

A Glance at the English Education of Singapore

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Introduction



In January 2009, I had a chance to take a trip to Singapore and visit four local primary schools with sixteen school principals and twenty-three other English teachers from Taipei County. The six-day trip was a wonderful experience which allowed me to glance at the English education of Singapore. In this report,

the English Language Syllabus of Singapore will be briefly introduced first, followed by the summarization of the STELLAR Program, which won't officially launch until 2010. The profile of Chongfu Primary School, along with my class observation will be elaborated on next. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn based on my own reflection.

English Language Syllabus of Singapore

Primary school students in Singapore learn three core subjects: English Language, a second language (Mother Tongue) and Mathematics. Science is introduced from Primary 3 onwards. These are the four subjects to be tested on at the end of Primary 6, known as Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), which assesses their abilities for placement in a secondary school course that suits their learning pace and aptitude. Students also take up other subjects like Arts and Crafts, Civics and Moral Education, Music, Social Studies, Physical Education and Project Work¹.

As we can see, one of the key features of Singapore's education system is their bilingual policy. All students learn the English language and an official Mother Tongue language, i.e., Chinese, Malay or Tamil. The bilingual language policy is intended to equip students with the language competencies to access both eastern and

¹ Project Work is conducted during curriculum time, but is not an examinable subject.

western cultures, and to develop a global outlook. While emphasizing the importance of English as a common language to communicate with people from almost any part of the world, Singaporeans do not forget to set a good foundation in their Mother Tongue, which helps them strengthen their cultural identity and develop an appreciation of their cultural heritage and values.



²However, English is the main medium of instruction in multi-cultural Singaporean schools. The status of English is clearly stated at the very beginning of the English Language Syllabus, implemented by the Ministry of Education in 2001: It is the language of public administration, education, commerce, science and technology, and global communication. It is also the medium by which most Singaporeans gain access to information and knowledge from around the world.

Therefore, the ability to speak and write English effectively has become an essential skill in the workplace, and a mastery of English is vital to Singapore's pupils. By speaking and writing effectively, it means to communicate in "internationally acceptable English" which is grammatical, fluent and appropriate for purpose, audience, context and culture. That is, the formal English used in different parts of the world, known as Standard English.

Taking a closer look at the Syllabus, the essential components include Areas of Language Use, Learning Outcomes, Text Types, and Grammar Focus. Areas of Language Use include Language for information, Language for Literary Response and Expression, and Language for Social Interaction. The Learning Outcomes are the expected attainment targets for pupils at the end of each two-year period, that is, Primary One and Two, Primary Three and Four, and Primary Five and Six. Text types vary from print, non-print and electronic sources and different text types are suggested to be included in different grades. The section of Grammar Focus consists

² Image retrieved from Ministry of Education, Singapore.

of Convention of Grammar and Grammatical Features of Text Types. The section on Convention of Grammar lists the grammatical items and structures to be taught during each two-year period. The section on Grammatical Features of Text Types serves as an extension of grammatical knowledge for upper primary pupils. Grammatical items and structures associated with different text types will be taught in the context of reading, writing and oral communication.

STELLAR Program

One thing which is worth mentioning about Singapore's English Language Syllabus is that major changes will be made to the new syllabus every ten years. The latest syllabus won't be put into practice until 2010, but several primary schools have already tried out the new program, known as STELLAR, which will be implemented in lower primary, i.e., Grade One and Grade Two.

STELLAR, which stands for Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading, is a language teaching program that is designed to help students acquire English language skills through activities in listening, speaking, reading, writing and visual literacy. It aims to start children reading early in the primary years, in the hope that students will love to read and have a strong foundation in the English Language. Simply put, students not only read for knowledge, but also for enjoyment.

The underlying philosophy of this program is that learning most often proceeds from whole (meaning/context) to part (skills/strategy instruction) to whole (meaning). The wholeness and the context will link to children's experiences and make sense for them before learning occurs. To enhance the acquisition of English language skills, students are taught through three strategies, namely Shared Book Approach (SBA), Modified Learning Experience Approach (MLEA) and Learning Centers (LC). STELLAR does not make use of textbooks and workbooks, but a package of resources and worksheets are provided by MOE, which is comprehensive and meets the requirements of the current English Language Syllabus. A package consists of

various types of grammar, vocabulary, cloze, listening and reading comprehension worksheets. However, students are not required to do all of the worksheets in the STELLAR package. Teachers will have to exercise their professional discretion and decide on the relevant worksheets to complete. In other words, schools will have to tailor their own scheme of work to cater to the needs of their students.



A typical STELLAR lesson begins with SBA when students are introduced to storybooks, which are carefully selected by MOE. Students will read Big Books with their teacher and engage in oral discussion with their teacher and peers. To follow up, the MLEA is an enjoyable experience to extend and expand on the language skills

learned from the Big Books. The teacher models writing using children's language. Children engage in writing together and then in writing independently. Finally, Learning Centers give students the opportunity to work on their own, where mini lessons will be prepared by teachers based on specific needs of children. These learning centers provide practice or extension of the language skills taught in SBA and MLEA lessons, which might include grammar, vocabulary, word recognition, decoding skills or spelling. While children work with their peers, the teacher works with a group of students, usually the slow learners. Apart from language skills, the use of Learning Centers helps children develop social skills for group interaction such as cooperation, respect for each other and responsibility.

Chongfu Primary School



One of the schools which impressed me a lot during this visit is Chongfu Primary School. The staff there were great hosts and they made us feel warmly welcomed. They patiently answered all of our questions and helped us get to know about the English education in Singapore better.

Chongfu Primary School was founded by Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuah

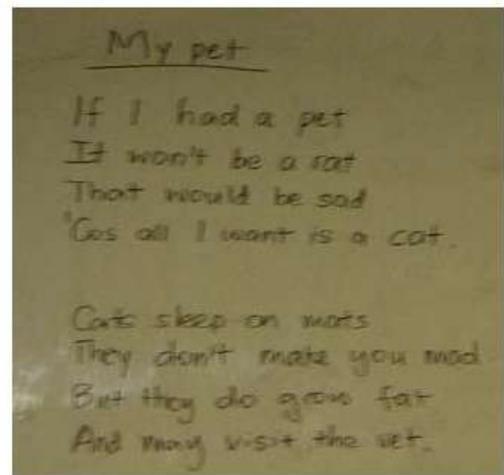
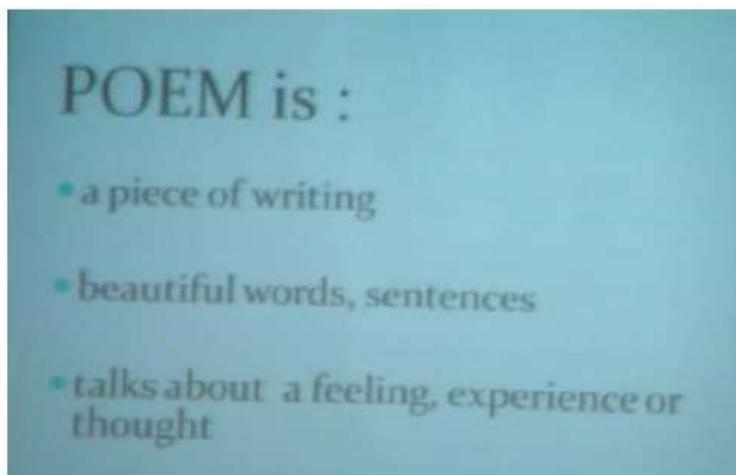


(SHHK), which takes in students of all races and offers all three Mother Tongue languages, i.e., Chinese, Malay and Tamil. It is regarded as a high-performing school whose PSLE results have been consistently above national average. The core values of Chongfu are

summed up with the word GRACIOUSLY, which stands for Gracious, Respectful, Achieving, Caring, Innovative, Observant, United, Sincere, Loyal and Youthful. Like most of the primary schools in Singapore, Grade One and Two students have classes in the afternoon, starting from 12:20 p.m., and Grade Three, Four, Five and Six have classes in the morning, starting from 7:15 a.m. That is why a room is usually shared by two classes. There are fourteen and fifteen periods of English classes for Grades One and Two respectively. Grades Three and Four both have thirteen periods, and Grades Five and Six have fourteen periods. Comparing with the MOE syllabus, the school has added one more period to Grade Four, and two more for Grades Five and Six. Each period is thirty minutes.

Classroom Observation

I was lucky to observe Mdm Fan's fourth grade class. I was impressed by her lucid instructions and her enthusiasm for education. The topic of the lesson was poetry recital. Here are the teaching steps I noted down:



Step 1: Ask students what a poem is. Briefly introduce the four kinds of poems which students are going to learn for the semester, namely, rhyming poems, acrostic poems, Haiku and alphabet poems. Point out that they are only going to focus on rhyming poems for the day.

Step 2: Check to see if students recall what the four types of poems are.

Step 3: Remind students of things to pay attention to when reciting a poem, e.g. stress patterns, volume, intonation, speed, tone...etc.

Step 4: Teacher reads a poem she wrote about her Doggy Moo³ and asks students to pay attention to the features mentioned in Step 3.

Step 5: Teacher points out the rhyme for the poem.

Step 6: Teacher summarizes each paragraph as she reads along. (For example, the first paragraph is about Doggy Moo's appearance; the second is about its master, Mdm Fan; the third is about what Doggy Moo likes to do...etc.)

Step 7: Teacher reads the poem again, but this time students only look at Doggy Moo's pictures without words at the bottom of the slides.

Step 8: Teacher tries to teach about rhythm by reading to students a rhyme and having students clap the rhythm.

Step 9: Have three students go to the front of the classroom and demo the

rhythm "Stomp, Stomp, Clap."



Step 10: The teacher reads the chant, “One, two, buckle my shoe”, which they

³ Mdm Fan shared a bit of her life (her pet) with her students. It was interesting because students got to know a little more about their teacher.

learned in kindergarten⁴, while the whole class does the rhythm “Stomp, Stomp, Clap.”

Step 11: Ask students if they know other rhythms. For example, the rhythm for Humpty Dumpty or African rapping.

It was a pity that I did not get to watch the class longer, but Mdm Fan told me that her next step would be to have students write their own poem and recite it.

Reflection and Conclusion

This trip to Singapore has been a wonderful experience. There are quite a few things that Singapore does differently than how we do them in Taiwan. However, they are good references for us to think about.

First, the English Language Syllabus is renewed every ten years to match current trends. Before a new program, such as STELLAR, is implemented nationwide, it is first tested by several schools.

Second, though a comprehensive package for the program is provided and a lesson plan is offered for every lesson, it is up to the schools and the teachers to decide their school-based curriculum according to their students’ level and fix the goals their students have to achieve. That is, teachers adapt to the new program using their professional knowledge instead of adopting it.

Third, remedial teaching begins in early primary. As soon as school starts, a School Readiness Test is taken by first graders and students who need extra help will be screened out or put into a pull-out program.

Fourth, each subject department is run by a head who is an experienced teacher in that learning area, and who is equally important to heads in the Administration Department. The message sent out here is that the teaching staff is just as important as the administration staff, and everyone is a specialist in that field.

Benjamin Lee Whorf said, “Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about.” A teacher’s job is to plan out those language features for

students to learn. As William Arthur Ward said, we can all choose to be a mediocre teacher who tells, a good teacher who explains, a superior teacher who demonstrates, or a great teacher who inspires.

⁴ I personally think this is a good way to link to students' background knowledge and build up from what they knew.



References:

Chongfu Primary School: <http://www.chongfupri.moe.edu.sg/>

Ministry of Education Singapore: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/>