No doubt, in this unfolding journey, teachers will continue to play an important role in the implementation of English Language policies, curricular changes, and assessments in the years to come. ELIS will endeavour to play a leading role in equipping and supporting teachers through in-service education.

References

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- _____. 2012. *My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore’s Bilingual Journey*. Singapore: Straits Times Press.

Notes

¹ From “My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore’s Bilingual Journey.”

² Parliamentary speech by Minister for Education Mr. Tony Tan Keng Yam, March 1986.

³ From “Shaping Our Future: Thinking Schools Learning Nation,” speech by Prime Minister Mr Goh Chok Tong at the International Conference on Thinking, Monday, June 2, 1997. Available online at: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/1997/020697.htm>.

⁴ Desired Outcomes of Education Para 2. Available online at: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/files/desired-outcomes-of-education.pdf>.

⁵ From the ELIS website. Available online at: <http://www.elis.moe.edu.sg>.

⁶ From the ELIS website. Available online at: <http://www.elis.moe.edu.sg>.