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## **Pedagogic approaches and cultural scripts: The use of talk during shared literacy lessons in three primary two classrooms in Singapore**

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**Pedagogic Approaches and Cultural Scripts:  
The Use of Talk during Shared Literacy Lessons  
in Three Primary Two Classrooms in Singapore**

**Maha Sripathy**

**A Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements**

**For the Award of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**in**

**Applied Linguistics**

**at the Faculty of Arts, Edith Cowan University.**

**1998**



## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.



## **ABSTRACT**

### **Pedagogic Approaches and Cultural Scripts: The Use of Talk during Shared Literacy Lessons in three Primary Two Classrooms in Singapore**

This study investigates the use and occurrence of talk during the implementation of the key approaches of Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story in three Primary Two classrooms in Singapore. These approaches are based on a constructive perspective of literacy where children make meaning from texts read with the teacher through joint exploration and connection with their respective background knowledge and experiences. Central to this joint exploration and meaning-making is the teacher-pupil talk.

The occurrence and use of talk in the implementation of these approaches in three primary two classrooms was recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Teachers' and pupils' experiences and practices of talk at home were also obtained through interviews, pupil logs and observations and audio recordings of shared reading and shared writing done in the classroom and in some homes. These would show the teachers' and pupils' orientation to talking to learn and consequently, the cultural congruence of the two major approaches currently being used in the classroom.

The theoretical rationale informing the study is a sociocultural perspective. The relationship between language and culture is emphasized because the learning



of English in Singapore has been based on the second language paradigm for a long time. Given the cultural heterogeneity in the classroom and the learning of English as a first language in Singapore, this paradigm needs to be replaced. The different cultural scripts that Singaporeans take with them into the classroom necessitate a change of paradigms and a shift towards a sociocultural perspective of literacy learning.

The study found that the talk which occurred during the shared literacy lessons in the classrooms of the Chinese and Indian teachers was dominated by the teachers with the pupils participating only to answer teacher- questions. Both the Chinese and Indian teachers also stated that pupil comprehension was their main concern during the Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story sessions. This seemed to match the home reading experiences of the Chinese and Indian children in this study. In the Malay teacher's class there was pupil-initiated talk with the pupils initiating topic change as well as plane change and responding to teacher- questions spontaneously.

The study argues that literacy is culturally loaded and therefore it is important to ensure the cultural fit of pedagogic approaches implemented in the classroom. It also argues the inadequacy of only a linguistic adaptation of pedagogic approaches originating in different cultural and linguistic contexts. Pre-service and in-service training of teachers need to transcend the imparting of procedural knowledge of the approaches and instead sensitize teachers to the cultural



Malay and Indian communities in Singapore and their sociocultural practices. Their knowledgeable input and sharing provided a clearer understanding of the communities' perceptions and practices without which this study would not have been complete.

I must convey my appreciation to the English Language curriculum specialists and textbook writers who generously gave of their time to provide information and clarification on beliefs, policies and practices which guided the teaching of English in primary schools in Singapore.

Finally, this thesis would not have been possible if not for the tremendous patience and sacrifices made by my family, in particular my two children, who gave up so much of their recreation activities so that I could stay home to complete my work.



embeddedness of the approaches. Emphasizing the sociocultural perspective of literacy so that teachers perceive the Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story as necessitating and encouraging social dialogue would ensure that teachers and pupils with different cultural scripts and consequently engaging in reading and writing practices for different reasons and in different ways are not marginalized and disempowered. Attending to the cultural load of learning to read and write in English in Singapore has become urgent in view of the national call to create "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation". Pedagogic approaches are culturally loaded. They cannot be viewed as being neutral. Recognizing the cultural situatedness of English language learning and teaching and the pedagogic approaches used in the process is necessary if the government's vision is to become a reality.



## DECLARATION

"I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text."

Signature:

✓  
Name : Maha Sripathy

Date : 29 January 1998



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# **INTRODUCTION**

## **OVERVIEW**

**Learning English in Singapore is a complex matter, extending beyond the paradigm of second language acquisition. The complexity is as much political as it is sociocultural. The learning of English cannot be viewed as merely learning a foreign language. This is because English is the medium of instruction from pre-primary right up to tertiary level. It is also the language of government and culture. It is the key working language and has replaced Malay as the national language of Singapore.**

**Although English is the language of education, literacy learning in the Singapore context is not confined to the learning of English. Children acquire literacy in a minimum of two languages, usually in their mother tongue and English. The simultaneous acquisition of literacy in two languages is accompanied by its own complexities.**

**The main purpose of this study is to investigate the occurrence and use of talk during the implementation of the key approaches of Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story in three Primary Two classrooms in Singapore. (Both these approaches are officially perceived as means of facilitating English language acquisition). This will then be compared with notions of talk and adult-child talk patterns which prevail in the three main ethnic communities in Singapore.**

**The purpose in matching talk patterns during the shared literacy lessons of SBR and CDS in school with the patterns of talk in naturally occurring home**



situations is to see the influence of home talk patterns on talk patterns occurring during Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story sessions.

The Shared Book Approach and the Class Dictated Story, which are the focus in this study, have been in use in the lower primary classrooms since 1985. Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story are based on a constructive perspective of literacy where children make meaning from texts read with the teacher through joint exploration and connection with their respective background knowledge and experiences. Central to this exploration and derivation of meaning is the teacher-pupil talk that takes place. This talk during shared reading and shared writing becomes complex in multi-ethnic, multi-lingual classrooms in Singapore, where English officially enjoys first language status and is the medium of instruction, while the ethnic languages, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil (the three official languages) are learnt as second languages. The culture of the learner, the culture of the teacher and the culture of the imported pedagogic approach are thus brought to meet and mix in the literacy classroom. The micro context is also influenced by the macro context of espoused Singaporean culture and values and an external culture transmitted through the media and which is increasingly felt to run counter to espoused values. This has caused the government grave concern. A large part of this concern may be due to ideological differences.

The acquisition of literacy in English at school is significant given the emphasis on English as an international language which is seen as a means of enabling Singaporeans access to the corridors of technological and



consequently, economic power. On the one hand, Singaporeans are reminded that their bread and butter is dependent on their mastery of the English language. On the other hand, they are constantly exhorted to withstand the cultural and social deterioration that is said to follow from an English language education and urged to preserve their cultural roots by mastering their respective ethnic languages. This inevitably causes tension for the vast majority of the population. The classrooms are not spared this tension either. Implicit in the call for English language mastery for economic success and mother tongue mastery for cultural preservation is the notion of linguistic neutrality - that is, a language can be learnt without the entrenched sociocultural beliefs and practices in which it is firmly embedded. Similarly it is felt that the mother tongue can be acquired with total disregard to its economic viability, political clout, social status and use. The neutral perception of English language learning and literacy acquisition is also extended to methodological approaches implemented in the classroom.

Sampson points out that “educational practices in ESL are being exported, that claim to be scientific, and therefore usable under circumstances that are quite different from those in which they were originally developed” (1985:44). Similar arguments have been conveyed by Phillipson (1991) and Pennycook (1989). The concern with adopting language teaching pedagogy from overseas is the cultural compatibility in the user context. McLean (1983) refers to conceptual differences, where the ideological basis of a theory and its motivation become lost in the process of transfer or where the “local elites”



**adopt the “metropolitan values” (quoted in Ho, 1994:260). Ho argues that the latter situation is less likely in the Singapore context because of the awareness by curriculum planners of the need for appropriacy of transfer. However, the recasting of the approaches very often attends to the linguistic fit rather than the sociocultural fit that may be necessary. This oversight may be due to the perception of the English language in Singapore as a neutral language and only as a tool to access the global information technological advances. But the fact that it is the language spoken by most Singaporeans and reflects the Singaporean culture (Koh, 1989; Pakir, 1991), means that it is culturally loaded. In learning a language, elements of the culture might be transferred to the learner. Therefore, in adopting pedagogic approaches from other contexts, it has to be remembered that the sociocultural basis of these pedagogies might conflict with existing cultural experiences and practices of pedagogy.**

**The cultural fit of pedagogic approaches in the classroom is significant in the Singapore context because “for many years, the pull of the metropolitan centers (in the West) remained as strong as it had been in the colonial period principally because they were (and are still) the centres of knowledge creation and development...” (Ho, 1994:244). There has been a great deal of reliance on America, Britain and Australia, to a certain extent, in developing the English language curricula perspectives and approaches. This is despite efforts at indigenization of curriculum materials and pedagogic adaptation.**



**The perceived need to keep abreast of developments in language teaching pedagogy overseas in order to remain progressive and the emphasis on English as the international language of technology, seems to necessitate this reliance.**

## **LITERACY AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCT**

**Literacy activities are embedded in the sociocultural and historical experiences of a society {Gee, 1992} as well as its political orientations and economic base. The ideological base and the lived experiences of the people determine the use and purpose to which reading and writing are put. As Freire (1990) states, there may therefore be varying forms of literacy depending on the respective needs of each society as well as a range of literacies within a society, each contextually determined. The classroom then becomes the theatre where societal values and aspirations and day-to day lived experiences come into contact. As in the Singapore classrooms, in a multi-ethnic classroom, where two languages are being acquired at the same time, the cultural heterogeneity implies the possible prevalence of different perceptions of literacy and different paths to its acquisition. For literacy activities themselves are influenced by the sociocultural contexts of the practitioners, so that as Street (1984) in describing Vai literacy states, the ascription of roles and functions to reading and writing must necessarily reflect the daily activities of the individuals within that community.**



**The link between literacy and culture adds a significant dimension to the issue of cultural load. What constitutes reading and writing and the contexts in which each is used is socioculturally embedded. Heath's (1983:11) ethnographic study of the Trackton and Roadville communities bears this out. School literacy practices which are similar to home literacy practices and perceptions facilitate children's acquisition of literacy. In contrast, as shown by the studies by Malcolm (1979), Au & Jordan (1981), Boggs (1982), Erickson & Mohart (1984), Freebody, Luke and Gilbert(1991, 1995), Spreadbury (1996) and McNaughton (1996), pedagogic practices which conflict with the lived literacy experiences of children may hinder its acquisition. In multi-ethnic classrooms the literacy teacher must be sensitive to the multiple literacies that may exist. Whatever the pedagogic approach that is selected the teacher would err by treating literacy as neutral. To do so argue Berthoff (1987) & Freire (1994) would be "to support the dominant power structure" (cited in Au, 1995:88).**

**Reading and writing events in the classroom reflect particular ideologies. In engaging in structured interactions around texts during shared reading, children may have their views and practices with respect to literacy endorsed or learn new ways of doing literacy or not succeed. As Freebody, Luke and Gilbert (1991) point out, in adopting a particular approach in the classroom, the teacher not only endorses it as legitimate, but also excludes other ways of handling reading and writing. Reading and writing involve both social and cultural construction and schools as formal institutions in which literacy is**



acquired play a major role in this. If reading and writing are perceived to rest on the prior knowledge and information the learner brings to the task, then the cultural situatedness of literacy becomes apparent. The knowledge that children possess will be culturally relevant but pedagogically of little use in the classroom. The teacher in a multi-ethnic classroom is thus faced with different cultural schemas and multiple literacies (Anstey & Bull, 1996). The choice of a particular schema may empower one group over others and marginalise those who do not possess the contextually relevant schema. Researchers working on literacy as culturally varying, perceive literacy as occurring in particular cultural contexts and literacy practices therefore being determined by contexts. Erickson (1984) expresses this view thus :

... the notion of literacy, as knowledge and skill taught and learned in school is not separable from the concrete circumstances of its uses inside and outside school nor is it easily separable from the situation of its acquisition in the school as a social form and as a way of life.... It is reasonable to expect that various kinds of literacies might represent a variety of interests and be embedded in a variety of belief systems. (pg. 525 )

Anstey & Bull (1996) argue that “traditional psychological pedagogies of the past sometimes resulted in students constructed as illiterate, being held to account for their lack of ability in literacy”(1996 : 152). The sociocultural fit of pedagogic approaches to literacy is therefore of paramount importance. Perspectives of literacy and culture reflect the contexts of use and the users. In the past, literacy-culture research focussed on differential learning as the



central issue: how and why similar instructional experience and exposure contribute to a range of educational achievements (Mehan, 1989). This was based on the assumption that despite social class and cultural differences with which children entered school, the school curriculum would even out the perceived disadvantages. However in the seventies and eighties, ethnographic studies of urban poverty provided a further perspective on differential learning. Factors and experiences outside the realm of school experiences were seen to be contributing to achievement differences. The culture of poverty was soon to have resulted in “cultural deprivation”. As Gumperz and Gumperz (1990:2) state, children from a culture of poverty were also assumed to be lacking in “adequate reasoning skills” and therefore any school failure must necessarily be due to “language deficiencies”. This linguistic deprivation theory resulted in the linguistic and cultural repertoire that children had acquired at home being ignored or seen as deficient. But its significance lay in emphasizing the cultural element in literacy acquisition. That some of the linguistic and cognitive skills children may need to succeed in school are acquired at home long before they start school, has been demonstrated in the work of Rohl (1996), Spreadbury (1994), Heath (1983) and Wells (1987). So children whose home literacy practices differ from those of the school will be disadvantaged. The home literacy practices that Heath captured also made transparent the cultural grounding of literacy (for a detailed discussion see literature review - Chapter 2, Pgs. 99-101). The classroom then becomes a meeting point for this rich cultural variety which the teacher must broker to



facilitate acquisition. The teacher needs to socialise the learners into linguistic and discourse patterns that school literacy requires (Gumperz, 1990; Gee, 1996).

The important place assigned to talk during shared reading and shared writing lessons in the classrooms raises questions about the practice of adult-child talk in Singaporean homes and the perception of the role of talk in learning. The use and perception of talk has a cultural basis and the talk that occurs in the classroom is two-fold. One is determined by the very context of the classroom itself, while the other is necessitated by the approaches to literacy in the classroom. The talk is interwoven with the social and cultural histories of its users and the relationships of power and domination. Where these factors concur linguistic assimilation may be made possible. Where they do not, varying interpretations are inevitable.

When schematic knowledge is not shared, as is often the case in linguistically and culturally diverse settings, what seems like the same message in terms of overt propositional content, may be interpreted differently by different individuals. (Gumperz & Gumperz, 1990:15).

Language use, discourse strategies and talk patterns are all pegged to the individual's early socialization practices in the community. Learners take the socialization practices in these into the classroom. Work by Erickson (1984) and Philips (1972), demonstrate how patterns of classroom talk may provide or deny access to learning. The communication failure that Erickson and



Philips perceived to be taking place in the classroom, was due mainly to cultural differences in practices and perceptions of literacy by teachers and learners. Anstey & Bull state that “as well as focusing skills, a teacher can attempt to use the Discourses a student brings to school and incorporate the literacy practices already learnt and in use in the home” (1996:152). To be able to do this, the teacher would have to possess knowledge of the literacy practices and interaction patterns prevailing in the homes of the students.

Literacy can thus be described as a set of practices which occur in sociocultural contexts. What counts as literacy, how literacy is acquired and the purpose to which it is put are all socioculturally constructed. Approaches to the teaching of literacy in school may therefore have to include the cultural constructions children bring into the classroom and harness the differences so that some Discourses are not empowered while others become marginalised as has been shown by (Gee 1996, 1992, Jackson, 1994, Delpit, 1988). Such an approach to pedagogy would incorporate student’s current practices and what they already know (Anstey & Bull, 1996).

### **The Inappropriacy of the Second Language Acquisition Paradigm**

Current approaches to the teaching and learning of English in Singapore are based on the Second Language Paradigm. The development of research in “new Englishes” (Kachru, 1992 Platt, Weber & Ho, 1984, Pride, 1982) is another landmark in the history of language education. At worst, research in



varieties of English effaced the SLA paradigm. With political independence and social empowerment, countries like Africa and India, Pakistan, Singapore and Hong Kong developed a new awareness of their own non-native varieties of English. This is, in part, a reaction to independence as much as the realization of the important role English may play in development. The new varieties are targets in their own right, to which speakers of the respective countries aspire. They are influenced by the native languages and the culturally diffuse speech context in which they exist. Reflecting the political and sociocultural features of their respective societies, these new varieties are acquired under conditions different from those put forth by SLA theories (Sridhar & Sridhar, 1992; Kachru, 1990).

SLA research and research developments in non-native varieties of English have focused on spoken varieties. Language learning and consequently literacy acquisition involves the learning of inherent values, beliefs and thought processes. Literacy learning in Singapore centres around this notion. English is seen to function as a vehicle for inter-cultural understanding rather than an emulation of Western culture. But the very use of Western pedagogic approaches that conflict with local ways of interacting and using language may reflect a lack of cultural understanding by curriculum planners. Besides, whatever the official reason may be for learning English, children have access to Western culture in the very books they read in class and the numerous imported programmes (Bananas and Pyjamas, Sesame Street, Blinky Bill) the



television stations make available. Language carries a cultural load, regardless of what policy makers may state its official function to be. It is important to go beyond the spoken varieties of a language and attend to other aspects of literacy acquisition. Looking at literacy rather than merely at second language will enable the incorporation of other factors which influence the use to which literacy is put to and the way it is practiced.

The second language paradigm, on which the teaching and learning of English in Singapore has been based, is not an appropriate model for describing language acquisition in a multiracial, multicultural, multilingual country, where English is officially the first language and the medium of instruction in school. The existence of an indigenised variety of English, which is being used increasingly as a marker of Singaporean identity, is another reason necessitating a new paradigm. The simultaneous learning of a mother tongue in school, produces bilingual, biliterate individuals, who switch from one linguistic code to another with relative ease. This code-mixing and code-switching emphasises the functional purpose of learning English in Singapore, which the SLA paradigm fails to capture. The ease with which Singaporeans code-mix conveys one aspect of language use that is sociocultural in nature. Cook-Gumperz refers to this use of language as “a socially constructed phenomenon” (1986:1).



**The current integrated approach to the teaching and learning of English is more comprehensive than a conceptualisation of language acquisition as achieving communicative competence. This necessitates a new paradigm. Cook-Gumperz (1986) described literacy as transcending “the simple ability to read and write, but rather by possessing and performing these skills, we exercise socially approved and approvable talents” (pg. 1). The importance of the political, social and cultural contexts of literacy practices and acquisition has been emphasised in the works of Dyson (1989, 1992), Gee (1994, 1988), Heath (1983), Freebody (1996), Street (1984) and Scribner and Cole (1981). Dyson (1992) described literacy as a cultural tool”, which is used to service the social and cultural needs of society. Street (1984) in his description of Vai literacy, emphasised the cultural embeddedness of literacy and the process of socialisation that members need to go through to appropriate the various meanings of literacy. The social and cultural embeddedness of literacy acquisition is therefore important in any discussion of literacy. For it is the context which accords the language and the ways in which it is used, the relevant meanings. In the Singapore context where children learn to read, write, speak, listen and make meaning in at least two languages a sociocultural perspective of literacy is more appropriate.**

**Language, as Bakhtin pointed out, is not “an abstract system of normative forms but rather a hetereoglot conception of the world” (1981:292). This means that the discourse structures and practices and the grammatical system**



evidenced in a language carry with them meanings, which reflect the social and cultural norms of its users. Since these norms differ from society to society, it may be assumed that the world views of different groups may also differ. This explains the linguistic variety that exists as well as the different perceptions and practices of literacy and the norms of communication. Language, literacy practices and patterns of interaction are culturally created in the context of the prevailing political and social conditions of a country. As these conditions change, so will the cultural practices and perceptions. This introduces the notion of culture as continually evolving. A perception of culture in such terms, conveys the constant creation of new meanings and new ways of doing things with words. Perceiving the learning of a language thus, allows for the accommodation of multiple literacies within a society boundary. It is this perspective of literacy as socioculturally situated that best describes the perceptions and practices of adult-child talk in the lower primary classrooms and the homes of the Chinese, Malay and Indian children described in this study.

In learning language, Singaporean children are constantly interacting with different linguistic cultures both at home and in school. The programmes disseminated by the media have a significant role in bringing the cultures together or compartmentalising them into separate, distinct enclaves. How Singaporean children learn English is culturally and socially influenced as much as it may be cognitively determined. Because the concentration has



been on cognitive achievement as represented in percentage passes and grades, other paradigms of language learning have not been explored. A move away from the cognitive and psycholinguistic paradigm will reveal new concerns and require new frames of reference. And the move to a new paradigm is timely for two reasons. Firstly, experimentation with language policies and issues has crystallized. Having attained successful economic progress, the society is now in a position to devote precious resources towards a macro understanding of language issues in the republic. Secondly, as an independent nation, striving towards her own identity in the world, Singapore can put to rest the period of following language education trends in Britain and America. Theories and paradigms developed in one context may not be transferable to another context without consequences. Each societal context is unique in its cultural composition, linguistic range, social history and expectations and aspirations. To continue to adopt language paradigms developed in other sociocultural contexts may not help Singapore develop its own literacy tradition.

A further reason justifying a new paradigm is the sociocultural context of learning English in Singapore, which is different from other contexts of learning English. A detailed description of the Singaporean political, social, educational and cultural experiences is given in Chapter One. The top-down approach, the importance assigned to hierarchy and authority are uniquely Singaporean. This has implications for the use of pedagogic approaches



developed in other contexts with different notions and practices of literacy arising out of a different political, economic, social and cultural setup.

The need for a new paradigm that reflects the learning of English in Singapore is thus apparent. Jernudd (1981) and Harris (1987) point to the inapplicability of much linguistic theory to the rest of the English-speaking world. The teaching of English and the pedagogic approaches advocated in its teaching are grounded in British and American social, cultural and political experiences. They have been exported to countries with differing setups as universal dogmas. As Castell and Luke assert, researchers and educators need to “look beyond psychological explanations of literacy acquisition and use which purport to be exhaustive, universal, and ideologically neutral. Rather, the substantive context of personal, social and political values must be explicitly addressed, since it is this basis that now, as in the past, determines what is to count as literacy” (1986:88). They add that the “social, cultural and political consequences of a literacy that is based on imposed culturally significant information can be disastrous” (1986:106).

The learning of English in the primary classroom in Singapore is therefore best seen in the context of a sociocultural paradigm. The teaching and learning of English is influenced by sociocultural factors as captured in the lived experiences, beliefs and perceptions of the people, which are neither universal nor generalisable. In Singapore, the three main ethnic communities



have their respective traditions and cultural values alongside a set of shared national values. They interact with each other daily, using English as the medium of communication. The shared values and the use of English helps the different races integrate, while maintaining their distinct cultural identities. Patterns of talk within families would differ according to the values, expectations and aspirations of the larger cultural group of which they are a part. These differences will influence practices of literacy. The Census of population (Literacy) 1990, shows that many Singaporeans speak their mother tongue or a dialect at home.

English, however remains the language of inter-ethnic communication. The use of Singlish (Singaporean English) is also said to be on the rise. The formal acquisition of literacy in school needs to be placed against this background of spoken linguistic competence and cultural practices and perceptions of literacy. A sociocultural conceptualization of literacy captures the various kinds of literacies that may be in existence. It also debunks the conceptualization of literacy as a separate, reified set of 'neutral' competencies, autonomous of social context.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

This study on the use of talk during Shared Book Reading and the writing of the Class Dictated Story and the cultural experiences of the teachers and the learners of adult-child talk at home, is based on a sociocultural framework. If



**literacy is seen as fulfilling the individual and society's needs, then it must be perceived within the social and cultural experiences of the end-users. In the Singapore context, where more than one language is being learnt, and each language harnesses different social, cultural, economic and political values and perceptions, a sociocultural framework provides an insight into the factors that influence literacy in English and captures the differences in perceptions and practices of talk among the different ethnic communities. More significantly, in Snow's words it describes the "social and cultural situatedness of language learning" (1992:17).**

**More recent work by Anstey & Bull (1996), Breen et al (1994), Baker (1991), Freebody (1995), Cook-Gumperz (1991) and Street (1994), has presented literacy as encompassing variable social practices that are constructed through interactions with parents, teachers and learners in and out of the classrooms. Freebody, Luke and Gilbert (1991) argue that in structuring interaction around and about texts, teachers are systematically "selecting and valorising" particular practices and excluding others while "students learn a selective tradition of how to do things with those texts" (1991:435-436). The classroom sanctions certain ways of handling texts and these come to be regarded as literacy practices. What is sanctioned as accepted forms of literacy practices by the teacher, while guided by policy statements and teaching materials, is socioculturally constructed through dialogue with the pupils and the teachers' ongoing dialogue between self and society. One way**



**in which this dialogue occurs in the primary classrooms in Singapore is during the talk that takes place during the Shared Book Reading and the Class Dictated Story sessions.**

## **SUMMARY OF THEORETICAL RATIONALE**

**The above sociocultural framework is the basis of this study on the perceptions and practices of adult-child talk during reading and writing activities in the lower primary classrooms and the Chinese, Malay and Indian families. Approaches to literacy and practices of literacy vary from culture to culture. A sociocultural approach enables the accommodation of multiple literacies. This provides for a description of the different practices of adult-child talk in the three main cultures in Singapore. In acquiring literacy, learners not only appropriate the language to meet their individual needs but also learn the social and cultural ways of using language. Literacy is therefore a cultural tool.**

**A sociocultural perspective will also allow for a consideration of the political and historical factors which influence and determine the conceptualization, acquisition and uses of literacy in English. As discussed earlier, what constitutes as reading and writing, the purposes to which reading and writing are put, the contents of reading and writing and the approach to teaching and learning reading and writing is situated in the social and cultural context and experiences of the people, which are influenced by the political and economic**



histories. The different conceptualisations of literacy also make the importation of pedagogic approaches across contexts in the guise of universality of approaches or the neutrality of English, difficult at the implementation level because beliefs and practices of literacy are socioculturally embedded.

## **THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the occurrence and use of talk during Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story sessions in three lower primary classrooms and to see how this corresponds with talk patterns and practices at home in the three main ethnic groups. Do Singaporeans regardless of their cultural backgrounds, share similar practices and perceptions of talk and in particular, talking with children or do they engage in different practices? In investigating these practices, the study aims to describe the patterns of talk at home and in school, during shared reading and shared writing. The key research questions are as follows:

- 1} What is the nature of teacher and pupil talk during English literacy lessons, with particular reference to Shared Reading and Class Dictated Story Sessions?
- 2} What is the nature of parent-child talk in the homes of the families in this study?
- 3} What is the relationship between the adult-child talk that occurs during the shared reading and shared writing sessions at home and in school?



**Based on these key questions, this study aims to examine the occurrence of talk and its use by teachers and pupils during the shared reading and shared writing sessions as a major means of acquiring literacy in English, and the nature of talk practices that occur among the Malay, Chinese and Indian parents and their children at home. This will help to highlight the issues that may have implications for the implementation of pedagogic approaches that advocate a talk-based curriculum in the lower primary English literacy programme in Singapore schools.**

**This study is also important from a personal perspective. As a teacher educator, I am placed in the responsible position of training teachers to teach the English Language to young children. In the course of fulfilling this professional responsibility, I introduce current approaches to literacy that are advocated by the Ministry of Education, Singapore or researched and published in other language learning contexts. In doing so I realize that I may be endorsing approaches that may not fit in for a variety of reasons. In fact, this study is prompted by my observations of classroom practices during school visits and the realization that practices tend to differ at the implementation level. The abandoning of approaches, differences of opinions with regards to procedural implementation of approaches as expressed by some teachers, the overwhelming amount of teacher talk in comparison to pupil talk, the culturally- situated ways in which parents perceived learning and teaching led me to critically evaluate the curriculum I was delivering to pre-service and in-service teachers. Being actively involved in literacy**



activities and organizing workshops for parents and teachers also enabled me to understand their concerns, expectations and perceptions and provided me with an insight into some of their home literacy practices. As an active member of the community, I also had many opportunities to interact with members of the community and have been involved in educational programmes within and across the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities. This provided me with valuable insight into the cultural ways of thinking and doing things in these communities. While this background of professional involvement and personal interest in literacy initiated this study, in the course of carrying out the research, I was careful not to let my personal concerns or perceptions interfere with my data and its subsequent analysis. This objectivity was maintained through the triangulation of data as well as recording what was reported by my teacher, parent and child informants. The analysis of the data was limited to describing what was observed and recorded. In the process of collecting the data, I made a conscious effort to distance myself from my informants and recorded all observations of classroom talk as well as home literacy practices immediately. Despite these steps, I am aware that the interpretation of the data and the context of study may have been shaped by the fact that I am a member of both the larger Singaporean community and the Tamil-speaking minority I am describing and in which I have a vested interest both professionally and as a citizen. Since the study is based on a small number of participants, the conclusions



**drawn are limited to the participants in this study and any generalization made is tentative and will have to be substantiated using a bigger sample.**

**Chapter One provides a description of the tensions involved in adopting pedagogic approaches that may differ from the linguistic and cultural experiences of children. The political and sociocultural histories and experiences and the economics of survival which have contributed to a Singaporean lifestyle influence the approach to learning English and literacy acquisition.**

**Chapter Two reviews literature that has contributed to the theoretical framework of this study. Classroom Interaction Analysis, ethnographic studies of literacy, sociocultural contexts of literacy acquisition and research on talk-based curriculum are discussed for their contributions to developing a sociocultural understanding of literacy. This is followed by a survey of major research in language and literacy done in Singapore.**

**Chapter Three presents the cultural scripts of Chinese, Indian and Malay Singaporeans. Their respective cultural scripts is set against their historical, political and economic experiences. Each community's perception of children, and their beliefs and values about education influence their practices of literacy and adult-child talk patterns at home and in school. The different cultural scripts are described to provide a context for the discussion of classroom pedagogic approaches currently in use in the Singapore classroom.**



**Chapter Four describes the development of the English Language Curriculum in Singapore. It reviews the Primary English Syllabus to provide a perspective of the development of literacy and the place assigned to talk in the literacy curriculum. The introduction of the Shared Book Approach and the Class Dictated Story, teachers' perception of these approaches and some of the implementation issues will be discussed.**

**Chapter Five describes the research design for this study. Besides the description of the data collection procedures and sources of data, it also discusses the selection of ethnography as a research procedure for this study.**

**Chapter Six is in three parts. The first part presents the data and analyses it for the occurrence of talk in the shared reading and shared writing lessons. The type/s of talk and the types of speech acts engaged in by the teachers and the pupils and advocated by the teachers is described. The second part presents the profiles of each of the ten pupils and the third part describes the nature and occurrence of talk at home and some of the practices the focal families engage in.**

**Chapter Seven discusses the data in the light of home and school literacy practices and perceptions. The lack of congruence between classroom pedagogy and cultural ways of learning and acquiring literacy is presented. It**



is shown that practices of literacy and of adult-child talk at home in the three communities differ from the beliefs and practices of talk on which the pedagogy of classroom literacy is based. It is argued on the basis of the data that the three teachers do not seem to subscribe to the philosophical basis of the approaches they are being requested to implement in the classroom. Pupils' cultural and home experiences of talking with adults and of talking to learn, their perception of the teacher as an authority to be respected and their culturally ingrained perception of a good student as one who listens passively to the teacher (views that are shared and endorsed by the teachers and parents) does not synchronize with the demands of a talk curriculum, which emphasizes meaning negotiation, collaborative learning and risk taking. The chapter recommends that both teachers and learners be made aware of the adjustments they would have to make to facilitate the occurrence of negotiated, collaborative talk during shared reading and shared writing. The differences between cultural ways of learning and talking and the expectations and demands of a talk curriculum in shared literacy lessons may have to be discussed with teachers and pupils to ensure effective pedagogic fit of the approaches advocated in the classroom.

The next chapter sets the background to this study by describing the historical, political and social factors influencing the learning of English and literacy acquisition in Singapore.



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **LITERACY IN SINGAPORE**

**This chapter describes the political, economic and social issues involved in the learning of English in Singapore. Literacy in English must be seen against the background of literacy in the mother tongues, namely Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, the three official languages. The history of English language education, the policy of bilingualism, the introduction of Confucianism and the White Paper on Shared Values together describe the political, social and cultural aspects of English language acquisition by Singaporeans. Tied to this is a unique Singaporean way of life, which influences interaction at the family, community and societal levels. These have implications for the pedagogic approaches implemented in the classrooms.**

#### **Background**

**Singapore is a small island (639.1 square kilometres) with a population of 3.2 million people. Of this 77.7% are Chinese, 14.1% Malays, 7.1: Indians and 2% "Others" including Eurasians, Europeans and Arabs. The main religions are Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity (Source: Singapore 1992). Despite the lack of natural resources, Singapore has grown from a small, fishing village into a very successful industrial economy, with a per capita income which rivals many industrialized economies. This background necessitates that it connects with the international economy. This crucial link with the world economy requires it to be easily accessible in linguistic terms. Thus, in the early stages of its**



economic planning, the importance of English was emphasized. However, the emphasis on English was not a new phenomenon. Singapore had been a British colony from 1819 to 1959. The English language was the British legacy. Although Singapore gained independence in 1965, she maintained close ties with Britain through the education system. The Cambridge examinations were a hallmark of that continued connection. As in the case of post-colonial giant, India, and other countries, English was deeply entrenched in the administrative, educational and commercial sectors. Its retention was in the main part due to its perceived role as the vital catalyst for economic progress. The first generation leaders, who were English-educated, saw English as the lifeline enabling Singapore to tap into the global economy. Besides this economic role, English also enjoyed the advantage of being a non-ethnic language which the leaders felt would allow all Singaporeans fair competition. Unlike many post-colonial countries, Singapore had the added complexity of being a multi-racial, multi-lingual society. English, therefore, was perceived as a unifying common denominator:

The 'National identity' by which a Singaporean identifies himself as 'Singaporean' rather than a 'Chinese', 'Malay' or 'Indian' is best expressed through the use of English. (Tay 1978 : 17).

English thus is the official working language and the language of education (Tay, 1982). Together with English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil enjoy the status of official languages and are offered in schools as the official second languages.



**87% of the population live in government built high-rise apartments. These are self-contained densely populated estates which have all the public facilities of hospital, library, schools, shopping centres and transport within easy access. In contrast to the past, the newer generation flats are fringed by parks and trees. The allocation of apartments is controlled in terms of ethnic percentages. This is to avoid any one residential area becoming identified as an ethnic enclave, which might give rise to ethnic conflicts. The distribution is maintained on the national population ratio of the three main ethnic groups.**

### **Political Ideology**

**Although of migrant origin, economically Singapore has progressed at a speedier rate than any other country in the ASEAN region. Its original economic disadvantage has been harnessed to maximum effect and today it is the envy of many of its neighbours. It is a modern metropolis linked to the information highway and displaying the most current of modern trappings.**

**Behind this curtain of ultra modernism, lies a society which has been constantly reminded by its leaders of the need to maintain its traditions and customs so that its achievements will hold together. Often the populace is reminded that the success of modern Singapore is due to the discipline and hard work of their ancestors.**

**In terms of political ideology Singapore is a social democracy. It practises a "one man, one vote" parliamentary system. Since assuming power in 1959, the People's Action Party which is the**



dominant political party in Singapore, has been the government. Elections are held once in five years. Several opposition parties have been in existence and new ones have emerged, but few have made it beyond the election rallies. A single opposition member entered Parliament in 1984 and has been returned by the electorate thrice. Since then four opposition candidates have been elected. The government rules with a firm hand. The difference between an opposition ward and a People's Action party ward is, at least, physically visible. The government's firm hand transcends the politics of survival. The government has absolute power and the citizens appear to accept both the control and the direction it sets. Almost every aspect of life is guided by government policies or exhortations by the party in power. Most citizens accept this as the norm and generally do not question government policies or action, though Singaporeans seem to have the general habit of silent grumbling. The government agenda for the people is focused on keeping them healthy and wealthy. In line with this, unemployment is non-existent and health care is excellent with access for all. It boasts of having one of the finest and most efficient land and air transport systems in the world. Socially, it has never encouraged a welfare system and through various policies aimed at awareness-raising, has ensured that people prepare for a gracious retirement. Encroachment on ethnic sensitivities is dealt a hard blow and freedom of speech is encouraged within limits. Freedom of the press is given its due place with responsible journalism being encouraged. In line with maintaining traditional values and ethnic cultures, censorship is routine. All ethnic groups are encouraged to nurture



their individual identities within a larger Singaporean identity. The White Paper on National Values (1990) upholds meritocracy and multiculturalism and community above self. Excellence is the hallmark of individual and collective activity. The sum of this is a high level of intolerance for corruption and a top-down directedness at many levels of society. The gist of this governing approach is Asian and has been criticized by people unfamiliar with the workings of this society as undemocratic. Conflicting as it may be with Western style democracy, the government and many Singaporeans are convinced that it is a style most suited to Singapore's needs and success - judging by the electorate support for the ruling party for the last thirty-five years. In the 1997 General Elections, the party (People's Action Party) won sixty-five per cent of the votes. It must, however, be added that with the easy access to foreign media, the affluence and the increasing number of Singaporeans travelling abroad, tensions are inevitable.

### **Changing Population Base**

The government is faced with two groups of population at opposing ends. On the one hand, there is the older generation which together with the pioneering leaders have experienced the effects of a corrupt government, racial riots and secret society clashes and therefore supported the government policies to achieve the present economic, political and social success. On the other hand, there is a younger cohort of Singaporeans who have never experienced the hardships of war, poverty or racial insensitivities but have lived a modern and progressive life with the best amenities. The former group seems



prepared to follow and is a contented lot. The latter, by and large, seems to harbour higher expectations and aspirations and is demanding more of the government. They are the ones caught in the East-West debate and are constantly pulled in both directions. They seem to be the ones for whom the government feels the maintenance of ethnic cultures is so vital to ensure a balance, to preserve what has been achieved at great cost.

### **Language Diversity And Planning**

The linguistic situation in Singapore, however, is not as straightforward as the official language policy. The language diversity is an offshoot of the ethnic diversity of the population. Kuo (1980) identifies 33 specific native languages which are differentiated further by religion, ethnicity and culture. The Chinese speaking populace falls into ten dialect groups (dialects in the Singapore context refer to 'languages' which are spoken but do not have a written script) with Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese and Hakka being the most widespread. The Indians are characterised by diversity of language. While Tamil is the majority language spoken, Malayalam, Punjabi, Hindustani, Bengali and Gujarati are also spoken. The number of people speaking the above languages has increased, given the influx of nationals from India. Consequently, centres teaching Gujarati, Hindi and Punjabi have been established and parents can now arrange for their children to offer any one of these languages for the major examinations. The Malays in Singapore are the most linguistically homogenous group. With the exception of Malay (which



**enjoyed National language status until 1970) which has been maintained, the Chinese dialects and Tamil have seen fluctuations in their use.**

**While its economic and political role is firmly grounded, the increased and important role the English language has assumed in the lives of Singaporeans is not without social and cultural implications. The government has of late been concerned with the erosion of ethnic values (Straits Times, 28/1/96).**

**Increasingly, speaking English has been seen as the passport to economic survival, success and prestige. This has resulted in the gradual closing down of vernacular schools and an increasing demand for an English-medium education. The government also perceived political gain in the voluntary shutting down of vernacular schools, particularly Chinese-medium schools, as they were a source of ideological conflict.**

**The Chinese dialects enjoyed higher circulation until 1979 when the Speak Mandarin campaign was officially introduced. Mandarin had been introduced in the schools as the official second language for all ethnic Chinese students in 1962. It was made compulsory for the PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examination) in 1965. Concerted efforts were made at all levels from then on to eradicate the use of dialects among Singaporeans. Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the then Prime Minister, felt that "dialects will hinder the learning of a child" because learning Mandarin in school and "reverting" to speaking dialects (at home) is to negate the time and effort invested in teaching and**



learning Mandarin. Without making Mandarin the mother-tongue in place of the dialects, he argued, the country's policy of bilingualism would not succeed (Straits Times, 26/9/1981). This led to a great deal of unhappiness. A major source of discontent was among the older generation - some parents and many grandparents, who knew only their respective dialects, found the new policy difficult. At a social level, it also destroyed the link and communication between the generations - children, who spoke only Mandarin, and parents, and in particular grandparents, who spoke only dialects. The campaign was systematically enforced with the cinemas and the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation dubbing all Chinese films and programmes in Mandarin (Ang, 1994 : 326). The policy, it was felt at the government level, however bitter initially, had to stay. Over time, the Mandarin campaign was tightened with slogans at government offices such as, "If you are Chinese, speak Mandarin". As a result of the sustained effort of the Speak Mandarin Campaign (it became an annual event from 1979), 68 per cent of the 1987 Primary 1 cohort of Chinese pupils came from homes where Mandarin was spoken, with 12.5 per cent coming from dialect speaking homes (Straits Times, 8/10/1987). This percentage is in sharp contrast to the 1980 figures where two-thirds of the Chinese pupils entering Primary One came from dialect-speaking homes. Hence, for a time dialects died an enforced death in Singapore.

However, with government concern over eroding family values and culture, the observed trend towards Westernization through mass media influence, and the loss of electoral votes to dialect-speaking



candidates, the official stand towards Mandarin softened. Today, dialects have made a quiet comeback and are seen as providing essential links to the culture and history of the Chinese in Singapore. This changing stance of the lingua franca of Chinese Singaporeans gained significance economically as China opened its doors to external investors. Singapore, having maintained its "Chinese-ness" and seen by China as an economic success, was ready to begin a courtship. Singaporean entrepreneurs, particularly of Chinese descent, were encouraged to seize the business opportunities the Chinese markets offered.

The language situation among the Indians has been less volatile. This is mainly because the majority of the Indians are Tamil-speaking with a much smaller minority, speaking Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati and Punjabi. Given the small number of speakers, it was not economically viable to offer these different languages as a subject at the school level. Tamil, despite enjoying official language status, has led a threatened existence. There have been serious concerns about its continued maintenance given its low economic value. As of 1994, following requests from the communities concerned, five other minority Indian languages like Hindi, Punjabi and Gujarati came to be offered as second languages (Straits Times, 15/5/1994). These languages, although they can be offered at the Primary School Leaving Examination and the GCE O' and A' level examinations, have to be learned at specialized language centres during the weekend. The decision to offer them is due to the government's



**recognition of the important role the mother tongue plays in the preservation of an individual's culture and traditions.**

**The Malay language has not suffered the upheavals and the concerns of Mandarin or Tamil, because of its homogeneity as well as its functionality in economic, religious and linguistic terms. The Malays in Singapore enjoy the linguistic support of their three large immediate neighbours, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. Standardization of the language has taken place and now Bahasa Baku is used in all the four countries. Singapore Malays have access to their own programmes on radio and television.**

### **History of Literacy in English**

**English and Malay literacy were developed in the early years, with the British administration sponsoring primary education in Malay. English education served to train people for the local administration. The teaching of Chinese and Tamil was in the hands of communal or religious organizations (Gopinathan, 1974 : 2-3; Soon, 1988: 3-4). In 1824 the first English medium school was set up. Between 1867 and 1945, more primary and secondary schools were established. With this English education expanded further to meet both the demands of the British administration as well as increasing commerce. English education, however, remained accessible to a limited few, and was therefore responsible for creating an elite minority and much dissatisfaction, especially among the Chinese.**

**The social and economic disadvantages faced by those who had had an ethnic language education contributed to tremendous discontent,**



and led to the 1955 unrest by the Chinese students. The outcome of this was the setting up of an All-Party Committee to look into the problems facing the Chinese schools. The All-Party Report that was subsequently produced is an important landmark in the history of literacy and education in Singapore. The report declared:

Chinese education will have to play its part, as also Chinese culture with which it is inextricably mixed, in the formation of a nation marching rapidly towards self-government and independence, not by jettisoning its cultural ideas and values, but by tolerance and ready acceptance of the contributions of the other races and by sinking communal differences and jealousies; playing a significant, if not predominant, part in shaping a common ideology and embracing political entity and common outlook, which are inseparable features for national existence. (1956:4)

Following this report, bilingual education in the primary schools and trilingual education in secondary schools was introduced. With all four language streams receiving equal treatment, it meant the availability of a second language in all schools. English was made available in the vernacular schools and the three official ethnic languages were available in English schools. At the secondary level, Malay was made compulsory as a third language for non-Malay students in the lower secondary classes. The importance of English for international economic functioning and Malay for its regional role was thus established.

The merger with the Federation of Malaya in 1963 was unsuccessful and in 1965 Singapore became an independent country. On August 9, 1965, Singapore declared independence and with it proclaimed



**Malay as the national language and English, Chinese and Tamil the official languages. This endorsed the government's policy of multiculturalism and multilingualism:**

**I would like to believe that the two years we spent in Malaysia are years which will not easily be forgotten, years in which the people of migrant stock here - who are a majority - learnt of the terrors and follies and the bitterness which is generated when one group tries to assert its dominance over the other on the basis of one race, one language, one religion..... So it is that into the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore will be built-in safeguards .... means whereby the conglomeration of numbers, of likeness - as a result of affinities of race or language or culture - shall never work to the detriment of those who, by the accident of history, find themselves in minority groups in Singapore ....We have a vested interest in multiculturalism (Lee Kuan Yew in Josey 1968: 435-6).**

**Although Malay was the national language and used for ceremonial purposes and inter-ethnic communication in the sixties and seventies, it was English that was ascending in status and power. Being the official working language, it enabled those who had a command of it to enjoy high remuneration (Census of Population 1980: 42-43). The economic advantage of literacy in English meant increased enrolment in English-medium schools and declining enrolments in vernacular schools (Kuo 1985: 346). The tide of feeling for an education in English was not to ebb as more and more parents saw the need for an English education. This led to the declining enrolment in Nanyang University and its subsequent government enforced merger with the National University of Singapore in 1980.**



**The government's concern for literacy in the ethnic languages led to the compulsory learning of English and one other ethnic language in school in 1966. The need for bi-literacy was emphasized by Lee Kuan Yew in 1972:**

**I am convinced that this effort (bi-lingualism or more precisely bi-literacy) has to be made if we are to survive as a distinctive society, worth the preserving. Or we will become completely deculturalized and lost ...If we fail to resolve effectively our problem of languages and preserve what is best in our respective cultural values, we could become an even more enfeebled version of the deculturalized Caribbean calypso-type society.**

**Bi-lingualism as defined by the Prime Minister, refers not just to spoken facility in two languages:**

**It is more basic that, first we understand ourselves, what we are, where we came from, what life is or should be about and what we want to do. Then the facility of the English language gives us access to the science and technology of the West. It also provides a convenient common ground on which the Chinese, Indians, Ceylonese, Malays, Eurasians, everybody competes in a neutral medium .... It is the learning of a whole value system, a whole philosophy of life that can maintain the fabric of our society intact in spite of exposure to all the current madness around the world. (Lee, 1972: Traditional Values and National Identity in Mirror 8, 47)**

**Hence, while English is the language of instruction in education and therefore enjoys an assumed first language status in schools, all students simultaneously study their respective mother tongues for the transmission of the norms of social and moral behaviour (Lee, in Goh et al., 1979 : 5).**



Thus in the fifties and sixties, parents had the choice of sending their children to English medium or vernacular schools. Students were not obliged to learn their mother tongue and where the ethnic languages were taught they were taught poorly because they did not enjoy equal status with English. As a result there grew up a generation of students who had no knowledge of their mother tongue. In the sixties and seventies, pupils also enjoyed the liberty of choosing any one of the three ethnic languages as their school second language, regardless of their ethnic background. In the eighties, however, it became mandatory for pupils to take, as second language, the language of one of their parents. Among other things, this, it was felt, would not only ease the burden of learning the second language but also preserve cultural roots.

It may be worth noting that there has been a great deal of parental concern over the learning of a second language. This is in part due to ministerial policies which have ruled that a pass in the second language is a prerequisite for promotion at various levels of schooling and for university entrance. While parental concern has been with second language learning, the Ministry of Education's concern has been the "low English proficiency of many of our students" (Tay, 1982). Yet, since the 1970s, an increasing number of parents have enrolled their children in English stream schools. In 1960, 51.81 per cent of students were registered in the English stream. This percentage rose to 99% in 1983 (Platt, 1983). The reason for this switch from vernacular schools to English stream schools was due largely to the awareness of the increasing and important role of



English in the international, commercial and business network (Ang, 1994 : 319).

## **Bilingualism**

The introduction of the bilingual policy was a necessary outcome of the increasing trend towards a switch to English stream schools:

**"Without a bilingual policy, the probable outcome would be a smaller number who would become very proficient in English" (Tay, 1982 : 80).**

The bilingual policy sought to keep deculturalization and the erosion of traditional cultural roots at bay (Gopinathan, 1974).

As a policy, bilingualism began with the introduction of bilingual education in 1956. This was the result of the All Party Report on Chinese Education. However, it was only in 1966 that the learning of two languages was made compulsory. English was the language of instruction and Malay, Chinese and Tamil were taught as second languages. In addition to this, Chinese and Indian students had to do a National Language, which was Malay. This requirement was abandoned in 1970. The demarcation of the functional uses and roles of English and the mother tongues crystallised only in the eighties when language consciousness was raised with the Speak Mandarin campaign. Until then, it would not be wrong to say that the role of English for economic survival was clearly understood while little attention was paid to the role of mother tongue learning.

A further boon to bilingualism occurred in 1987, when, to contain the cultural erosion among the Chinese, the Government introduced



the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools. The scheme started with four of the best Chinese schools offering both English and Chinese at first language levels. Today, this number has grown to twenty-one. More and more parents subscribe to the Government's view that a 'Chinese' education will provide their children with the necessary cultural balance, which they fear is rapidly being lost. The language policies bar other ethnic groups from gaining admission to these schools. Entry to these schools is based on outstanding performance at the eleven-plus examination. In non-SAP schools, mother tongues are studied as second languages. Independent and some high attaining autonomous schools may offer the mother tongues at first language level. The irony of the situation is that although mother tongues are emphasized for school success, it is English which enjoys abundant resources and material support. Students and parents are continuously caught in this battle of languages, many satisfying the exam requirement of mother tongue learning while being fully aware of the need also for efficient mastery of English as it holds the key to economic success.

Bilingualism in Singapore does not fit into the Western paradigm of majority and minority languages. English and the mother tongue are given equal weight both in classroom exposure time and grading. However, it has not been without cost. Performance in the second language has been consistently commendable (contrary to parental concerns) (Ang, 1991). At the Primary School Leaving Examination, 97 per cent passed Chinese as Second Language, Malay as Second Language and Tamil as Second Language with an average score of about 80 per cent. At O' level it was 82 per cent. This was in stark



contrast to 40 per cent pass for English as First Language at O' level. As the Minister of State for Education, Mr Tay Eng Soon, has said "English is the real problem for the majority" (1982). The bilingual policy, although posing an additional burden to the students, seems to have potentially 'saved' Singapore from becoming a monolingual country.

The development of bilingual education in Singapore has seen several phases. Till 1978, most school children were taught in English and Mandarin (for the Chinese) and Tamil (for the Indians), despite the fact that 85% did not speak either of these languages at home (Ministry of Education Report, 1978:1). This has, however, changed and a large percentage of children entering school today know at least one school language. This very often is Mandarin for the Chinese pupils, Malay for the Malay and non-Tamil speaking Indian pupils and Tamil for Tamil-speaking Indian pupils. The emphasis is on achieving higher proficiency levels in the two languages.

The emphasis on the mother tongue is evident in the options given to pupils in the last two years of primary education. Depending on their abilities as revealed in the Grade 4 (Primary 4) tracking examination, pupils are recommended for one of three language streams:

**EMI -** pupils learn English and the 'mother tongue' at first language level.

**EM2 -** pupils learn English as first language and the mother tongue as second language.

**EM3 -** pupils learn English as first language and mother tongue at third language level, that is, pupils are taught



**aurai/oral skills as well as appropriate reading and writing skills in the mother tongue.**

**In 1990, the Ministry of Education announced that English, mathematics and the 'mother tongue' are considered foundation subjects vital to secondary school performance and should take up 80% of curriculum time in the primary school (Education Statistics Digest, 1991:4).**

**The question of language education in Singapore therefore revolves around the status and prestige of English and the role of ethnic languages in preserving the cultural roots of the communities concerned. Since 1979 the shift in language emphasis towards English:**

**"...has been achieved by allaying potential fears of de- ethnification through the support given to the different ethnic groups' official languages."  
(Beardsmore, 1994 :47)**

**In instituting the bilingual policy, the primary concern has been the preservation of cultural roots in the face of increased exposure to English and consequently, Western mores and values. As Beardsmore points out, the consequences of this shift:**

**"...are being felt as witnessed by the media coverage of questions of language and culture as major issues of concern." (Beardsmore, 1994 : 47)**

**Headlines in the local English press illustrate this concern - "*Learn English but don't neglect Chinese language, culture (Straits Times, 11/11/1991); "Culture best preserved through mother tongue" Ong Teng Cheong (Sunday Times, 2/2/1992). "Dialect names are an***



*integral part of cultural identity" (Forum page letter, Straits Times, 23/12/1991), "Teochew or Mandarin, it's still Chinese" (Sunday Times, 1/3/1992).*

The initial political decision to use English as the official administrative language, namely its perceived neutral status, amongst the main ethnic groups, was put increasingly to the test in the eighties. The bilingual policy highlighted the individual's ethnic culture and communities became conscious of their own cultures (Gopinathan, 1974; Chiew and Tan, 1970; Chew 1980). A side-effect of the annual Speak Mandarin Campaign was non-Chinese Singaporeans fearing Mandarin replacing English as the lingua franca and, perceiving the economic advantage of learning Mandarin, wanted their children to study Mandarin as the second language in school. In the early eighties, the Ministry of Education introduced a ruling barring non-ethnic Chinese from studying Mandarin as a second language.

The emphasis on the learning of the mother tongue to preserve the communities' cultural integrity and heritage was not well received with all sections of the population. The English-educated Chinese, who were very often economically successful, had trouble learning Mandarin. This was aggravated by the "Speak Mandarin" campaign. The suggestion that a Chinese person who could not speak Mandarin had lost touch with his/her cultural roots, seared the raw nerve of many dialect and English-speaking Chinese. It was felt that cultural values can be learnt just as well through English (Straits Times 10/10/1992). Thus the role of English in a neutral capacity to



ensure social cohesion and promote nation building was being increasingly questioned. The voice of the Chinese-educated was particularly loud. To continue using English as a cohesive force to merge Singaporeans into one nation, was to endanger loss of ethnic values. The height of the concern has been the socialization into a new culture and set of values - a set of values which has been felt to be detrimental to the social nexus and continued integration of Singaporeans as a nation.

Although bilingualism as a policy has been in existence for almost three decades now, the labels used to describe the language status in Singapore do not always reflect the linguistic reality. For example, a child growing up in a household using Hokkien or Cantonese and learning English and Mandarin in school is not considered trilingual. This is because bilingualism is defined strictly as 'proficiency' in English and in one other official language' (Tay, 1984: 5). All other Chinese varieties (except Mandarin, which is the official language) are regarded as 'dialects'. The Chinese child speaking Hokkien at home is thus assigned Mandarin as the "mother tongue". Similarly, an Indian child speaking Hindi or Malayalam at home, may be doing Tamil or Malay as a second language in school. In other words, the second language children learn in school may not always be their mother tongue (second language in this study, follows the definition of the Ministry of Education, Singapore and refers to the child's mother tongue, which is based on ethnicity. The issue of mother tongue becomes complicated with inter-ethnic marriages. The first language for all school-going Singaporean children is English, which is the medium of education as well as the official working language).



## **Singapore English: Definition and Use**

**English is the working language in Singapore. With the emphasis on maintaining ethnic languages for cultural preservation, English has been relegated to a purely functional domain (used mainly in the workplace). It transcends these domains when creativity is given a little attention periodically. Although the English language is a British legacy, the British did not establish roots in Singapore long enough for them to have an all-consuming influence, as they did in India (the British left Singapore in 1959). It is, therefore, a new, non-native variety characterized by intrusions from other dialects such as Hokkien, and Cantonese and the Malay language. This has perhaps given rise to an indigenized variety where particular vocabulary, syntax and phonology are intelligible only to Singaporeans. Code-switching is a feature of the use of English in Singapore and Singaporeans code-switch with great ease, frequency and confidence. The cultural contextualization of English has accelerated in the last few years with the concern to create a Singaporean identity. The literary scene and the media (television) have largely contributed to the development of a Singaporean variety of English.**

**The situation in Singapore schools is that Standard British English, is officially claimed to be used, but teachers use an acrolectal/mesolectal variety of Singapore English, while many students use a mesolectal/basilectal variety of English at home and in**



school. The television, which is a major source of influence for many Singaporeans, especially children, displays a preference for British/American accented speech with regard to news and current affairs programme presenters, while at the same time promoting local English drama where code-switching is a norm. In addition there is a tendency for expatriate native-speaker teachers, curriculum planners, materials writers and examiners to maintain a 'foreign' standard while the users of the language namely the students and teachers, develop and use a Singapore standard of English.

The 1980 Census of Population, cited twelve per cent of the population using English as the predominant home language. This had increased to twenty per cent in the 1990 Census. An increasing number of Singaporean households claimed to use English as their main home language. Although this contradicts the government's call to maintain ethnic languages for cultural preservation, it also reveals the reality of the situation in the households. A possible explanation for the use of English as the main home language could be that these were parents who did not benefit from a bilingual education and left school as monolinguals. Another reason is the awareness that English is vital for success. Chinese-educated parents in particular, would not want their children to experience similar hardships, for example, Nanyang University graduates had great difficulty obtaining relevant employment (Nanyang University was a Chinese university set up by the Chinese community for the sole purpose of catering to the higher education needs of the Chinese



community). Their lingering discontent cost political votes for the ruling party in two elections.

While the increased use of English at home has created in the eyes of the government a de-culturalized English-educated elite group and is causing concern, it has also given rise to the establishment of a new and non-native variety of Singapore English. There has been much debate over the variety to be taught in schools although implicitly it is the educated British English model that is advocated. National language management has resulted in more time being allocated to language teaching at the primary school and languages carrying more weight at all major examinations (Pakir, 1992 : 243).

The issue of English language use in Singapore is not limited to bilingualism. Issues of cultural maintenance and national and ethnic identities loom large in ensuring successful bilingualism.

## **THE SINGAPORE SCHOOL SYSTEM**

All pupils entering Primary One go through a bilingual programme with lessons in English and one of the three official mother tongues, Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. Pupils do Mathematics, Health Education, Music, Art and English in English at first language level and learn the mother tongue as a second language. 33% of curriculum time is set aside for English language and 27% for mother tongue teaching (Yip et al., 1991). All children have a



**minimum of ten years education with ability-based streaming throughout.**

**The old primary school system implemented in 1979 was revised in 1991. It was claimed that the revision was necessary to ensure an intelligent and skilled workforce and to -**

**"...facilitate the inculcation of sound Asian values to serve as a cultural ballast in the face of rapid progress and change" (Report on Improving Primary School Education, 1991 : 1)**

**The Review pointed out that there is a need to provide pupils with an adequate grounding in English and mathematics so that they are prepared for further education and training. This is particularly so with the lower 20% of the school population. The Review stated that because many of the slower pupils spoke dialect or their mother-tongue at home, an early decision by the school as to whether pupils should learn the mother tongue or put in extra effort to improve English language proficiency will serve them better. Because curriculum time is finite, it was felt this decision on the level at which (first or second or third language level) English and the mother tongue should be studied would ensure they acquired adequate competency in the working language and mathematics. The revised system provides for a seven year primary education, which places emphasis on English, the mother tongue and mathematics. This comprised a one year preparatory stage (pre-school), a four year foundation stage (Primary One to Primary Four) and a two year orientation stage (Primary Five to Primary Six). Curriculum time in Primary One to Primary Four, while retaining the time for English (33%) and mother tongue and moral education**



**(27%), was distributed between 20% for mathematics and 20% for other subjects. A further revision was that of delaying formal streaming at the end of Primary Three to the end of Primary Four and providing three language streams at Primary Five and Primary Six. Although streaming at Primary Four is based on ability, parents have the final say on the stream their children go to.**

### **The Perception/Role of Education In Singapore Society**

**Because of the examination system and criteria for entry to higher education, competition is rife at every level of education. Besides internal tracking, national tracking keeps both parents and children under constant pressure. The pressures of learning two languages and excelling in both place stress on all involved. This pressure has in fact given rise to the proliferation of tuition teachers and tuition centres. Such cramming begins as early as five years of age to ensure children have a head start at school. Additionally, the provision of out-of-school activities to give children an added advantage is common practice. The effort expended by parents on providing additional out-of-school support of the nature described above is in great part due to the high premium placed on education. For the individual, education is an important means of social mobility. For the society at large, education is the only means of staying competitive in an internationally-pegged economy. The recent ranking of schools based on school examination results ("O" and "A" level examinations) is published annually in the major**



**newspapers. Competition to obtain places in a good school (with the best academic results) is very keen. And parents ensure their children make it to the good schools and obtain good results by taking leave from work to supervise and assist their children in exam preparations.**

**As demonstrated, although English is deemed to be the official working language and the language of instruction, in actual fact, it is the second or third language for many children. Thus, a related issue with learning and teaching English in Singapore is the non-native language status. For a long time the education system relied on Britain for methods and materials. English language textbooks began to be locally written and published only in the seventies with the setting up of the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore. Major examinations at the secondary and post-secondary levels have relied completely on the Cambridge Examination Syndicate. The continued reliance on the British Examination authorities, a long time after independence is due to the concern for maintaining internationally acceptable standards. The fact that many Singaporeans still regard themselves as speaking English as a second language has been brought about by dependence on external standards, materials and measurement yardsticks. In fact, a recent suggestion to assess the "O" level examination papers in Singapore, rather than in Britain, met with mixed reactions with many Singaporeans fearing the effect of this decision on the international marketability of their certificates (Straits Times, 27/7/1994).**



**From the above discussion, it can be seen that the learning of English in Singapore is a complex issue. It is very much connected with economic and cultural concerns. While many Singaporeans may be able to speak more than one language, they may not have attained adequate mastery of any one language. Singaporeans may be bilingual but not biliterate because biliteracy implies the ability to read, write, speak and listen equally proficiently in two languages.**

**Thus, although English is the medium of instruction and taught as a subject the continued reference to it as a purely functional language by Singapore politicians sends conflicting signals to learners and teachers.**

**The question which arises is whether language can be taught in such a way that it only serves the purposes declared by the government. If so, what will the end product be? Against this background arises the adoption of pedagogic approaches from outside Singapore for the teaching of English. In the Singapore primary classroom, the approaches to language teaching and learning which are advocated, may not match the teachers' and learners' cultural orientation to literacy and learning.. The issues arising from the learning of English in the primary classroom in Singapore are threefold:**

- 1) English is a second language over which few have mastery.**
- 2) English is taught for economic reasons.**
- 3) Approaches which are being advocated and used may conflict with the children's and teachers' cultural and linguistic understanding and experience of teaching and learning literacy.**



**The approaches advocated in the classroom, may conflict with Singaporean perceptions of learning, and the role of talk and adult-child interaction. There may arise a basic ideological conflict, namely, that the talk curriculum advocated by the current approaches to literacy in the primary classroom in Singapore may not coincide with teachers' and parents' perception and use of talk with children and its role in learning.**

### **The Learning of English- Some Issues**

**English, introduced by the British for political reasons then, is here to stay. The increased emphasis on mother tongue learning is not its death knell. In fact, the changing economic survival pattern of Singapore will necessitate its increased use. One might expect that the concern for Singaporeans, then, might be the effect the mastery of the English language will/may have on their ethnic and Singaporean identities. More importantly, they are likely to be concerned with the adequate mastery of a language for instrumental reasons. No language is value free. English, being an established and world language, is culturally loaded. Calling for higher proficiency in English and plugging into the information networking will mean Singaporeans may not be able to escape some of the values embedded in the language.**

**Language thought and culture are intertwined. As Vygotsky (1968) stated, thought, as manifested in outward behaviour, is linked to culture**



**and language. It is language which gives thought expression. And that expression both originates from the culture and shapes it further. The world views of two individuals speaking two different languages are bound to be different. Singaporeans, accessing the information network through English may absorb both the information, the culture and the world view of that language.**

**The close nexus between language, thought and culture is but one argument against the perceived neutrality of English or any other language. Another argument is its accessibility. English has always been a middle-class language in Singapore and many other post-colonial countries. For many middle-class children English is the home language. This gives them an advantage in school in enabling them to better cope with school-based literacy expectations. In addition, life chances in terms of better employment opportunities are more accessible to them (Kwan-Terry & Kwan-Terry, 1993).**

**On the other hand, with the increased emphasis on mother-tongue learning and the relegation of English to matters of economic functioning, many Singaporeans have focused on providing their children with a good foundation in their respective ethnic languages. This means for many, English will only be a school language and limited in its domains of use. Thus, although English is the working language in Singapore, the variety which is commonly spoken is "Singlish". This**



situation may have arisen in part because the lack of fluency in English seems to be dealt with very often by a switch to Mandarin regardless of the ethnic orientation of the person being communicated with.

### **THE SINGAPOREAN WAY OF LIFE**

A description of the Singaporean way of life will help provide an understanding of the communicative styles and cultural values that people bring to literacy. Increasing affluence and the attractions of office and factory employment have resulted in a higher female labour force participation rate and consequent increased demand for domestic help. This necessitates families employing foreign live-in maids to provide child-care and other household duties. Despite the high economic cost for the families, (the government imposes a monthly levy of \$350 on each foreign maid) and the social cost of using and relying on such support services, this dependence is increasing.

The foreign worker syndrome permeates every facet of life in Singapore. Foreign workers are a feature of the business and domestic scene in Singapore. Domestic maids from the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and China are employed by Singapore households.

The reliance on foreign maids impacts upon the literacy acquisition of Singaporean children. Foreign maids, depending on their countries of origin, may either speak the child's home language or, speak no English or a native variety reflecting their national



background. Children left in their care for an entire day will be influenced in their linguistic development through interaction with the maid every day. In addition, as pointed out in this chapter, the question of which and whose culture the young child may be exposed to arises. A maid, by virtue of her job description and her educational background, may not be in a position to provide young Singaporean children with the types of literacy experiences which parents and siblings may be able to provide.

Families which cannot afford a maid have the option of child-care centres. Established to cater for working mothers, the child-care centres vary in quality in terms of personnel as well as facilities. Working mothers with children in child-care centres are given a child-care subsidy. The qualifications of child-care personnel vary with many of them having no professional qualification and having less than an 'O' level academic attainment. Many of the personnel are also more fluent in Mandarin than English. For this reason, the medium of communication in many child-care centres is Mandarin with Singlish. Many Malay families, however, may not have extended family support or are financially unable to access child-care facilities or hire a maid. In response to this, there is a growing trend of mosques providing child-care facilities in their premises. Here again, the language of communication is very often Malay with Singlish. A few child-care centres have a very small number of Malay and Indian child-care personnel.

The sum total of child-care arrangements available to Singapore families has implications for early literacy development and



**interactional patterns in the classroom. Children cared for by child-care teachers and adults, whose cultural orientation to talk in learning differs from the talk curriculum advocated in the primary classroom, may have difficulty coping with the school's requirement and expectation of collaborative, participatory learning.**

**A trend, arising out of the government's housing policies and urbanisation, is the increase in nuclear families. With 85 per cent of the population living in Housing and Development Board flats and the increased affluence and preference for privacy, many children grow up without the contact with grandparents or an extended family.**

**Family literacy practices in Singapore can be viewed against this background. The foreign maid syndrome, working parents and nuclear families imply reduced family interaction. It is through interaction that families inculcate culture and attitudes.**

**Literacy practices associated with reading and writing, as modelled by parents at home differ across Singaporean households. New practices such as window-shopping, reflecting the modern, affluent living, seem to be on the rise. And yet parents as care-givers are seen as important models for literacy (Wells, 1987) and nurturing appropriate literacy skills before the child enters schools and in the first few years of elementary schooling.**

**Adult literacy practices in Singapore homes seem to be limited to newspaper reading and watching television (see Pupil Profiles, Chapter 6, pp. 493-532). Most Singaporeans who read, subscribe to The Straits**



**Times, which reflects official thinking and is felt to report more serious information. The New Paper is an afternoon tabloid, the readership of which has trebled in the last one year. Singaporeans also subscribe to ethnic language newspapers. Of these, the Chinese daily, Sin Chew Jit Poh has a very large circulation, followed by the Malay daily, Berita Harian. Readership of the Tamil newspaper is restricted largely to foreign Indian workers, although circulation increases when there are special editions to coincide with special occasions and when parents are exhorted to subscribe to it by school teachers.**

**Literacy activities such as reading bills, writing payments of different sorts do not seem to be common activities. This is because many Singaporeans, except the elderly, make bill payments through electronic arrangements such as GIRO. Even schools do not collect school fees in cash from children now. They are settled by GIRO. Similarly, making shopping lists and writing out children's birthday invitations (taken over by McDonalds) may be foreign to many ordinary Singaporeans.**

**Second-hand bookshops are few and far between. The major bookshops, such as TIMES and MPH stock popular fiction. It is only in the last two years that these bookshops have been observed to set aside a small space for children's books. The display, however, is relatively small. Reading and writing is not one of the favourite pastimes of Singaporeans (Lee, 1991). The Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew (1991) commented in Parliament how he was impressed with the Japanese who read even while waiting in the subway and lamented the absence of this habit among Singaporeans.**



**Membership at libraries has increased nevertheless, although active membership may not be large. Every housing estate has a modern library with the latest in technology. Talks and workshops on literacy are organised periodically but participation is generally poor.**

**The National Book Development Council organises an annual International Book Fair every September. This coincides with the school semester break. The massive fair is the meeting place of book distributors and publishers from around the world. Although organised with the sole aim of creating a reading population by nurturing the reading habit, the fair has, in recent years, turned into a stationery and computer software fair. The increase in the number of stands promoting pre-school books, encyclopaedias, assessment books, and computer software, is noteworthy. This change in the composition of the fair is a reflection of the Singaporean parents' concern to provide their children with a head start in education.**

**Judging by the increase in the number of centres offering computer classes in the last three years, computer literacy in young children is on the rise because parents feel it is the technology of tomorrow and equipping their children with it will give them a necessary head start. This is illustrated in the increase in private centres conducting computer classes for children, and the number of computer software shops which draw huge weekend crowds, many of them families.**

**Many Singaporean adults spend their after work hours in front of the television. Daily Chinese serials during prime time (7pm-10pm) are a national draw. Viewer ratings for Chinese serials are very high**



**and they are watched by Singaporeans regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. Locally produced English sit-coms are favourite viewing for families, especially children.**

**Many children's literacy practices revolve around the daily task of assessment books and attending tuition lessons. Tuition lessons are a norm for many children upon school entry (except those whose parents cannot afford it). Increasingly they are seen as a pre-school necessity. Tuition is a lucrative economic activity in Singapore, engaged in by many teachers as well as 'A' level and university students. In addition to established tuition centres, community centres and ethnic self-help groups (SINDA, Mendaki and CDAC) conduct a range of classes in various subjects. Tuition is considered a necessity not just for academically weaker students but also for bright students who want to keep ahead.**

**Assessment books are common features in every Singaporean home with school-going children. Parents buy assessment books and papers regularly throughout the year. Many children spend hours doing assessment books during the end of year school vacation, to gain a head start over their peers and as preparation for the next grade and throughout the year for practice at above-grade level. There exist bookshops devoted exclusively to selling assessment books.**

**Besides tuition and doing assessment books, an increasing number of children also attend music (piano), drama and self-defence classes. These classes are becoming popular in the wake of society's interest**



**in 'creating' all-rounded individuals. All such classes have foreign examinations and students are given certificates for performance/grade attainment. Classes which provide certification are sought after. Similarly, centres offering foreign certification (Guildhall, Trinity) are highly sought after.**

**Many Singaporean children spend their small amount of free time playing computer games or watching television. Few children use playground facilities made available in housing estates or engage in outdoor games, except during school physical education lessons. The preference for passive engagement (Computer games, television) may be the outcome of the tremendous academic pressure which is placed on children by parents and teachers as well as the protective orientation of many parents towards their children. The debilitating effect of the heat outdoors is another contributing factor.**

**The proliferation of tuition centres, regular tuition lessons and practice of doing assessment books is a reflection of the importance Singapore parents place on educational achievement. They also reflect the approach to learning as one of rigorous and repeated practice aimed at attaining perfection. Discipline is emphasized and many children are not allowed to engage in any form of play during the school term. School holidays, except for the end of year holidays, are used for revision, extra tuition and rigorous completion of assessment books.**

**Besides academic help, parents also provide emotional and moral support. Many parents concoct special soups (Ginseng) and dishes**



**which are believed to enhance memory, stamina and consequently their children's performance in the examinations.**

### **The Introduction of Confucianism**

**The introduction of Confucianism in Singapore is relatively recent and was prompted by the concern with deculturalization that was felt to be taking root in the society. The process of urbanization seemed to pave the way for the death of the kampongs (communities) and the development of new towns, the building of which was overseen by the Housing and Development Board. The dispersal and relocation of people into newer communities meant the destruction of traditional customs, folk practices and established networking (Chua, 1991). The basis of social, community and individual relations was transformed from a personal level to a more impersonal, formal level. The urbanization aside, industrialization also brought a significant disruption to the social structure of society. With industrialization, more young and female Singaporeans found themselves in demand. With the female participation rate in the work force increasing, the role and function and make-up of the family changed. A side-effect of industrialization which went hand in hand with urbanization, was the rise of consumerism, individualism and utilitarianism. These values were seen by the government as incompatible with traditional Singapore society as they were "seen to be non-Asian and anti-tradition". (Kuo, 1992 : 4). This new development was seen to give rise to a moral crisis. The concern was not new but gained political**



attention in the seventies only because urgent matters of nation building had been dealt with by then. The moral crisis was attributed to Westernization which was seen as a natural concomitant of industrialization. So long as scientific knowledge and technical know-how came from the West, the transmission of "decadent Western values" was inevitable. But it was unanimously felt by the leaders that the erosion of traditional Asian values had to be countered. And the best route to achieve this was through reviving traditional Asian values (Chua, 1993). This would build up confidence in the ethnic cultures and provide a greater sense of identity. It was against this social background that Confucianism set foot in Singapore.

Confucian ethics was introduced as an additional subject for Chinese students not pursuing any of the five religious subjects offered in the compulsory Religious Knowledge course implemented in 1982. This would "give young Singaporeans a cultural ballast against the less desirable aspects of western culture" (Straits Times, 4 February, 1982). Although, introduced as a subject, Confucian Ethics lacked both expertise and resources in Singapore. This came from the American universities in the form of Chinese-American professors who drew up the conceptual framework relevant to Singapore. Meanwhile, major newspapers and key political figures continued publicly discussing the relevance and usefulness of Confucianism to Singapore. Almost overnight, Confucianism had become a Singaporean philosophy (Straits Times, 13 June 1982). Project teams and the establishment of the Institute of East Asian Philosophy



were significant developments in the nurturing of Confucianism as a way of life in Singapore.

The timing of the campaign together with the Speak Mandarin Campaign and the endorsement given it by political figures, while making the promotion of Confucianism seem part of promoting Chinese culture and language, did give cause for concern among the non-ethnic Chinese. Soon Chinese clan organisations and business enterprises latched on to Confucianism. To alleviate the concern and to stress its indigenous nature, it was pointed out that Chinese Singaporeans had always practised Confucianist values, albeit unconsciously. The government was merely formalizing this orientation.

At the same time that Confucianism was gaining a foothold in Singapore, Western scholars like H. Kahn and E. Vogel, upheld the Confucian ethics as the new answer for moral, social and economic decadence. The success of the NIEs (Newly Industrialised Economies) was attributed to Confucianism which gave their people a certain mould of character. Thus, although the introduction of Confucianism was to eliminate the evils of Westernization brought on by rapid industrialization, it soon provided remedies for other internal concerns such as the rise in the number of elderly occupants in welfare and aged homes and the increased demand for public housing.

Although Confucian ethics was made a school subject and vast amounts of resources expended on its promotion, the small student enrolment (17.8%) in the course was disappointing to the authorities. In 1990, barely seven years after its introduction, the subject was



**phased out. Religious knowledge then became an optional subject. With this, the demise of Confucianism in Singapore was signalled.**

**The natural demise of Confucianism with its origins in rural, agricultural society showed the need for a national value system to hold Singaporeans together.**

**In 1988, the First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong urged the need to develop a "national ideology" which Singaporeans across ethnic and religious boundaries can subscribe to, to evolve a unique Singaporean identity.**

**In 1990, the government announced a "White Paper on Shared Values". It interestingly reassured Singaporeans of non-Chinese ethnic origins that it was not the government's intention to "impose Chinese Confucian values on non-Chinese Singaporeans" (Sunday Times, January 6, 1991). The question of the "archaic-ness" of the precepts aside, the practices and values espoused did not seem to have a cultural fit, politically, socially or economically.**

**The following five values were identified as the basis of a set of shared values for Singaporeans:**

- \* Nation before community and society above self;**
- \* Family as the basic unit of society;**
- \* Regard and community support for the individual;**
- \* Consensus instead of contention, and**
- \* Racial and religious harmony.**

**These values are taught in schools in the moral education (moral education is taught in the mother tongues) and social studies lessons. In**



**1988, the government called on organisations, institutions and individuals to propose a list of family values seen to be important to and reflecting Singaporean beliefs and values. These values were compiled into a list. They are filial piety, care and concern, mutual respect, commitment, responsibility and love. Together, these various efforts combine to create a Singaporean identity and a way of life. As expressed beliefs, they constitute the culture of the society and have implications for pedagogic approaches used in the English classroom in Singapore.**

**In addition to parents' anxiety, the setting up of ethnic self-help bodies such as Mendaki (Malay self-help organization), SINDA (Singapore Indian Development Association) and CDAC (Chinese Development Assistance Council) have all emphasized the importance of education for communal and societal advancement. The constant emphasis and the consequent increased awareness has resulted in better examination results of Singaporean students than previous years. There has also been a perceived increase in the literacy rate - 84% in 1980 and 90% in 1990. Biliteracy has also increased from 39% in 1980 to 46% in 1990 - attributable to the successful school bilingual programme. A perceived increase in bilingual literacy, while laudable, needs to be seen in perspective. As pointed out earlier, the use of English in Singapore households has also increased. This raises the issue of language shift and language maintenance particularly among Malay and Indian households. The**



learning of Tamil, in particular, has threatened to remain a school language because of its low economic viability [many students stop using (speaking, reading and writing) Tamil once they leave school].

To sum up, it may be accurate to say that Singaporeans place a high premium on education and the accumulation of paper qualifications. For this reason, while many may complain outright of the stress the school system causes through its numerous tracking, they seem willing to tolerate the pressures for the assurance of better/higher remuneration and better lifestyles (Straits Times 9/12/95). The outcome of all this may be a fairly educated workforce. The emphasis placed on examination success through rigorous work and discipline and the approach to learning as perfected practice, is based on an underlying perception of learning not as a process of negotiated, collaborative engagement and inquiry, but as repeated practice. Such an approach and perception have implications for English language teaching pedagogy, which favours active engagement through dialogue and negotiated meaning-making.

### **WESTERN PEDAGOGIC APPROACHES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: SOME ISSUES**

What pertains to this study in the light of the above discussion, is the approaches used in the primary classrooms in Singapore to teach English. In teaching the language, approaches that have been



successful in New Zealand, Australia and America have been adopted with slight modifications. The approaches themselves are based on a particular philosophy of learning, of children and of adult-child interaction. These philosophies may not coincide with the beliefs, perceptions and practices of Singaporeans. Approaches which conflict with the linguistic and cultural background of the child may not produce the desired results (Phillips, 1982; Luke, 1993; Boggs, 1984; Au, 1995; Freebody, et al, 1996; Anstey & Bull, 1996). The seriousness of the potential mismatch is best understood if we remember that a large percentage of children in Singapore begin school with little or no knowledge of English. Yet, English is the medium of instruction for mathematics and science and English. On school entry, the child is thus confronted with not just a new language and unfamiliar content, but also a whole new approach, which emphasises a task curriculum.

Children come to school with a range of language and literacy practices established through their experiences in the home and community. Given the vast range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds children come from, there may be marked differences in literacy experience between the children in any one classroom. The English language teacher in the primary classroom in Singapore is expected to use a particular approach to English literacy which the children may be unfamiliar with. The question of successful learning thus arises.

Two of these prescribed practices are Shared Book Reading and the Class Dictated Story. A fundamental principle underlying the



**Shared Book Reading session and the Class Dictated Story is the encouragement of pupil talk. The teacher, through her supportive talk and response, is supposed to encourage pupils to talk round and about the story (REAP Guidelines, 1987). This talk encourages the use of language as well as enabling pupils to learn from their peers. The teacher's facilitating questions, response and comments are also aimed at enabling children to acquire the necessary reading and linguistic skills. Emulating the Western bed-time reading situations, the conduct of the Shared Book Reading session is aimed at facilitating language acquisition in a secure, warm and non-threatening environment (REAP Guidelines, 1987). Both the approaches necessitate pupil engagement in talk to express personal response to the shared story and shared personal experiences in both the shared reading and shared writing. The teacher through her warm approach is to create opportunities for the development of collaborative, negotiated talk (REAP Guidelines, 1987; PETS Teachers' Handbook 2A, 1996).**

**To sum up, it can be said that the political exhortation to learn English for economic reasons and the ethnic languages for the preservation of cultural values and the constant reminder that an English education erodes 'Eastern' values which are implied to be better, has implications for the English language curriculum currently in use in Singapore. The political style, sociocultural histories and the constant exhortation of the people by the government to strive towards success, have a bearing on the values, aspirations, expectations and lifestyles of Singaporeans. The top-down approach, the importance of hierarchy, and the**



government implementation of social, economic and educational policies, which are deemed to serve the common good, describes a particular approach to government. Collaboration and negotiation through shared talk is not the political style or cultural experience of many Singaporeans. Leaders (ministers and parliamentary representatives) as sole decision-makers who have been given the mandate to guide the rest of the citizens, is accepted without question. Retribution for misconduct is also swift in such high office. Both these practices and perceptions are embedded in Confucian philosophy and permeate every aspect of daily life. Within the home-school context, children are therefore considered to be subservient to adults (parents and teachers) and teachers to principals. This reduces the willingness to take risks because respect for authority and age and the need to save face rank high in any interaction or context. Questioning authority is also considered taboo. Such notions and practices influence and mediate free expression. Pedagogic approaches based on behalf of freedom of expression and personal responses may therefore be difficult to implement given the cultural experiences of Singaporeans to the contrary. The political, economic and sociocultural factors described in this chapter, which have created a Singaporean way of life influence the practice of adult-child talk and the role and use of talk in learning and the acquisition of English language literacy in Singapore.

The next chapter looks at the place of culture and context in literacy acquisition and classroom talk as demonstrated in the various studies and research that has been undertaken hitherto.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

**This chapter reviews the literature that has contributed to the formulation of the conceptual framework of this study. As the focus of this study is the use of talk during shared reading and shared writing lesson in school and at home and the occurrence of adult-child talk in the three main cultures in Singapore, the literature review will be related to the research on classroom interaction analysis and cultural perspectives on literacy and talk.**

**Models of analysis in classroom interaction studies and perspectives of literacy documented in the major research works on literacy will be reviewed and assessed to determine their strengths and weaknesses in the light of their relevance and applicability to this study.**

**The review of literature is divided into four sections. The first part describes research pertaining to the analysis of classroom talk. Frameworks developed by Flanders (1966), Bellack (1966), Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), Mehan (1979), Barnes (1976) and Malcolm (1979) are reviewed for their contributions to the study of classroom talk. This is followed by a discussion of the sociolinguistic studies (Gumperz & Herasimchuck, 1973) which introduced the importance of context in communication.**

**The second section of the review looks at ethnographic studies which highlighted the place of patterns of adult-child talk at home and their impact on classroom participation patterns. This home-school link leads to a review of perspectives of literacy at the societal level. The sociocultural situatedness of literacy necessitates a description of the place of home literacy practices in**



**school achievement, which in turn emphasizes the function of social class and culture in literacy practices.**

**The third section looks at research into talk in reading and writing. The Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story in primary classrooms in Singapore, which is the focus of this study, is based on a talk curriculum. The review of relevant literature will reveal the role of talk in beginning reading and writing.**

**The fourth section surveys research on language education in Singapore with a view to describing the changing research interests and the contributions of ethnographic approach to language education research.**

### **Classroom Interaction Analysis**

**Studies of classroom interaction are reviewed because these capture the occurrence and nature of talk that take place in the context of a language classroom. Classroom interaction studies can be divided into two broad categories. Studies done in the 1960s (Flanders, 1966; Bellack, 1966) focused on capturing the occurrence of teacher talk in the classroom. Studies done in the 70s (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Mehan, 1979) analysed the type of teacher talk occurring in the classroom with some attention to pupil response. The earlier studies focus on frequency counts of teacher talk while the latter tend to focus on describing the type of teacher talk within a framework. This explains the adoption of quantitative analytic systems to capture the phenomenon of teacher talk in the early studies and the development of a descriptive framework in the later studies.**

**Interest in classroom interaction research began in the 1960s with the focus being on product rather than process. Procedures that were developed to**



study classroom interaction therefore tended to adopt quantitative approaches, which allowed the use of a large database and quick, systematic analysis. Samples of classroom language however, were limited due to the difficulty of accessing classrooms and the limited availability of sophisticated equipment for recording classroom data. Flanders' Interaction Analysis System (1966) is amongst the first systematic techniques developed to observe classroom verbal behaviour. Flanders uses pre-determined categories to codify observed classroom interaction, which is recorded over small time intervals. A frequency count is then done of the coded behaviour and the interaction described in quantitative terms. The FIAC identifies ten categories of classroom interaction, seven of which describe teacher talk, two describe pupil talk, with the last one functioning as a residual category.

The categories describing teacher talk are:

- 1] accepting feelings
- 2] praising or encouraging
- 3] accepting ideas
- 4] asking questions
- 5] lecturing
- 6] giving directions
- 7] criticising or justifying

Pupil talk is categorised as

- 8] responding to teacher and
- 9] initiating talk.

The tenth category is labelled silence or confusion. In this system, the observer works with a coding sheet which has the ten categories and codes the talk that



takes place in the classroom every three seconds, recording it sequentially. Flanders (1970:6) recommends “an average speed of 10 to 30 symbols per minute.” It has been pointed out that this would mean about 800 tallies in a forty-minute lesson. These codings and their respective scores are then computed and “an analysis can be made of the frequency of events in each category, a profile of the distribution can be drawn, or a simple display can be created which shows how each event is part of a chain. Inferences about the chain of events can be made keeping in mind the limitations of the overall process”(Flanders, 1970:6). Teachers’ use of talk, in particular, teaching styles, teacher control of topic and use of pupil responses are then compared based on the tabulated scores (Delamont, 1976:104).

Despite the criticisms that have been levied against Flanders’ system (Stubbs, 1976; Delamont,1976), the quantitative classification of talk lent the analysis reliability and clarity. The relatively simple and objective instrument, which could be administered to large numbers, also guards against observer prejudice. Neither interpretation nor inference of teacher or pupil behaviour by the observer is possible. The ten categories mean that teachers’ use of talk can be compared on the basis of identical categories. Another advantage is the statistical analysis that the coding system facilitates. This means relatively quick feedback to teachers.

Useful as these features are, they have their limitations. Flanders admits the limitations of his system in saying that he is focussed on “describing the balance between teacher initiative and teacher response and tracing this balance as it varies with time, instructional purposes and classroom settings” (Flanders, 1970:423). The analysis therefore captures very



general patterns of teacher talk in particular the effect of “directness and “indirectness” of teachers’ influence on pupil attitude and achievement (Flanders, 1970:102).

A major drawback of Flanders’ system is that it reduces classroom talk to minute units, which are discrete. Interaction in any context is complex and depends on the participants’ interpretation of the context, the utterance and the task at hand. Classroom interaction encompasses the use of language to fulfil more than the seven discrete categories. Teacher-pupil behaviour is not conditioned to conform to a certain pattern or to specific categories. In limiting the coding of teacher-pupil behaviour to ten categories, Flanders does not accommodate other forms of interaction that may arise in the classroom. As Stubbs (1976:71) states “the pre-selected inflexible coding categories tend to treat both teacher and pupil talk as discrete utterances rather than as part of a discourse structure”. The meaning of an utterance is derived from the rest of the discourse. In breaking up talk into small units, the “conditional relevance” of talk referred to by Edward and Furlong (1978:41) is also ignored.

In allocating seven out of the ten categories to teacher talk, Flanders emphasizes his belief in the importance of teacher talk, which he says balances the interaction that takes place in the classroom (Flanders, 1970:36). Similarly, the two categories for pupil talk reflect his perception of its role in learning and interaction. The holistic, integrated approach to learning which characterizes literacy classrooms calls for negotiated learning, where pupils are more actively involved in the learning process. This requires teachers to take on roles other than that of a transmitter of knowledge. The negotiation, collaboration and shared learning that goes on in literacy lessons, generates



interaction that cannot be contained within the ten categories. The discrete coding means that it is surface behaviour that is being observed and recorded. As Walker and Adelman (1975), Stubbs and Delamont(1975) and Malcolm (1979) have pointed out, the FIAC works within a transmission model of communication rather than an interactive model and the context of informal classrooms.

The FIAC has been criticized for its strict time-unit sequence. This means that the response to a question is coded for its frequency of occurrence rather than its discourse link. Any interaction is negotiated through several sequences. The focus on frequency inevitably omits this sequential development. It also fails to account for participation monopoly by some pupils so that if the same pupil responds to teacher questions the coding system would record this as the number of times pupil talk occurs. This gives a misleading picture of pupil involvement.

Teachers and pupils use of language and their utterances can be meaningfully interpreted only in the light of the entire discourse and not with single utterances in isolation. But the speed at which the observer has to categorize utterances leaves little time for reflective interpretation. This together with the discrete coding into limited categories and the breaking up of the talk into small units gives rise to the possibility of a misinformed or inaccurate categorization. Teachers tagging questions to responses, framing restatements after inaccurate responses and pupils seeking clarification or posing a question when a response is due, are common occurrences in classrooms. Teacher questions can function as evaluative feedback first and seeking elicitation second. Mehan (1979) refers to this as the multiple functions of an



utterance. Flanders' teacher talk categories in being mutually exclusive underscores the range of functions an utterance performs simultaneously.

The coding system also overlooks particular teacher-pupil interaction styles that may have developed over time and function as shared knowledge not transparent to the outside observer. As Walker and Adelman (1975) state, classrooms have their own culture which cannot be encased within specific categories. The interaction that takes place in a classroom is based on the perceptions of the participants and the interpretations accorded to the tasks at hand. These may not be visible to the observer and cannot be captured by the inflexible coding categories.

The coded category system also poses the question of validity of observer interpretation. Observers working at "an average speed of 10 to 30 symbols per minute" (Flanders, 1970:32), may not be able to interpret teacher and pupil talk accurately. When the system is used by a large number of observers, the possibility of multiple and varying interpretations is inevitable. This complexity of interpretation is described by Bailey thus :

In answer to a child's complaint a teacher says: "It's difficult, but you can do at least the first exercise." If the teacher accepts the child's analysis of the problem, is she accepting the child's feeling (Category 1) or the child's idea (Category 3)? Or is she not accepting anything, but instead justifying (Category 7) the work that must be done? Further, there are elements of encouragement (Category 2) and giving directions (Category 6) in this sentence which would certainly confound an observer .

(Bailey 1975:338)

Another criticism of the category system is that it does not account for culturally different participation patterns that may exist in a classroom. Every teacher question need not be followed by a pupil response. In some cultures,



pupils respond only in small group situations and to peers rather than in whole class contexts and teacher- fronted discussions. Philips' [1972] study of Warm Spring Indian students attests to this cultural variation of classroom behaviour. Such differences in talk patterns have been observed by other researchers (Au and Jordan, 1981; Erickson and Mohatt, 1984). Culturally different participation structures may generate different types of classroom talk, which the FIAC will not be able to capture.

Generally, Flanders' system can be said to classify classroom talk as either initiation or response, with the teacher almost always doing the initiating and the pupils the responding. This broad categorization, the discrete breaking up of talk into small units and the speed of recording reduces its applicability to interactive, informal classrooms. In failing to account for participants' perception of the teaching-learning role, the culturally different participant structures that exist in heterogeneous classrooms and the sequential development of the lesson, the FIAC system ignores the sociocultural context of classroom interaction. The form-function match of the system is not only inaccurate but also simplifies the complexities of classroom talk and interaction. The quantitative approach also reduces the nature of the feedback that can be given to teachers. Feedback will be limited to the ten categories rather than an evaluation of appropriate teaching styles in the context of the learning situation and the needs of the pupils.

Bellack's (1966) study of classroom interaction is focussed on the pedagogical moves that occur during a lesson. Basing his analysis on data collected in experimental situation, where the teachers teach predetermined lessons, he proposes four general moves of Structuring, Soliciting, Responding and Reacting. Within this hierarchy, he identifies twenty-one cycles of various



patterns of pedagogical moves. Each move is rule-governed as in a game. This as Morrison and McIntyre point out provides an insight into “the content and logic of classroom communication” (1972:11). The teachers and pupils make verbal moves according to the rules. In the Structuring move, the context for subsequent actions is set. This move may launch or halt interaction and therefore plays an important role. Soliciting moves, on the other hand, elicit a verbal or physical response. Questions and requests are grouped into this category. While these two moves are almost always performed by the teacher and trigger an interaction, Responding moves almost always follow soliciting moves and cover pupils’ use of talk. Reacting moves follow responding moves and serve to modify or evaluate a previous utterance. In a sense the four moves can be grouped into two broad categories, initiating and responding.

The four pedagogical moves are complemented by four Content categories of

- a) substantive meaning,
- b) substantive-logical meaning,
- c) instructional meaning, and
- d) instructional-logical meaning.

Substantive meaning refers to the content focus of the lesson while substantive-logical meaning refers to the cognitive processes that teachers use to explicate the content, such as when explanations or definitions are advanced. The third category refers to routine instructional procedures with the fourth category describing didactic moves that elucidate the teaching and learning. Giving instructions and providing feedback will thus fall into this category.

Bellack’s system of ‘moves’ places classroom discourse within a hierarchical structure and emphasizes the importance of meaning in the form-function



dyad of interaction. In allocating three out of the four pedagogical moves to the teacher, Bellack's model like Flanders' FIAC system, upholds the teacher as the key player in classroom interaction. Although it was not intended by Bellack's model, the allocation of the major portion of the pedagogical moves to the teacher, displays a hegemonic structuring of classroom discourse with the power of facilitating and controlling the discourse left entirely to the teacher. In identifying the verbal moves made on the basis of certain ground rules, he introduces the concept of rule-governed communication, which structures much of classroom talk as revealed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975).

Bellack's descriptive model, despite setting the ground for the development of models of discourse analysis, is nevertheless too simplistic. Firstly, although the four pedagogical moves provide an explanation for the logic of classroom interaction, they seem to be focussed on teacher talk and more particularly, its pedagogical functions. This ignores the role played by non-pedagogical moves, which complement the four moves identified by Bellack and which communicate meaning thereby enriching classroom discourse. Also, restricting classroom discourse to the pedagogical moves alone, makes the different levels of meaning conveyed in the process of teacher-pupil interaction less transparent. The mutually exclusive hierarchical moves structure, does not record varied moves. Bellack's observation of the predominant cyclical pattern of Soliciting, Responding and Reacting moves by the teacher can be explained by the very broad categories in the model, which fail to capture the multiple levels of interaction that classroom discourse reveals. The model therefore provides a limited framework for observing teacher-pupil talk.



The system of moves proposed by Bellack describes teacher-pupil talk in a transmission mode classroom rather than an interactive, learner-centered classroom. In an interactive classroom within the limits of turn-taking rules and topic maintenance, both teacher and pupils may exercise choice over the nature of their participation as well as topic development. This means teacher and pupil moves cannot be predicted in the hierarchical manner put forth by Bellack. The pre-determined lessons on which Bellack based his study are also not characteristic of informal, interactive classrooms. The open agenda and the shared learning and negotiation found in such classrooms restrict the application of the moves model. The sequential development of the lesson is determined by a number of factors including the prevailing atmosphere in the classroom rather than a teacher pre-determined sequence. Shortcomings as these may be, they served Bellack's needs then and had significant influence on Sinclair and Coulthard's model of Discourse Analysis (1975).

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) pioneered the linguistic description of classroom discourse. "It is a continuing investigation of language function and the organization of linguistic units above the rank of clause" (Coulthard, 1974:229). Working within a Hallidayan framework, the model has five levels, with the highest category, the 'lesson' being made up of 'transactions'. The other levels comprise the 'Exchanges', 'Moves' and 'Acts', the latter being the minimal functional unit in the structure. There are twenty categories of acts, five classes of moves (opening, answering, follow-up, framing and focusing), two categories of exchanges (boundary or teaching) and three categories of transactions (preliminary, medial and final). The 'lesson' is not a discourse unit. Sinclair and Coulthard state that there is no need to suppose a one-to-one correspondence of units between levels (1975:24). The units are identified on the basis of linguistic evidence



presented such as the occurrence of certain linguistic forms marking discourse boundaries (eg. 'Right', 'Okay'). This paradigm for the analysis of classroom discourse, allows for further classification and finer functional discriminations at each of the five levels.

This system of explicating the structure of classroom discourse through hierarchical categories located in empirical data (1977:15-17), has contributed significantly to the analysis of classroom discourse. But as Coulthard (1977:105) acknowledges, the categories are "sufficient to describe the corpus, though not necessarily all classroom discourse". Sinclair & Coulthard's model also fails to provide for the analysis of particular participant strategies in different contexts within the classroom, or take into account the changes that may occur as the nature of the tasks changes or the perception of power by the participants within the given interaction undergoes change. Neither does it make transparent the kind of interactional competence the learner must have to succeed in the classroom. Social conventions and rules that direct and influence the nature of interactions in the classroom is not given adequate consideration in this model. This is a significant consideration because in heterogeneous classrooms (as is the case in Singapore), learners and teachers may have different interaction patterns and conventions, which may give rise to communication gaps and affect meaningful or expected forms of participation.

Sinclair and Coulthard take the discourse as given and identify the rules and procedures by which the interaction was produced. In fact, their decision to focus on the classroom was because, given its formality, the discourse would be guided by clear rules. Their general descriptive system is based on units which are taken to have the same relationship to each other as units in early



forms of systemic grammar (Fairclough, 1994 ). Within a framework of lesson, transaction, exchanges, moves and acts, they derive the rules of discourse. Only discourse contributing to the interaction is categorized. Speech acts not contributing to the interaction are abandoned in the category 'Aside'. The clear development of a structure for the 'transaction' rank of the interaction, explains the perception of classroom interaction as a transaction, which consists of exchanges, opened and closed by boundaries made up of 'framing moves'. These framing moves may or may not be accompanied by other moves, such as focussing moves. An eliciting exchange may thus consist of an 'initiating', 'responding' and feedback moves. A feedback move is very often accompanied by a further initiating move.

Despite taking into consideration the situational factors which affect classroom interaction, the framework lacks a "developed social orientation to discourse, and gives insufficient attention to interpretation" (Fairclough, 1994:15). It also fails to account for culturally different ways of interacting, which will have an effect on the type of discourse that develops in a heterogeneous language classroom. The focus on a traditional teacher-centred classroom, characterized by a transaction mode of teaching may explain the limitations. In not accounting for the range of diverse classroom practices, Sinclair and Coulthard's model of analysis implies that all classroom discourse is homogeneous and 'reifies' particular practices and ideologies. As Fairclough states, it fails "to consider how relations of power have shaped discourse practices, and in failing to situate classroom discourse historically in processes of social struggle and change" (1994:15). Another criticism levied against this model, is the teacher-oriented interpretation. Fairclough(1994) states that instead of describing the data, Sinclair and Coulthard interpret it as well. Thus decisions about the functions of utterances are forced by the



framework, while in reality utterances and discourses remain ambivalent to those outside the context of the exchange (Fairclough,1994:16).

Although the meaning of an utterance can be derived by looking at the context which facilitates its occurrence or production (Austin, 1962----- conditions of 'felicity') , the speech act analysis has limited application in contexts characterized by diverse types of interaction. Interaction in literacy classrooms is as much sociocultural as it is linguistic. Although language is the medium of communication, the perceptions, beliefs, experiences, cultural ways of knowing and telling come together to provide an interpretation of the language and the interaction. Since in the literacy classroom meaning is negotiated by pupils and teachers sharing their world views and experiences, the sociocultural aspect of interaction assumes an important role.

The prescriptive, formalized rules postulated by the Speech Act Theory focus on the structural aspects of interaction and ignore the contextual factors which affect interaction. The universality of speech acts put forth by Gordon and Lakoff in their discussion of conversational postulates and by Brown and Levinson in their description of politeness strategies will not hold in contexts of linguistic varieties and cultural differences. Because speech act strategies vary across cultures the rigid rules for the identification of speech acts within the Speech Act Theory cannot be used satisfactorily. Schmidt and Richards state that "there is sufficient evidence to suggest that speech act strategies will be found to be universal only if they are phrased in extremely general terms" (1982:62). Khoo(1988) provides examples of this lack of generalization when she compares the making of a request in English and in Chinese (107). If the purpose of interaction is the construction of meaning through negotiation



based on shared knowledge and experience then the social and cultural nature of interaction cannot be overlooked.

Despite its limitations, the Speech Act Theory with its formal rules can explicate meaning in classroom interaction and identify speech acts which characterize teacher talk. But it cannot explain or capture the sociocultural determinants of talk which are embedded within the interaction.

Another dimension to analyzing classroom interaction is provided by Mehan in "Learning Lessons" (1979). In emphasizing the need "to spend more time making careful descriptions of what takes place inside schools" (1979:2), Mehan tries to capture the processes (as opposed to the product focus of Flanders, 1970 and Bellack, 1966) of learning and teaching taking place inside classrooms. To examine the processes, he devised the research strategy of "constitutive ethnography", which describes the "social organization of routine, everyday events" (1979:8). In constitutive ethnography, the structure of the events is obtained by the interaction that takes place between the participants. In studying the organization of teacher-pupil interaction in classroom lessons and the activities that structure this interaction, Mehan describes the unfolding of the process of learning in school situations and more significantly, the relationship of socialization to education in formal schooling. Mehan's analysis throws light on "the skills and abilities that students need to display in order to be considered successful in an important classroom endeavour" (1979:34). This success is determined as much by social behaviour as by academic knowledge, though the former has been given little importance in research. Mehan describes the teacher-student interaction in lessons by looking at the hierarchical as well as the sequential structures in the instructional sequences that occur. These sequences are



analyzed in three related parts of an “Initiating” act, a “Replying” act and an “Evaluating” act. The former characterizes the teacher’s most frequent form of participation, while the latter captures pupil engagement. The third act is exclusively the teachers’. Mehan perceives the classroom lesson as sequentially organized within a hierarchical setup. Through the use of turn-allocation strategy, the teacher maintains the basic structure of the lessons. Alongside this strategy, the teacher directs the development and flow of the lesson by ignoring pupil responses, tagging questions to statements, inviting responses and providing evaluative feedback. Pupils respond accordingly to this sequential and hierarchical structuring of the lesson. Mehan’s unit of analysis is the event because as he states:

The unit of analysis in generative-transformational theory is the sentence, while the unit of analysis for constitutive studies is the event. While considering the sentence as the unit for analysis makes an investigation psychological or individualistic in nature, a focus on events moves the investigation to the social or interactional plan.

(1979:75)

Lessons are interactional units which are hierarchically organized. Within this hierarchy are sequential sets which reflect the different phases of the lesson. Both these combine to form the event of the lesson. These lesson sequences involving both teachers and pupils although usually verbal in nature, follow a pattern, namely the I-R-E (Initiation-Response-Evaluation). In each phase of the lesson, the interactional sequence is different. At the beginning of the lesson, when the teacher is focusing the talk on a topic (the instructional phase), the interactional sequences centre around the topic. In the closing phase of the lesson, when the teacher is engaged in informing the pupils of the task they have to do as follow-up, the directive sequence



dominates. Although the interaction sequences change according to the phase of the lesson, the events are all inter-related through the principle of 'reflexive tying'. This maintains the link through the lesson and connects the events together. This implies that both teacher and pupil responses may serve multiple functions because all utterances and interactions are both retrospectively and prospectively connected. Mehan describes this backward and forward connection thus:

The teacher's sanction of a student's action can serve a retrospective and a prospective function simultaneously. Retrospectively, the teacher's sanction serves as an evaluation of an inappropriate action that has occurred in the past; prospectively it serves as a statement of expectation for future actions.

(1979:189)

Although Mehan's model of classroom interaction analysis is an advance over Flanders' quantitative analysis, and locates the social organization of classroom events in the interaction itself, the social context of communication remains a background rather than an active contributing factor to the interaction. The instructional sequence will be influenced by the teacher's and pupils' cultural experiences and patterns of interaction outside the classroom domain. In focusing solely on the social organization within the classroom, without attending to the sociocultural setup existing within the community, which will exert an influence on the pattern of instructional sequence and its development in the classroom, the I-R-E model simplifies the nature and type of talk occurring in the classroom. As pointed out in the analysis of other models of classroom interaction (Flanders, Bellack and Sinclair & Coulthard), Mehan's model has limited applicability in classroom characterize by interactive, shared talk, where turn-taking as well as the predictable sequence of lesson structure and development may not be present.



In such literacy settings, the teacher may not have the prerogative of the initiating or evaluative acts. Similarly, pupils need not be restricted to the responding act. Thus where the sequential development of the lesson does not reside with the teacher alone, the I-R-E model will not reflect the interaction that is taking place.

Malcolm's study of classroom discourse (1979), focuses on non-native speakers learning standard English, namely the Aboriginal children. Their interaction with white Australian teachers is observed for the sociolinguistic interference that arises in such contexts. These two differences distinguish Malcolm's study of classroom discourse and seek to increase our understanding of the types of interactions that can occur in non-homogenous classrooms. Using a Hymesian framework, the study investigated the patterns of classroom interaction in an Aboriginal primary classroom in Australia. Within the broad classification of ten Speech Events, Malcolm identifies fifty routine structures that recurred in the interactions that were observed. These routines are composed of sequences of seven basic types of Speech Acts. They are the acts of eliciting, bidding, nominating, replying, acknowledging, informing and directing. These are further analyzed at the levels of semantic functionality, grammatical coding and context or environment (1979:262). It is the routine structures which reveal the existence of the sociolinguistic interference in the classroom interaction of the Aboriginal child and the Australian teacher. Different ways of communication in each community resulted in different perceptions and patterns of interaction in the classroom.

Unlike Flanders (1970) and Bellack (1966), who are interested in the occurrence of teach-talk and teacher-pupil interactions respectively, in the classroom, Barnes focuses on the way teachers used questions to stimulate



pupils' thinking. He looks at two aspects of interaction, namely, teacher questions and pupil participation.

Barnes (1976) illustrates some of the ways in which children use speech in the course of learning, and goes on to show that this depended very much on the patterns of communication established by teachers in the classrooms. He argues that the nature of the interaction between teacher and pupils forms a crucial aspect in the process of learning. Using transcribed conversations from the classroom, he analyses the types of discourses being used to engage the pupils in learning. The analyses shows the importance of relatively unstructured conversations in facilitating learning. These unstructured conversations, which follow along the lines of 'natural' conversations, as we observed to be the case in peer group discussions recorded by Barnes, involve the pupils in the learning process. Barnes argues that formalized methods of teaching, which are very often opposed to the natural patterns of inquiry children are accustomed to outside the school, are rigid and have an inhibiting effect on learning.

Classifying teacher questions as either "factual", "reasoning", "open" or "social" and analyzing pupil participation for its effect on learning, he examines the "instructional register, the social relationships of the classrooms and the channels of classroom communication" (Malcolm, 1979:222). In analyzing teacher styles, he identifies teacher questions as a predominant pattern of classroom discourse. Teacher questions Barnes points out may be of a closed nature so that pupils' thinking is not encouraged. He compares teacher fronted discussions with pupils' group discussions and highlighted the large number of open-ended questions and exploratory talk characterized by hesitations, pauses and ellipsis which pupils engaged in, in the absence of a



teacher. In drawing attention to the contributory role of exploratory talk in classroom learning, Barnes made a significant contribution to classroom interaction studies. As Malcolm (1979:222) points out, the first part of Barnes' analysis which deals with the classification of teacher questions is a convenient model for the analysis of teacher questions.

Barnes advocates the use of small groups of children, to maximise children's potential ability to assume responsibility for their own learning. Though the approach provides useful insight into teacher strategies and classroom verbal behaviour, the absence of "operational definitions" of the categories (Barnes 1976:47) remains a major weakness. Barnes (1976:21) acknowledges that it is difficult to define categories in such a way that the analysis can be reproduced by another researcher. But therein lies the nature of qualitative studies. The purpose is to study a problem at hand, rather than to extend generalizations across a broad range of situations. This is justified on the grounds that no two classrooms will be the same.

A drawback of Barnes's classification system is that it was used with secondary school pupils, whose linguistic abilities would be relatively advanced. They were also native speakers of English. Non-native speakers of English and young children in the process of acquiring English, may not be able to engage in the exploratory talk of the type described by Barnes.

Another point of consideration is the cultural experience of talk that pupils carry with them into the classroom. Barnes states that pupils generate exploratory talk in group discussions and that this leads to learning. In making this claim, he ignores the sociocultural factors that impinge on interaction. Regardless of the type of teacher questions or group dynamics, young pupils and teachers who are culturally attuned to learning through



listening to an authoritative figure such as the teacher, and reserve silence may not respond to 'open' questions. In addition, teachers can claim to ask open questions but accept only one response as the correct answer (Richards, 1978). This renders the distinction made between 'open' and 'closed' questions weak. Barnes's use of small segments of classroom talk limits the analysis by underplaying the role of context which determines the development of interaction. Larger segments would allow the language generated in a discussion to be analyzed in a contextually appropriate manner.

## **SUMMARY**

The Classroom Interaction studies discussed above can be grouped on the basis of their respective analysis. Flanders and Bellack focus on quantifying classroom interaction and are interested in teacher talk as it occurs in the classroom. They attach little importance to pupil talk as evidenced by the few categories they assign to it. Mehan's model on the other hand goes a step further by capturing the social structuring of interaction in the classroom. His focus is on the lesson as a unit of interaction. Using the principle of 'reflexive tying', Mehan analyzes the interaction in terms of the Initiation-Response-Evaluation sequence and the lesson phases. All acts therefore depend on the preceding and ensuing interaction for their meaning. This attention to the holistic picture means that finer details of the ongoing interaction are bound to be ignored. The sequential and hierarchical analysis of the discourse attributes the use of strategies to user motives. This approach to the study of interaction originates from action theory, where group interaction is seen as a means of one group exerting influence through the use of relevant strategies or knowledge to further its own interests. Because interactional motives are related to the context and take off from there, the



interactants' perception of the context becomes important. In his study Mehan shows how teachers shift their strategies according to the contextual actions of the student participants. Whenever a student monopolizes a turn, the teacher uses several strategies, namely that of ignoring the response, restating the question or nominating another student. Mehan maintains that a "single speech form can serve more than one language function at a time" (1979:189). This multifunctionality is further emphasized thus :

... a teacher's comment on the content of one student's reply can serve as evaluative function while simultaneously serving an initiation function for the next speaker. And inversely, the teacher's selection of the next student in a round of reading, simultaneously accomplishes evaluation of the reader's work.

(Mehan, 1979:189)

Thus evaluation, initiation and response evaluation are all simultaneously accomplished. These acts function to maintain the lesson structure and are known to both teachers and students.

Mehan's social action model perceives the significance of the acts in terms of the functions they perform very differently from Sinclair and Coulthard. Every act is seen to contribute to the whole. This is because Mehan holds that "a single speech form can serve more than one language function at a time" (189). The acts display the behavioural actions of the teachers and pupils which in turn provide the lesson structure. Mehan shows that the teacher's initiation act, identifies the respondent who is to take the action, as well as, the type of response that is expected. It is in this way that Mehan says teachers maintain and structure the lesson.

The models used by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) and Malcolm (1979), on the other hand, have a sociolinguistic framework, emphasizing the functional



aspect of utterances. The unit of analysis is linguistic. While Malcolm focuses on the situatedness of language use, which thus enables him to connect classroom interaction patterns to the speech community's use of language (1979:245), Sinclair and Coulthard locate the utterances within functional categories on the basis of the contribution they make to the discourse as a whole, such as signifying the end of a discussion, or movement to a new topic. A significant feature of Sinclair and Coulthard's work is the emphasis on the functional aspect of the discourse. The interpretative rules which they propose take into consideration the linguistic form of the sentences and the situational factors. The framework as a whole is set up to show that classroom discourse is systematically organized and identifies ways of describing it. This is a development from both the FIAC system and Mehan's model.

In summary it can be said that Flanders' and Bellack's studies are significant in initiating systems of analyzing the extent of teacher talk in the classroom through codification and set the direction for a linguistic analysis of classroom talk.

While Mehan and Sinclair & Coulthard (1975) developed a system to describe the type of teacher talk, Barnes focused on the way teachers used questions to stimulate pupils' thinking. The above section reviewed systems of analyzing classroom data which were quantitative in nature. The next section discusses a significant contribution to our understanding of classroom talk.

### **Sociolinguistic Studies**

Stubbs (1975, 1976) objects to the limited linguistic analysis of classroom discourse, pointing out the lack of a sociolinguistic perspective. Gumperz and



**Herasimchuk stress the importance of situation meanings of utterances “to draw out some of the social messages underlying the literal meanings of teachers’ words” (1976:155).**

**Another perspective of language focuses on the communicative aspect of utterances. This perspective of talk considers the larger context and role of language in communication so that it is the contextual knowledge and interpretation of the communicative partners, like the teacher, which may or may not facilitate learning. Gumperz states it thus:**

**The community studies suggest that it is not at all clear that the linguistic difficulties faced by bilingual children in schooling are due to a lack of grammatical knowledge of English; the problem is rather one of context-bound usage.  
(Gumperz,1990:9)**

**Sociolinguists like Gumperz, focus on the way language enters into interaction to affect the learning environment in the school. The referential meaning of language is given less importance and instead the way in which language enters into the creation of the social order and how this order is maintained through interaction gained attention. Gumperz (1986) emphasizes the social construction of literacy in linking the problem of differential learning to literacy acquisition. He states that an understanding of the variety of discourse patterns and sociolinguistic codes prevalent in the classroom can lead to greater access to learning opportunities for all pupils.**

**Gumperz and Herasinichuk (1973) in their study of classroom interaction provided “an empirical method of classroom analysis capable of recovering the social assumptions which underlie the verbal communication by focussing on the actors’ use of speech to interact, that is , to create and maintain a social situation” (1973:99). Lessons are divided into episodes based on activity focus and role distribution. Teaching is thus seen as an encounter where teacher**



and pupils carry out a task. This means interaction tasks that are similar can then be compared. Their findings show that both the social assumption of the role of the teacher and paralinguistic signals maintain and create the situation (the classroom lesson).

Sociolinguistics thus gives classroom interaction an interactional perspective, where language functions as a symbolic medium through which the process of verbal communication supported by culturally-based background knowledge and contextual information enters into an inferential process to produce the situated interpretations (Gumperz,1990:28). This approach takes language not as an abstract grammatical or semantic system, but places it within the larger framework of communication. Communication then becomes regarded as a dialogic process with meaning being situationally located. Gumperz states that the processes by which “we assess the validity and persuasiveness of an argument and judge the attitudes of our interlocutors are themselves culture specific, as they assume sharing of cultural presuppositions” (1990:13). An interplay of language, context and social presuppositions create the classroom learning environment.

Gumperz and Herasimchuk (1973: 29) focus on the ‘situated interpretation of utterances’. Social meaning is considered to be as important as referential meaning in interaction. But this meaning depends on the situatedness of the utterance in the context of other utterances. Utterances then become not single isolated acts or moves but part of the entire discourse.

A significant development of the sociolinguistic approach to language use is the generation of interest in context of language use.



In conclusion, sociolinguistic studies can be said to have placed emphasis on the important role of context in classroom interaction. It is significant that the move from a purely linguistic analysis of classroom talk to an analysis of context based classroom use of language highlights the variety that exists in both the use of language and ways of communicating. The act of reading and writing are events in the classroom, which is a miniature social system with its own set of beliefs, values, social relationships, norms of participation and expectations about what constitutes appropriate speech. The daily practices of teachers and pupils display the speech routines that prevail in the classroom. Classroom ethnography studies focusing on interaction in school and in the community, have shown patterns of regularity in both the types of speech events, (Gilmore and Galthorn, 1982) so that by describing the types of speech events which occur in the classroom and at home, it is possible to describe the nature and patterns of interaction in these two contexts. Participants' knowledge or expectation of the events they are engaged in plays an important part in the way they engage in them. This informs the instructional process and where it is not shared, as may be the situation in linguistically and culturally diverse settings, interpretations can differ.

### **Ethnographic Studies**

The approaches to talk discussed up to this point have looked specifically at talk occurring in the classroom between teacher and pupils. But classroom talk does not occur in isolation. It is influenced by many factors. An important variable that influences talk in the classroom is patterns of interaction at home. Home as a significant variable in classroom talk patterns gained attention with ethnographic studies.



**Ethnographic studies added a new dimension to the study of classroom talk and participation and set a significant research trend.**

**The ethnographic approach to talk began in the 1970s. In this approach, the researcher uses unstructured observation to record the event in its entirety. Unlike systematic observation which perceives classroom events with the aid of preformulated categories, in ethnographic research, the researcher assigns significance to the sociocultural context of events. The absence of pre-specified categories extends the scope of coverage as well as allowing for a detailed, comprehensive description of ‘naturally’ occurring data. This provides insight into the uniqueness of the context being studied. As Delamont and Hamilton (1976:73) state:**

**Despite their diversity, individual classrooms share many characteristics. Through the detailed study of one particular context, it is still possible to clarify relationships, pinpoint critical processes and identify common phenomena. Later, abstracted summaries and general concepts can be formulated, which may, upon further investigation, be found to be germane to a wider variety of settings. Case studies, therefore, are not necessarily restricted in scope. Indeed, unlike interaction analysis, they can acknowledge both the particulars and the universals of classroom life.**

**In participant observation, the researcher becomes involved in the study by taking part in the activities without necessarily identifying the purpose to the participants in the study. The events are recorded on audio or video and written notes of impressions and descriptions of the event are kept. In some instances, the researcher as participant observer assumes familiarity with the environment and the participants under study, through long-term involvement such as, in Heath’s (1982) study. In non-participant observation, the researcher as observer remains on the fringe of the event and does not get**



involved in the activities being studied. The data is derived mainly from the researcher's field notes, although information derived from questionnaires, interviews and official and unofficial documents may be used.

Despite the advantages of the ethnographic approach, a major criticism levied against it is the lack of generalization of the findings (Long, 1980:28). The detailed study of a particular context while reducing the generalization to other contexts, does not prevent the formulation of general deductions, which lend themselves to investigation. In reality no two contexts can claim to be the same. Classrooms, despite their conceptual similarities as institutions of learning, are classic examples of different orientations and beliefs and a variety of perceptions and expectations. Ethnographic studies allow extrapolations to be made to other contexts, thereby facilitating comparisons (Nunan, 1994).

A first step towards emphasizing the important role of home talk patterns in school performance began with Philips' study (1972) of Warm Springs' Indian children.

Philips' study of children's participation in classroom verbal interactions focuses on North American Indian children. Using participant observation as the research methodology, Philips demonstrates that "some of the social conditions governing or determining when it is appropriate for a student to speak in the classroom differ from those that govern verbal participation and other types of communicative performances in the Warm Springs' Indian community's social interactions" (1972:370). Analyzing the organization of classroom interaction in terms of four types of participant structures, Philips shows that the extent of Indian children's verbal participation varies according to the structural arrangement in place during the lesson. Indian children



participate less than the non-Indian children in whole class interaction with the teacher and in small group participant structure, where the teacher interacts with only some of the students in the class at once. In the first context, the teacher may address all the students, or a single student and the students may respond individually or in a chorus. In the second context, the student has to respond individually because the "main purpose of such smaller groups is to provide the teacher with the opportunity to assess the knowledge acquired by each individual student" (Philips, 1972:377). Two features mark both these participant structures. Firstly, it is the teacher who determines the student who is to talk and whether the participation is voluntary or mandatory. Secondly, the students have to respond in front of their peers. Philips finds that the lack of knowledge of rules governing communicative performance in the traditional classrooms, inhibits the Indian students from participation. However, when students control and direct the interaction in small group projects, Indian students, as opposed to the non-Indian students, talk a great deal more to one another. A similar observation is made in the interaction pattern, when Indian children are involved in unsupervised playground activity, where leadership roles are not assigned. Philips concludes that Indian children fail to participate verbally in classroom interactions because the sociolinguistic assumptions about communication that the Indians subscribe to differ from those of the non-Indians. In addition, the social conditions for participation to which the Indian children have become accustomed in their community are absent in the classroom context.

The study shows that cultural discontinuity between the rules relating to learning in the home and in the classroom contribute to the lack of participation in the classroom . Philips' study is significant in raising awareness of the cultural variation in sociolinguistic and interactional patterning and in



emphasizing the learning difficulties that these may give rise to. Her study shows the importance of changing the structuring of classroom learning situations to suit culturally different learning styles.

Following Philips' study, several studies have looked at culturally induced learning disabilities in terms of cultural or communicative code differences and conflicts. It has been hypothesized that "minor differences in communicative codes can lead to disasters in everyday life" (McDermont, 1974:82). These studies show that teachers classify students into ability groups on the basis of communicative code conflicts. The classification has tremendous influence as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Spindler, 1959; McDermont, 1974). Spindler shows that teachers dominate classroom social organization and label children so that school success follows these lines. Focussing on black children and white teachers, these studies attempt to look at points of conflict in black and white communicative skills and the difficulties of biculturation or bilingual acquisition. Different worldviews and practices explain this as McDermont states "blacks and whites slice up the world in slightly different ways" (1974:108). These differences in perception results in patterns of induced inattention demonstrated by the children and selective teacher attention culminating in school failure. This is one argument that has been put forth to explain Black American illiteracy.

Culturally influenced patterns of children's classroom behaviour is also observed by Dumont and Wax (1972), who report on the significance of the 'silence' maintained by Cherokee children in the classroom. Through long and skilful observations, Dumont and Wax find that Cherokee students use 'silence' as a form of "social adaptation" to the classroom situation created by non-native teachers (Malcolm, 1979:224). By remaining unresponsive and



silent, they exercised control over the teachers. Similar observations are made by Wax and Wax(1971) and Dumont (1972) in their investigations of “Sioux Society”, where lack of student participation in the classroom and inaudible responses indicate a strategy of withdrawal.

Boggs (1972) observed a first grade classroom in Honolulu and noted that while the children speak and interact extensively with one another, they are relatively more inhibited in communicating with the teacher. This is particularly so when the teacher nominates a child to answer a question. Boggs suggests that the presence or absence of “authority” as represented by the teacher and the form of relationship that is maintained during the interaction determined the children’s participation. The adult- child interaction is greater when the teacher shows “receptivity” to the children’s responses (Boggs,1972:311).

Davidson’s (1975) study of Aboriginal boys’ interactions with their teachers and their caretakers outside of school is yet another attempt at establishing the need for congruence between school practices and home cultural patterns of communication. In observing the classroom of Aboriginal boys in Bamyili in the Northern Territory in Australia, he finds a great variation in the boys’ interaction interactions and the caretakers’ and the teachers’ expectations. Malcolm states that this is because Aboriginal teaching assistants adopt teaching approaches which “approximated to those of the European teachers on ‘modern’ tasks and to those of the boys’ fathers on traditional tasks” (1979:227).

In the school context, the boys are more attentive and respond to the teacher. But in interactions with the caretakers, the boys’ responses are limited or



absent. The caretakers, Davidson states, appear to be “generally permissive in that they appear to have no expressed expectations that the child would respond immediately and in a prescribed way” (1977:4). The Aboriginal boys’ interactions with their parents are very often child-initiated. Aboriginal parents also tend to ‘shame’ and ‘reject’ their children (Davidson, 1977). In the classroom, however, interaction is almost always teacher-initiated and characterized by positive teacher evaluation. Thus, cross-cultural differences in interaction practices and purposes of interactions, as well as perceptions of the roles of interactants, determine the success or failure of instructional modes adopted.

The need to ensure cultural ‘affinity’ of interaction patterns in the classroom has also been borne out by Au’s (1980) research on Hawaiian children in the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP). Au states that “inappropriate contexts for learning may contribute to the poor academic performance of minority children by functioning to decrease the amount of context [number of propositions or idea units] that will be present in a lesson” (1980:92). Thus by synchronizing the participation structures in the reading lessons of a group of young Hawaiian children with those of ‘talk story’, a major speech event in Hawaiian culture, Au shows that their reading achievement increased. The study involves groups of about five children from a second grade classroom in the KEEP school, who meet with the teacher for reading lessons for approximately twenty minutes of daily instruction. The lessons comprise largely rapid interactions between the teacher and the children, the teacher asking questions and the children responding. The lessons are taped with a remote controlled, ceiling-mounted camera, which together with the microphone are permanent fixtures in the classroom. This means the pupils are unaware of being video-taped.



**Au (1980) identifies three sequences of Experience, Teaching and Responding in reading lessons. The lesson begins with teacher introduction with reference to the children's experiences, which are in turn related to the topic of the story. The teacher then assigns the children a page or two of the story, which they read silently. This is followed by teacher questions aimed at assessing the children's understanding of the story. The final stage is when the teacher draws a connection between the story that was read and the children's personal experiences.**

**Au identifies different participation structures in the reading lessons. Ranging from transition, chorus, single, single/joint, single/open, joint, joint/open and open participation structures, the first three resemble conventional classroom structures, while the others resemble talk-story like structures found in the Hawaiian culture. Each of the structures are defined in terms of the number of child speakers and the roles of the other speakers. More than half of the turns involve the joint performance of two or more children.**

**In analyzing the reading lesson, it was found that the teacher allowed and encouraged the children to use the talk story-like participation structure, to achieve the academic goals she had set (Au, 1980). Au's study shows that "interaction in reading comprehension lessons directed by an adult teacher would promote the academic achievement of young minority students, if the contexts in the lessons are structured in a manner consistent with the children's culture (1980:112).**

**Au's study is an important contribution to the development of culturally congruent and contextually appropriate approaches to learning. The Kamehameha Early Education Program in Hawaii provided evidence of the importance of adapting instructional patterns to take account of culturally**



conditioned learning styles. In changing reading instruction to permit student collaboration in discussing and interpreting texts, the improvement in reading and verbal, intellectual abilities were tremendous (Au and Jordan, 1981). The significance of Au's study to my present research lies in the ascription of importance to cultural ways of communicating and culturally embedded values and perceptions about literacy, which have to be harnessed to maximise the opportunities all learners have to become literate. Au's study also shows that content congruence is not sufficient to facilitate literacy acquisition. In connecting the text with the children's experiences and knowledge, Au establishes the cultural congruence of the lesson at the content level. The context of reading and sharing was made culturally congruent through the use of culturally familiar interaction pattern - the talk story.

Both Philips' and Au's studies point to the need for recognizing cultural differences that children bring into the classroom and how a lack of this awareness can lead to learning difficulties. Cazden, John and Hymes (1972) make a similar suggestion in referring to the different "styles of learning" Indian children are enculturated into at home and in the classroom. Such differences when left unrecognised by the teacher and pupils in their attempts at communication, may in fact, lead to sociolinguistic interference (Hymes, 1971).

## **SUMMARY**

The above brief review of some of the studies points to the significant need to match classroom instructional procedures and interaction patterns to the learners' cultural patterns and practices of interaction. Philips (1972), McDermoti (1974), Dumont and Wax (1972), Boggs (1972), Davidson (1975), and Au (1980) have raised awareness of culturally determined ways of



communication. They have shown that some learners may be marginalized when teacher and pupils have differing expectations of classroom behaviour and learning.

The studies nevertheless have some limitations. Firstly, many of them are focussed on minority groups, which have been unsuccessful in their acquisition of English language literacy. Minority groups, which succeed in acquiring literacy despite different language and communication styles are not subjected to scrutiny. Gumperz (1990), in fact dismisses the linguistic difference argument. He sees linguistic diversity as having an enriching effect on learning. In looking at the interaction patterns of the different groups in isolation, the researchers have ignored other factors which affect the acquisition of literacy. Cressy (1980) and Ogbu (1987), point out that the acquisition of literacy by groups and societies is enhanced when it is seen to serve both social and economic needs. When the rewards are present, literacy acquisition becomes a viable enterprise. Secondly, the studies have focussed on culturally and linguistically homogeneous classrooms. Classrooms catering to students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds may be influenced by a complexity of factors. The question of which cultural script to accommodate in the literacy classroom therefore arises. Thirdly, in all the literature reviewed so far, English was taught and learnt as a second language. The fact that in the Singapore classrooms, English is learnt as a first language (it is the medium of instruction) and is officially perceived to be a neutral language makes the process of literacy acquisition more complex.

To conclude this section of the literature review, it can be said that ethnographic studies along the lines of anthropological research, have provided another insight into practices and perceptions of literacy across



linguistic and cultural varieties. They have, together with studies on perspectives of literacy, enabled a connection to be made between home and school literacy practices and displayed the urgent need to establish congruence between home literacy practices and classroom instructional approaches in order to maximise effective learning.

The studies cited above also lack historical perspective. Particular literacy behaviours and orientations may have historical origins. The whole perception of the role of the home and how patterns of communication and adult-child communication affect students' participation in the classroom developed interest in perspectives of literacy. The type of literacy activities and the functions assigned to them depends on the perceptions and ideology of the particular society.

Literacy is multi-dimensional and can therefore be seen in different ways in different situations. Earlier studies of literacy emphasized the psychological constructs (Goodman, 1976; Smith, 1978; Pearson & Johnson, 1978; Schallert, 1982; Rumelhart, 1981). Such constructs of literacy have been challenged recently by sociologists, anthropologists and ethnographers, who suggest a social perspective to literacy (Freire, 1987; Courts, 1991; Gee, 1990, 1992; Heath, 1983). "The sociocultural definition of literacy focuses on the visible aspects of literacy and how they are manifested in various contexts. It can then be studied by investigating how literacy practices arise from, or within particular groups (Anstey & Bull, 1996: 152).

### **Perspectives of Literacy**

A discussion of the appropriacy of instructional approaches in the literacy classroom, implies the existence of different perceptions and practices of



**literacy. These practices and perceptions are guided by notions of what counts as literacy in a society. Literacy may be approached from a number of standpoints. First, literacy may be seen as changing perception, cognition and awareness of personal responsibility of meaning. This notion of literacy will mean the individual appropriating a language for his/her own use and needs and imbuing it with a different meaning. If language is seen to serve a functional and personal dimension, this meets that need. In advocating the learning of English for economic reasons, the Singapore government is taking a functional and societal perspective of literacy in English. Literacy in the ethnic languages, on the other hand, is seen to serve a personal and group function.**

**Concepts of literacy and criteria for its achievements have varied according to time, place and participants. Social and cultural orientations add a further dimension to conceptions and practices of literacy as can be seen in the description of Vai literacy (Scribner and Cole, 1981) and Heath's (1983) study of the Trackton and Roadville communities (see pp.107-109). Three parallel literacies exist side-by-side in a single community in West Africa. These are associated with the different domains of school, religion and personal communication. When domains change, so do the conceptions of literacy. This shows that literacy is shaped by wider social practices and values in society (Scribner & Cole, 1982). The fact that literacy takes on its meaning and function within the context of a society implies the need for a socially relevant definition of literacy. This would automatically exclude a universally-oriented definition that would fit into every society's needs.**



In the West, when literacy was the privilege of the rich and powerful in society, the classical definition prevailed. This, as Hirsch (1987) points out restricted literacy to the domain of high culture. With changing requirements of contemporary society new definitions have emerged, encompassing in Castell, Luke and MacLennan's (1986:7) terms, society's more practical uses of literacy. This has given us the notion of functional literacy embodying an instrumental perspective very much in keeping with the purposes for which literacy may be needed in post-industrial societies. It however reflects a transactional view of literacy and overlooks the informal learning of literacy. More importantly, such a conceptualization of literacy, generalizes the contextual embeddedness of literacy and individual differences in terms of needs and uses to which it may be put to by those who acquire it. Functional literacy is often meant to reflect the skills needed to operate in a workplace. It should not, however, exclude the social and pragmatic contexts in which human communication takes place. To function effectively in a community an individual may have to select socially, culturally and contextually appropriate linguistic codes and modes of communication. Bourdieu (1977) refers to this as 'expanded competence' and Heath (1983) analyzed this in her study of two communities.

A major study focusing on the sociocultural contexts of literacy acquisition is that done by Shirley Brice Heath (1983). Her ethnographic study of two communities— Roadville and Trackton— located only a few miles from Maintown's neighbourhoods in the Piedmont Carolinas, is a recorded account of the language learning habits of the children. The study describes the effects of the preschool home and community environment on the learning of those language structures and uses which were needed in classrooms and job settings. Conducted over a period of ten years (1969-1978), it looks at the



**Trackton and Roadville communities, both culturally different, and the ways in which children are socialized as talkers, readers and writers.**

**Life in Trackton is contrasted with that in Roadville. Heath found that Trackton children learn from a very young age that their creative use of language will get them the adults' attention. Parents reward them for this creative use of language in their story telling. Children are continually challenged to apply and extend their knowledge. Wit and reasoning skills are developed rather than rote-learning of words. Roadville children, on the other hand, are made to observe strict routines and are taught how to use language. Parent-child interactions are focussed on parents asking questions to test their children's factual knowledge and the referential meaning of words. Telling stories is not a practice engaged in or appreciated by Roadville parents. Gateway children, in comparison to the other two communities, have a different upbringing. From a young age, they are perceived as conversational partners and therefore acquire both listening and responding skills. They are taught to connect their knowledge of facts with new information. Through structured experiences they acquire information and are challenged to search for creative solutions.**

**As a result of these home differences, Roadville and Trackton children "enter a world where its "Ways with words" are somewhat orthogonal to what they have learned in their homes (Eisenhart and Dougherty, 1991:31). Because of this acquired ability to follow rules and to provide referential meanings of words, Roadville children perform well in school initially. Trackton children, on the other hand, while initially struggling with the rigidity of classroom control, structuring and functioning, over time meet the school's demand for imaginative thinking. The confusing and conflicting ways of communicating**



that the two groups of children face in school is due to their differing home experiences.

Heath establishes that school success is closely associated with community membership. Middle class children from Gateway do well in terms of their class achievements, followed by children from Roadville and then by Trackton children.

Heath's ethnographic study is a significant contribution in emplacing the role of the home in literacy acquisition. Although Philips (1980) and Au(1981) incorporated patterns of home interaction into classroom literacy approaches, Heath pioneered work in detailing home literacy practices to demonstrate how communicative patterns children learn at home, mediate the way in which literacy is acquired in school. Heath's study is also significant because in addition to using field notes and extensive record keeping, she had the benefit of shared experiences and habits of interaction—Heath “had grown up in a rural Piedmont area in a neighbouring state, so the customs of both communities were very familiar” (Heath,1992:5). The on-going relationship over about a decade between Heath and the communities and institutions studied will not be possible to replicate.

But the study throws light on culture as learned behaviour and on language habits as part of that shared learning. In the context of this study, Heath's research is relevant in demonstrating that the place of language in the cultural life of a social group is interdependent with the habits and values of behaviour shared by members of that group. These habits and values inform the perceptions and the world view of the interactants and guide their patterns of interaction within and outside the group. Heath's description of the different communities also shows that literacy practices and interaction patterns can



vary across different social groups within a society. Heath's study has the greatest relevance to this research because the focus is on the practices and perceptions of adult-child interaction, in three different communities in Singapore with particular reference to the use of talk during shared reading and shared writing.

Another study which highlights the fact that perceptions of literacy differ across societies and cultures is that of Scribner & Cole (1981).

Scribner and Cole examine the effect of literacy on cognitive development and the possibility of distinguishing the effects of different types of literacy, each performing particular functions, in a society. Scribner and Cole's study is significant in that it points to the functional use of literacy, so that the acquisition of literacy in any language is determined by its societal considerations. It may thus be possible to talk about multiple literacies. Studying the Vai society, they point out that while literacy in English is acquired in school settings, the Vai people also have an indigenous script [syllabic script] as well as a specific form of literacy in Arabic. Literacy in the two languages perform different functions. Literacy in English is used for communication with the government and for educational purposes; literacy in Vai is used mainly for commercial transactions such as writing letters and keeping records and Arabic literacy serves a religious function, being used for reading, writing and memorizing the Koran. Vai versatility in these forms vary, with some Vais being monoliterate, others biliterate and yet others non-literate. In examining their subjects' performance on "syllogistic reasoning" tasks, Scribner and Cole found that the use of both the Vai and the Arabic script did not demonstrate the existence of syllogistic reasoning (1981:240). The use of



literacy in English, on the other hand, demonstrated some form of abstract reasoning.

Scribner and Cole state that literacy in either of the three scripts is linked to specific skills. Arabic is associated with specific skills in memorization and recitation, while Vai script relates to using graphic symbols to represent language, and as a means of instruction. The types of skills, Scribner and Cole attribute to the Vai, reflect the day-to-day lived experiences and practices of the Vai people. Literacy for the Vai in Liberia therefore manifests the Vai way of life and is in turn directed by it.

While the Vai serve as good examples of engaging in different types of literacy according to functions performed; the perception of literacy as an ideology is introduced by Street.

Street [1984] proposes an “ideological model” of literacy, views literacy in terms of lived social practices and the ideologies in which the community’s literacies are embedded. Reading and writing and the range of linguistic skills at work in a society are influenced by and influence a community’s political, social, and economic structure and ideology. The form of literacy in practice in a community is shaped by already existing ideologies. As Gee states, “Abstracting literacy from its social setting in order to make claims for literacy as an autonomous force in shaping the mind or a culture simply leads to a dead end” (1994:181).

Street argues that literacy contributes to social stratification by endorsing one group’s views over others. As Gee points out, in Britain and the United States, “literacy served as a socializing tool for the poor, was seen as a possible threat if



misused by the poor and served as a means for maintaining the continued selection of members of one class for the best positions in the society”(1994:182).

Street’s ideological model serves to emphasize the sociocultural aspect of literacy. Ideology is embedded in the culture of the community---its experiences, expectations and aspirations and the value system. Smith defines ideology as “the set of rules which an individual has acquired to make judgements about things or behaviours he experiences. Therefore it is the culture system that engenders what can be termed aesthetic or ethical modes of behaviour” (1973:105). Parents transmit the ideology of the community to their children by explicit teaching as well as implicitly through modelled behaviour (Spreadbury, 1996, 1994; Sripathy, 1991, 1993) Literacy practices originate from these value systems by influencing perceptions of literacy and the uses to which they are put. The perception of reading and writing, their place in the day-to-day life of a community, the use to which they are put, the induction of children into these practices, the form/s reading and writing take and the existence of other forms of literacy (computer, cultural) is determined by the ideology subscribed to by the community. The ideological basis of literacy thus plays an important part in both the perceptions and practices of literacy prevailing in a community.

The perception of the world by a cultural group situates its literacy practices. In “Narrative, Literacy and Face in Inter-ethnic Communication”, Scollon and Scollon (1981), they show that in using language, cultural groups access different ways of making sense of their living environment. In their study of Athabaskans in Alaska and Northern Canada, they detail their discourse practices and world view and contrast them with those of Anglo-American society. Scollon and Scollon argue that changing the discourse patterns, which reflect a group’s world view and personal and cultural identity, is tantamount to



changing the group's identity. The acquisition of new forms of literacy is a case in point because it involves contact and association with the values, social practices and ways of knowing related to the new culture. This may conflict with the existing culture the learner already possesses. Scollon and Scollon compare the essay-text type of literacy practices in European-based, education reflecting a "modern consciousness" (Gee, 1994:183), with Athabaskan discourse patterns characterized by "bush" survival values. Each culture has adopted a model of literacy compatible with its respective everyday world experiences and exigencies of survival. Through a detailed description of narrative and non-narrative uses of language by the Athabaskans, Scollon and Scollon show the cultural place of context in communication and contrast this with the decontextualization valued in essayist prose characterizing Anglo-Canadian and American cultures. The consciousness in both cultures is shaped by the realities they encounter which direct their cognitive orientations. Hence, in one society, personal individuality is highly valued, while in another, the individuality of the others is respected and personal individuality is guarded.

Scollon and Scollon's study of the Athabaskans conveys the cultural situatedness of literacy and the communication conflicts that can arise from different perceptions and practices when learners' and teachers' cultures do not converge. World views determine both perceptions and practices of literacy. These world views in turn are socioculturally contextualized and are harnessed by the interactants in their communication. Differing worldviews and consequently differing perceptions of literacy and its uses give rise to potential for conflict and may marginalize learning in the classroom.



## **SUMMARY**

**What the above research show is that different literacy practices arise from the type of contexts that individuals participate in daily. These necessitate different ways of using both the oral and the written modes of communication. Gee describes it thus:**

**Each of us is a member of many Discourses and each Discourse represents one of our ever multiple identities...Each Discourse incorporates a usually taken-for-granted and tacit 'theory' of what counts as a 'normal' person and the 'right' ways to think, feel and behave.**

**(Gee 1990, pp xix-xx)**

**Because Gee's views perceives literacy as ways of using literacy, it allows for the incorporation of home literacy practice in school. Street (1984), Scribner & Cole (1981), Heath (1983) and Scollon & Scollon (1981) have shown the sociocultural nature of literacy. In doing so they emphasize the everyday nature of literacy and its relationship to individuals' interpretation of the world. This means what counts as literacy is visible and is manifested in various contexts. By looking at the literacy practices it is possible to describe as Freire (1987) states, the manner in which individuals read the world. Because this reading of the world and the word (Freire, 1987) is socioculturally situated, a sociocultural definition of literacy, which takes into account the important role of the home in enculturating individuals into particular literacy practices is more appropriate.**

## **Home Literacy**

**The survey of perspectives of literacy shows that literacy acquisition has several dimensions. But as the research review above shows, the social and cultural dimension play a significant role in literacy. In looking at home literacy**



practices and the relationship to school literacy, social factors like class and gender and culture influence the approach to literacy. Significant among these is the role of the home. Handel (1992), Morrow & Paratore (1993) and Meyers (1992) have shown the important role of the home in a students' literacy learning.

Although literacy practices at home seem to impact upon school literacy success as shown in the studies by Heath (1983), Au (1980), Boggs (1972) and Sripathy (1993, 1994) there have been few studies describing home literacy practices in different cultures.

Some recent studies of literacy practices in the home have shown that the language and literacy backgrounds and culture of individual families influence the types of literacy practices engaged in. Heath's (1983) *Ways with Words* shows that the literacy practices of the Trackton and Roadville communities do not prepare their children for the school's literacy practices and expectations. Rohl's (1994) study of Western Australian families and their home and school literacy practices shows that "some home environments complement those of the school to greater degree than others" (1994:23). In her study of the literacy resources and literacy environments at home and in the schools attended by the children, Rohl finds that while the schools appear to have adequate literacy resources with all children having access to them, "the literacy environments of the children's homes varied enormously" (1994:127). At school, all the children have ready and ample access to books, computers, as well as being engaged in talk around text. Such talk, Heath states, is vital for literacy acquisition:

It has been the continued learning and creation of opportunities to expand with others what one has read through talk, action and reflection that has formed the core of the sense of being literate. (1991:22)



But such discussion around text is not a uniform feature in the homes of all the children in the study. This is understandable, given the different expectations, aspirations, educational backgrounds and linguistic proficiencies of the parents. But Rohl's study shows that literacy practices are embedded in the sociocultural context of the school and the home and that school success in literacy is very much dependent on a combination of variables in both these contexts. Where the home literacy practices "complemented and extended those of the school, the children were coping well" (1994:143) with the school's literacy demands. A significant conclusion to be drawn from Rohl's study is that in contexts "where educational resources are used to value and extend the culture of the home, children may achieve levels of literacy which would not otherwise have been expected" (1994:144). Rohl's study is an important contribution to the study of literacy practices, because unlike earlier studies, she looked at children who came from different ethnic cultures - Malay, Chinese, Aboriginal, Nepalese and Cambodian.

The important role of the home in literacy acquisition and the possibility of achieving school literacy success if a match is ensured between home and school literacy expectations and practices, is also borne out in the study by Sripathy (1994) of Malay, Chinese and Indian mothers reading aloud to their five year old children and discussing the text. It shows that Indian and Chinese mothers are focused on ensuring their children's understanding of the text (word meanings, sentence meaning and content meaning). The Malay mother asks questions of a prediction nature and talks about the characteristics of the wolf (the story shared is Little Red Riding Hood) and through this talk, imparts values to her child. She talks about the moral behind the story. She explains that she feels "the child should enjoy the story while at the same time learning some 'lesson' (value) from it". The Indian and Chinese mothers express the



opinion that their children must understand what is being read so that they can succeed in school which “emphasizes comprehension of the passage being read” (1994).

This study points to two interesting aspects of literacy. The Malay mother’s reading aloud and discussion around the text reflects a perception of reading as enjoyment and imparting of values, while the Indian and Chinese mothers are keen to match school literacy practices, believing that in doing so they would ensure their children’s school literacy success. The sociocultural embeddedness of literacy practices and perception is thus obvious.

Parental imparting of ideology to their children is also borne out by the study done by Spreadbury. Spreadbury (1994) studies home literacy practices with specific reference to the transmission of ideology during book reading sessions at home. She examines parent-child reading episodes in the homes of twenty-five Brisbane families in Australia by using a recently published book, which is unfamiliar to all participants in the study. Using the book Sloppy Kisses, and analyzing the text, the parent-child conversation and the interaction arising out of the ensuing talk and the text, she shows how parents can transmit ideology to their children during read aloud sessions. Spreadbury states that the surface ideology is conveyed through the text first by its pejorative title— “the adjective sloppy can be seen as pejorative in that many people might classify Sloppy Kisses as not very enjoyable”(1992:291). The passive ideology is conveyed through the illustrations: “the physical and emotional closeness of this family is clearly seen in the illustrations. The two girls sleep in the one bedroom while Mama and Papa sleep in the same bed. The family members also kiss and hug frequently” (1992:291). She analyses the setting, the clothes worn by the characters and the artefacts in the environment ( such as the bicycle and the



bowler hat used by one of the characters) to point out that the illustrator distances the “ideology from both parents and children” (1992:291). The issue of gender is also raised significantly in the study. Spreadbury calls attention to the need for analyzing the surface, passive and interactive ideology presented in the texts that are read aloud to children. Teachers, she says, need to be conscious of the conflicting ideologies that books convey and be prepared to share and analyze the differences that are present.

Spreadbury’s study of ideology transmission in parent-child reading aloud, throws light on the types of ideological presentations that can exist within a text as well as the levels of transmission that can occur during shared reading . In learning how to mean within a culture, parents, and teachers through their explicit and implicit behaviours, impart values which have an ideological basis. Children absorb these values which affect the way they see the world. The transmission of ideology during shared reading at home has been a neglected area of research. Freebody and Baker (1988) and Luke (1988) look at textual ideology in beginning school readers and point out that:

“the books relentlessly portray an idealized version of childhood which suits adult conceptions, preferences and purposes.”

(Baker and Freebody, 1988:101)

Luke, O’Brien & Comber (1994), examine the various forms of ideology that textbooks present and conclude that textbooks endorse and stereotype particular social and cultural ideologies such that they are propagated as acceptable behaviours. They point out that gender stereotypes and sexist ideology pervade many children’s books. The transmission of ideology through literacy practices therefore plays an important part in the acquisition of literacy itself. Spreadbury’s work in this area and the studies done by Freebody and



**Baker (1991) and by Luke (1991) show very clearly the important role of culture, which influences the nature of literacy practices and perceptions in a society. How parents and teachers engage children in literacy, when and why, as well as the types of literacy practices they undertake, will be ideologically determined. Spreadbury's study, however, was based on middle class white families. Their literacy practices and experiences may differ from those of working class families.**

**The fact that texts themselves convey particular ideologies and users of texts (parents, teachers) use texts to impart their respective ideologies and since these would vary from culture to culture, the need for dialogue between participants becomes necessary so that there is a negotiated understanding of not just the linguistic content but also the sociocultural content of texts.**

**A point of significance is that unlike the ethnographic studies by Philips (1972), Au (1980), Erickson, (1984), the research by Heath (1983), Spreadbury (1993, 1995), Rohl (1994) and Sripathy (1994, 1996) focus on literacy practices of reading and writing.**

### **Social Class and Gender**

**In maintaining that perceptions and practices of literacy are embedded in the sociocultural fabric of society, the role of social class and gender cannot be ignored. Research (Walberg & Tsai, 1985) has shown that social class and students' school performance are related. The differences are especially significant in less developed countries such as Indonesia, Greece and Hungary, where differences in reading abilities were noticed between rural and urban students. Generally, students from higher socio-economic groups seem to**



**“consistently outperform students from lower socio-economic groups” (Louden, 1994:104).**

**Research on family literacy practices (Chall & Snow, 1982; Heath, 1983; Louden, 1994) has shown that “children whose home literacy practices most closely resemble school literacy practices are more successful in school (Auerbach, 1989:167). Morrow and Paratore (1993) argue that “practices such as shared reading, reading aloud, making a variety of print material available, and promoting positive attitudes toward literacy have been found to have a significant impact on children’s literacy learning” (1993:194). Louden argues that “if these particular family literacy practices and patterns of parent involvement in schooling were associated with social class differences it might be argued that the differences in family literacy practices actually cause the widely observed social class differences in student performance” (1994:104).**

**The Western Australian study, Literacy in its Place (Breen et al, 1994) concludes that family literacy practices are part of a pattern of class relations, which can enable or restrict access to children’s educational opportunities. Children from lower socio-economic class homes with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and literacy practices than those practised at school find it harder to achieve school success (Louden, 1994:120)**

**Although social class is not a variable in this study (all the pupils in this study come from middle class homes), its role in school success cannot be underestimated. Social class, like gender, plays a role in literacy acquisition. Although gender-based literacy practices across cultures has not had much research attention, gender influences both perceptions and practices of literacy.**



**Ethnographic studies by Heath (1983), Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines (1988), Barton and Ivanic (1991), Breen (1994) and Anstey & Bull (1994) have highlighted the diversity of family and community literacy practices. This diversity implies the presence of multiple literacies encompassing multiple practices. Where families differ by virtue of the ethnic group or community they belong to, and where there is a multiplicity of ethnic groups within a single geographic location, it may be more useful to view the range of literacy practices from a sociocultural perspective.**

### **The Place of Talk in Literacy**

**Adult-child talk is one aspect of literacy practice that is socioculturally situated. Belief systems, values, and perceptions of children vary from culture to culture. These have an impact on interaction patterns and consequently on practices and perceptions of literacy. The perception of talk, its role in learning and literacy acquisition and the occurrence and nature of adult-child interaction is socioculturally situated. This section reviews the place of talk in children's learning with particular reference to learning to read and write.**

**Teacher-child discourse is an important aspect of classroom discourse (Wells, 1992). Teacher-pupil talk in classrooms has been examined by Cazden (1988), Christie (1991), Cobb, Wood & Jackel (1993), Edwards & Westgate (1994), Lemke (1990), Mehan (1979), Sinclair & Coulthard (1975), Tizard & Hughes (1984) and Wells (1993). These studies have focussed mainly on how teachers structure discourse to achieve instructional objectives and the relationship between patterns of discourse and types of knowledge that children develop. The ways in which teachers structure discourse influence students' engagement in learning and the types of knowledge that are generated and shared during classroom activities (Burbules, 1993, Buzzelli,**



1995, 1996; Wells, 1992, 1993). Although much recent research (Lemke, 1990; Moll, 1990, Palincsar, Brown & Campione, 1993) has analyzed teacher classroom discourse following the Initiation-Response-Evaluation pattern, it is Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) notions of voice and speech genres which conceptualize teaching and learning as a dialogic process, which elucidates the significant role of discourse in the teaching-learning process. Bakhtin's notion of voice refers to the "speaking consciousness" that encompasses the speaker's voice and more importantly, other influences that act upon it (Wertsch & Smolka, 1993). This voice is conveyed through speech genres which "is a typical form of utterance; ...genres correspond to typical situations of speech communication, typical themes, and ... to actual concrete reality under certain typical circumstances" (Bakhtin 1986:87). Wertsch and Smolka argue that speech genres help connect inter-mental and intra-mental functioning on the one hand and cultural, historical and institutional settings on the other.... (speech genres) are quintessentially sociocultural in nature and hence naturally 'import' the sociocultural into the mental" (1993:77). This means speech genres help link discourse types to the types of mental activity and knowledge children develop through participation in shared activities in the classroom. The restrictive nature of the I-R-E pattern argues Buzzelli (1996) constrains the types of knowledge that children develop as well as the ways in which they engage in inquiry. Shared talk on the other hand, provides for multiple perspectives from which new knowledge can be generated and retold. Classroom talk, placed within a sociocultural perspective influences both children's appropriation of the means for inquiry and the conceptualization of knowledge itself.

A sizeable body of research by Cummins (1986), Holdaway (1979), Cambourne (1985) and Wells (1987, 1992, 1993) supports the importance of talk in learning.



Based on his Bristol study, Wells (1984) urges schools to provide the opportunity to develop and extend the conversational skills of children by putting them to use in the exploration of the new ideas and experiences that the greater formal curriculum provides. "All children will learn most effectively when there are frequent opportunities for collaborative talk with teachers and with fellow pupils" (Wells, 1983: 52) Talk that is relevant to experience may "provide the child with a meaning for the experience different from that which it would have had if it had happened without the accompanying talk" (Tough, 1973: 81). "We must first say aloud to others what we have to "say" in our heads later for other purposes. We need to sift the past, to wrest from it, its meaning for us" (Rosen & Rosen, 1976:57). In doing so new knowledge is consolidated. It is through constant exchange between adults and peers that children learn language and learn about the world. As Richmond (1983) puts it "children's mental grasps of ideas, facts or opinions develop as they try to express what they mean, or listen and respond to other people".

The importance of talk for school literacy has been shown in the seminal work of Heath (1983). Scollon and Scollon (1982) have also shown that it is children who are prepared for written forms of literacy, by being provided literate features in oral discourse (if it matches school literacy), who succeed in school literacy. Bakhtin (1981); Edwards & Mercer (1987); Wells (1993) and Wertsch (1991) emphasize that knowledge is socially constructed through joint participation between teacher and pupils in the classroom. In the shared reading and shared writing approaches, this joint participation is seen to be important in facilitating children's acquisition of language as well as skills.

Reading is a socially interactive process. Learning to read involves both decoding the language of the text to derive meaning (Carroll & Chall,1975;



Gibson & Levin, 1975) and bringing meaning to the text ( Smith, 1975). In both senses of the task, the learner has to acquire the skill of decoding or of meaning application. The learner has to be taught the skill and be able to apply it by verbalizing his /her understanding of the process. This is a cognitive view of literacy. It focuses on the mastery of prerequisite skills. But reading and writing are not just skills mastery or application of specific strategies. The community and culture of the learners exert critical influence on both reading and writing. In addition to this, Gallego & Hollingsworth (1992) and Goldenberg & Gallimore (1991) have shown that the school's response to cultural characteristics has a powerful impact on reading and writing acquisition. Collaborative talk with an adult facilitates the acquisition of this reading and writing by making transparent the process (Duffy & Roehler, 1989; Duffy et al, 1986). Although this depends on the type of talk that is generated. This is especially important when the language being learnt is not the child's native or home language because in learning to read in the language the child is also trying to learn the language and about the language at the same time. Without interaction and opportunities to talk through the text and the language children will not be able to make the connection. The tentativeness of talk enables children to formulate and test their hypothesis about language and literacy. Piaget (1987) and Bruner (1986) state that exploratory talk nurtures progressive elaboration of knowledge. Talk provides a means of reflecting upon thought processes and controlling them. Studies by Bus, van Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini (1995); Dickinson & Smith (1994) & Whitehurst et al (1994) show that shared reading experiences are important in children's language and literacy development. Spreadbury (1994) in her study of "Adults reading to children at home and at school" states that it is the interaction between parent and child that takes place when a parent reads to a child that facilitates the



child's reading. Neuman states that "as an intensely social activity, book reading provides an interactive context for children to acquire and practice developing verbal and conceptual skills" (1996:496). Neo-Vygotskian views of development (Rogoff, 1990) emphasize the opportunities available to children for internalizing social practices and advancing language development through interactive literacy activities. Rogoff (1990) and Tizard & Hughes (1984) suggest that by connecting the familiar to the new through shared activity, children's understanding is enhanced. This in turn will lead to further cognitive growth. Opportunities for engaging in conversations seem to contribute to children's language and literacy development (Snow et al, 1991).

Beginning readers and writers also have to grapple with the high degree of decontextualization that reading and writing demand. This is especially so because for many children the use of language at home [prior to school], is highly contextualized and is characterized largely by speech rather than reading and writing. Talk therefore makes the transition from contextualized use of language to decontextualized use of language required for literacy acquisition at school feasible. As Kieran Egan states "the development of orality is the necessary foundation for the later development of literacy" (1992:199 ).

The development of literacy in school is commonly centred around reading and writing. Research (Gee, 1992; Freebody, 1993) suggests that pupil talk is generally relegated a secondary role in the curriculum for various reasons. One explanation could be the threat it poses to teacher control and direction of the lesson. Gee (1992) and Freebody (1993) in discussing hegemony in the classroom, suggest that this could be for the reason that in allowing talk, teachers may find that their control becomes less sustainable. In fact teacher dominance of classroom talk is so well accepted by pupils, who have become



conditioned to accept this protocol and most often do little to upset the established pattern and order. Teacher- dominated monologues do not help in the process of reading acquisition or learning to write (Cummins, 1986; Gregory, 1994). But as Lewis Knowles states “there is value in encouraging pupils through talk, to consider their own ideas away from what can often be the inhibiting influence of teacher opinion and pronouncements” (1993:50).

In fact the failure to use interaction affects the ability to read. Curtiss (1977); Rymer (1992); Scollon (1979) and Ruddell (1992) have demonstrated that without a socially stimulated language environment, the ability to read is directly affected. Engaging in collaborative, negotiated talk facilitates textual meaning construction and develops pupils’ understanding of language functions. Lack of this understanding say Mosenthal and Na (1980) and Moll (1992) can affect children’s ability to engage in talking to learn and learning to talk.

Links between talk and writing have been established in the research of Zoellner (1969) and Vinson (1980). Britton argues for the use of talk in writing by stating that the incubation of ideas which takes place during talk, gives writing a boost by “the widening of consciousness” (1975:30). Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod and Rosen (1975) emphasize the centrality of talk to the writing process because it provides learners with opportunities for active rehearsal of new concepts and crystallizing of ideas. By presenting their ideas and listening to others, learners are able to recode and exemplify their thoughts and thus use them more convincingly (Sweigart,1991). The engagement in presenting and convincing others of their arguments through talk equips learners with the skills of reviewing, generating and planning their writing. Sweigart (1991), in his study of the effects of talk in the classroom states that :



**incorporation of more exploratory talk would allow students to use the skills they possess and already use out of school to deal with the curriculum they are expected to master in the classroom. (1991:493)**

**But this will be possible only if it reflects the skills that match expectation.**

**Barnes reiterates this further when he says that:**

**It is when the pupil is required to use language to grapple with new experience or to order old experience in a new way that he is most likely to find it necessary to use language differently. (1982:58)**

**Through talk pupils generate new thought sequences and explore implications which may be culturally at variance with their own.**

**Learning how to mean in writing differs across linguistic and cultural groups. In some societies, oracy takes primacy over writing (Ogbu, 1991). Transactions are conducted orally and no written records prevail. In others, writing is reserved for higher forms of communication such as legal matters (Scribner & Cole, 1978; Street, 1984). The purpose to which writing is put by a community and the expressions that are available for this determine the perception of it by its users. Children from cultures or from homes where writing is not a regular activity may tend to associate writing with school. For young pupils shared talk potentially provides a bridge and assists in the development of both language and writing skills. In engaging in shared talk about reading and writing, teachers are providing a necessary scaffold and extending the children's experience of adult support in acquiring language (Bus et al, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 1984; Dickinson & Smith, 1994).**

**What talk does for reading and writing is that it provides children with a scaffold between their individual linguistic data pool and the explicit demands of the genre and the skill they are engaged in. This scaffolding is important in**



early literacy learning. A competent adult is needed to extract the salient features of a text with which children are expected to engage and make them transparent (Whitehurst et al, 1994; Snow et al, 1991; Wiseman, Many & Altieri, 1992). To become competent readers and writers, children need to appropriate language to talk about the language. Meta cognitive functions are thus activated and understanding and knowledge base are extended (Paris, Lipson & Wixson, 1984; Flavell & Wellman, 1977; Raphael, Kirschner & Englert, 1988; Brown, Armbruster & Baker, 1986).

## Summary

This section discussed the place of talk in reading and writing. Recent studies have documented the value of talk during shared reading and shared writing activities, such as increased complexity of children's responses over time (Kelly, 1990) and the intertextual connections created during discussion involving story elements, illustrations and personal experiences (Short, 1992; Spreadbury, 1996). The research discussed in this section supports Vygotsky's (1978) ideas about the social construction of knowledge which informs us of the potential value of talk in children's literacy and language development. Collaborative interaction helps learners to stretch beyond their limits and gain new insights. While researchers and educators agree on the need for reading and writing experiences as the stimulus for literacy acquisition (Chall, 1989), implementation of such experiences in mixed-ability, culturally and linguistically heterogeneous classes, with students who may need the teacher and the school to become literate has not been adequately researched. The interest has been on deprived, disadvantaged, underprivileged, second-language learners of English (Anderson & Stokes, 1984; Neuman & Gallagher, 1994; Madden et al, 1993; Mullis, Campbell &



Farstrup, 1993). There are no studies of non-native children learning English as a first language who may or may not come from homes where English is spoken.

The review of literature in this section has shown that research into reading and writing practices and talk patterns has been based on Western societies, on children, teachers and parents who are white and middle class. Interesting and important as the findings from such research are, they cannot be generalized to contexts where reading and writing practices and talk patterns are dictated by different cultural scripts. The issue of relevance necessitates the study of pedagogic approaches that are based on differing cultural perceptions and practices in order to identify their effectiveness when transplanted to culturally different contexts. What are the literacy outcomes for children whose home literacy experiences differ from the typical school experiences (Anderson & Stokes, 1984; Pellegrini, 1990). Middle-class children who have school-like literacy experiences at home may be able to adapt to different kinds of instruction. Non-school literacy experienced children, however, depend on the nature of school instruction (Madden et al, 1993; Purcell-Gates & Dahl, 1991 Rice & Burbules, 1993; Snow, 1983)). The congruence between the cultural scripts of young children learning English in Singapore and the talk philosophy of pedagogies such as Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story, which this study is aimed at describing, would add to the current interest in literacy and culture in Singapore.

The Primary English Teaching Syllabus and the implementation of the Shared Book Reading and the Class Dictated Story Approaches in the primary English classroom in Singapore, advocate a talk curriculum. Both



these approaches revolve around negotiated, collaborative talk between teacher and pupils in the process of reading a story or writing a story. Given the syllabus requirement for talk, in this study, talk is defined as the negotiated and collaborative talk which is tentative and exploratory in nature. Some features of such talk are

**“incomplete units, occasional errors, overlapping contributions, interruptions and vocal fill-ins of an adult.” (Barnes, 1976:86).**

Such talk will provide a supporting and encouraging framework for pupils to use the language (English) they are learning as well as the skills of reading and writing (Marrow & Smith , 1990; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Whitehurst et al, 1994).

### **English Language Research In Singapore**

Interest in education research in Singapore began only in the 1970s and much of what was written was focussed on language planning and issues related to Singapore English. This is understandable if it is realized that from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, all attention and resources were devoted to nation building and economic planning. From the late 70s, with economic programmes in place and political stability ensured, the time was ripe for reviewing the educational priorities of Singaporeans. Research into language education came into being only in the mid-80s.

A significant starting point for discussing language research would be the South-East Asian Research Review and Advisory Group Report (SEARRAG) which documents the research undertaken at the three key language research institutions in Singapore, the Regional Language Centre (RELC), National



University of Singapore (NUS) and the National Institute of Education in Singapore (NIE). The Abstracts of Research on English Language Education in Singapore (1988), provide a good overview of the research stance in language and highlight some of the recurrent concerns of language education in Singapore. The bulk of the quantitative research deals with defining, describing and codifying Singapore English. This reflects the interest in varieties of English and the concern with identifying a standard variety as the acceptable norm for teaching and other official purposes. The need for a descriptive framework was felt to be urgent as an indigenised variety of Singapore English is taking shape (Gupta, 1989). It was also a time when the interest of language planners and educators across the world was focussed on indigenised varieties (Platt, 1984; Kachru, 1985; Ndebele, 1987) and related questions of acceptability and intelligibility. This was the beginning of a spate of studies in Singapore English (Crewe, 1977; Llamzon, 1977; Tongue, 1979; Platt and Weber, 1980). Comparisons at the phonological level (Tay and Gupta, 1983; Tay, 1982), discussion of norms and standards (Lim, 1986; Richards, 1977; 1982, 1983; Kachru, B, 1986) and attitudinal studies (Goh, 1981; Koh, 1983; Lim, 1979; Lim, HH, 1988; Loh, 1982; Ooi, 1985), were carried out in the late 1970s and in the 1980s. Platt (1980, 1984) Richards (1982) and Gupta (1989, 1985) attempted a description of the lectal continuum. The description and identification of Singapore English is crucial to any discussion on language teaching and learning in Singapore. While the debate on the description of Singapore English has consolidated somewhat, the question of the acceptable variety or standard to be used for educational purposes has not been conclusively dealt with.

Although the Ministry of Education implicitly maintains that schools use Standard British English, no attempt has been made to describe what this



might entail. In 1991, Pakir researched the use of English by students in two secondary schools and concluded that Singlish is used to signal solidarity and rapport. Based on the findings, the study advocates the use of Singlish in the classroom as this is what students are comfortable with and comprehend best. It is pointed out that this would facilitate learning. Her findings were published in the English language paper (The Straits Times) and caused an uproar among Singaporeans, educationists and non-educationists and an expressed concern over falling standards in English language learning.

Singlish evokes a negative image for some Singaporeans. For them, it is ungrammatical or bad English. Despite its negative image, Singlish is spoken fairly widely and is gaining popularity as a marker of identity. In essence Singlish is a colloquial variety carrying with it transfers from the ethnic languages in terms of grammar, vocabulary and phonology. The rise in popularity, in fact, threatens the use of ethnic languages at home. But, notwithstanding this imminent danger, the code switching that is prevalent in Singapore homes creates a favourable condition for Singlish to flourish. The gradual shift in language use that has been taking place and will continue to take place in Singapore shows the constant flux in which English has been. The use of English, its acceptability, norms and standards and attitudes towards the varieties will continue to capture researchers' interest as Singaporeans press on for a distinct identity of their own on the global map.

Besides the concern with codification, description and attitudes to Singapore English, the SEARRAG report shows that research interests also revolve round issues of concern that are in vogue during particular periods of time, namely, needs analysis, code-mixing/code-switching, language maintenance, error analysis, contrastive analysis, vocabulary, teaching of scientific English



and assessment of oral proficiency. A substantial amount of the research, besides being quantitative in nature is also aimed at identifying and evaluating discrete listening and speaking skills (Sng, 1971; Ho, 1972; Foo, 1984; Oh, 1984; Chew, 1984; Seet, 1986; Chan, 1987). In keeping with research trends then, the analysis attend to the products of teaching and learning (Kwa,1984).

What the SEARRAG Report reveals is the descriptive, exploratory and experimental nature of the research on English language in Singapore in Singapore in the 1970s and early 1980s. Besides throwing light on the concerns with language teaching and learning during that time, it also points to a fledgling research tradition in education and the global research orientation towards product-oriented approaches. The intensive nature of many of the studies (the bulk of the research was Academic Exercises and Masters' Studies), the limited duration available and the difficulty of accessing classrooms might explain some of the observed trends.

### **Classroom Interaction Research In Singapore**

In Singapore, research on the English language curriculum done by Mok (1984, 1987) and Quah (1989) and classroom interaction done by Lim (1985)and Khoo (1988) mark the first efforts of establishing contact with the context of language learning and teaching. In their studies of classroom interaction and discourse, both Lim and Khoo make interesting observations about teachers' and students' interaction strategies and patterns of interaction that emerge in different settings.

Lim studied the use of strategies by teachers to guide discussion lessons. In her research "An Analysis of Teacher-led Discussion Lessons in Junior



**Colleges in Singapore” (1985), she looks at the nature and extent of teacher control and the types of participatory demands the discussion necessitated from the students and the teachers. The study uses sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic methods to systematically investigate the interaction patterns that are generated by a discussion. Combining participant observation, interviews and questionnaires with videotaping of classroom lessons, Lim captures lessons in progress.**

**Malcolm’s (1979) analytical model for Speech Act identification is used and contexts are categorized using interactants’ purpose or goals and the nature of the initiation as a basis. Malcolm’s seven basic speech act functions thus yield ten teacher-initiated contexts and three contexts that are student-initiated contexts. Lim’s focus is on the sequential development or course taken during the instructional component of a lesson. With this focus, the study therefore does not take into account the sociocultural context of lesson interaction. Khoo in fact, states that the study “takes no account of the importance of the social variables of power and control in the asymmetrical role relationship of teacher and pupils in influencing strategies” ( 1988 :81).**

**Lim’s study shows the prevalence of high teacher control. In fact, teacher-initiated lessons dominate 75% of the lesson episodes studied. Similarly, lesson closings and end of discussions are also controlled by the teacher. This happens even when the discussion is initiated by the students. The observations of teacher-dominance in classroom talk and increased student-talk in peer-group discussion are consistent with patterns of classroom discourse across different levels and curriculum areas elsewhere in the world (Young and Watson, 1981).**



**Khoo(1988), studied the dynamics of classroom interaction in the discourse management of teachers and pupils by analyzing lesson sequences to show the different ways of interacting. This is done by identifying and describing the types of acts and “sit-types” that teachers and pupils engage in during the lessons. Looking at classroom interaction as social action involving negotiation between teacher and pupils, the study analyses the strategies both pupils and teachers use in communicating with one another. Khoo uses ethnographic investigation and video-recorded 16 lessons in an upper secondary English language classroom. This is supplemented by observation from field notes and informal discussions with teachers. The data is then analyzed by a description of the observed sit-types, followed by “an analysis of the interaction of selected episodes and of a whole lesson to illustrate the negotiated character of lessons” (Khoo, 1988:ii).**

**Khoo’s study is significant because it is the first major descriptive study that looks at classroom interaction in Singapore. Earlier studies are small-scale academic projects or adopted a quantitative approach. In describing the various strategies, tactics, devices and behaviours that teachers and pupils engage in their interactional encounters, Khoo presents classroom interaction as social action characterized by negotiation. Perceiving the lesson as negotiation implies a partnership in the joint creation of meaning, which is central to both learning and communication. It is also the first study in Singapore that takes an ethnographic approach to classroom interaction analysis. Khoo’s study, in a sense, set the scene for my study because she shows very clearly the importance of the ideological factors and constraints which influence the strategies and approaches teachers use in the classroom. As these play a significant role in the type of interaction that is generated in**



the classroom, they must be given the necessary recognition in any attempt at pedagogic innovation or change.

Khoo found that teachers' verbal dominance characterized much of the classroom interaction during English language lessons. This, she states, contributed to the pupils' passive behaviour (1988:318) and the prevalence of silence. Khoo's study has significance for my study for the following reasons:

- 1) It shows that pupils' reluctance to participate is a result of "social and cultural characteristics that view learning as a serious business so that the fear exists of giving wrong answers and being thought stupid" (1988:318).
- 2] It highlights the perception of authority by pupils and the role this plays in classroom interaction. Khoo states that the "pupils' ingrained respect for authority is reinforced by the teacher's classroom management strategies. So that the called out answer, far from being disruptive, is welcomed as a sign of responsiveness. As the silence often reflects passivity and compliance, it allows the teacher to ask a rhetorical question with confidence as it can be expected that pupils will reply supportively to it" (1988:318).
- 3] It concludes that the Composition (Writing) lesson "resembled a content lesson" (1988:320). The study shows that much of the talk during language lessons is teacher initiated and teacher controlled and "this is related to the content emphasis in Composition lessons, and the tendency for teachers to teach about language rather than teach language" (1988:320). This reduces the participation of the pupils and increases the teacher dominance in interaction.

The present study is being undertaken to find out the patterns of talk in families in the three main ethnic communities in Singapore and their perception of adult-child talk and the nature of talk in the classroom during



shared reading and shared writing. Khoo's findings cited above are thus relevant to this study because they point to the importance of the sociocultural context in literacy acquisition.

A drawback in Khoo's study however, is that while she recognizes the importance of social and cultural factors in teachers' communicative strategies, she assumes that these factors are the same across the three main ethnic communities in Singapore. The pupils and the teachers are treated as being culturally homogeneous and therefore a major source of ideological conflict inherently present in the classroom and which, also arises because of the different ideological orientation of the instructional approaches, is not given adequate attention. Most classrooms in Singapore have students from the three main ethnic backgrounds and this may mean the existence of different ideological orientations, which may result in different communication styles and strategies. These may affect both teacher and student interaction patterns. Studying classroom interaction patterns in isolation of their sociocultural influences, may not provide an adequate explanation of the observed patterns. Neither does it explain the nature of the adjustments that may have to be made in cross-cultural interaction, especially in the context of classroom learning. Nevertheless, Khoo's study is a significant step in analyzing classroom interaction in Singapore.



## **Ethnographic Studies**

**Cheah's study is the only ethnographic study in Singapore that has looked at literacy and culture and which has direct relevance to my study. The study surveys the notions of literacy informing English language education to show how these notions can have implications for the development of ethnic and national identities in Singapore. The data is collected from a primary Five classroom through ethnographic observations, audio recordings, formal and informal interviews, document analysis and children's written work. The document analysis provides the macro context for the description and analysis of the literacy activities in the classroom. The qualitative study is based on a sociocultural perspective to second language learning "with literacy as the end point of acquisition" (Cheah, 1994:1). Cheah found that the notion of literacy in curriculum development and literacy lessons is based on a conceptualization of literacy as neutral and as a technological tool. The dominant culture of the school, the study says, is the Singapore culture with "little for ethnic cultures" (Cheah, 1994:2). The existence of Western ideas in the curriculum is also observed. The study concludes that the process of deculturalization in Singapore is to be attributed to the emphasis on "nurturing a national culture and the neglect of ethnic cultures in schools" (1994:2). Cheah argues that Singaporeans should appropriate English for their personal and emotional needs transcending the functional purpose that has been advocated by the government.**

**Cheah's study is significant because it emphasizes the cultural load in literacy acquisition and points out that culture and literacy have to be constantly negotiated. The study calls for a perception of literacy as social dialogue, along the lines of Bakhtin, where being literate means active participation in**



the social, cultural and political life of the society. This social dialogue implies that literacy is socially constructed because as society changes, the notions, perceptions and practices of literacy also change. This also reflects the progressive nature of literacy. If culture is seen to be the day-to-day living in any group, community or society, then culture too takes on an evolving notion. Thus culture is socially constructed as well. This social construction of literacy while reflecting the changing needs of society also raises the need for continuing dialogue from all Singaporeans in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the society. Cheah's study shows the need for teachers to have a voice so that learners "can find their voices" (1994:255). As the demands of literacy changes and consequently, the type of literacy needed by a society also changes, the sociocultural aspect of literacy acquisition becomes an important background in any study of literacy. With the advent of IT 2000, Singapore is set on another threshold of literacy, albeit a technological one. This will have an impact on literacy and culture.

Cheah's study, despite being the first to consider the sociocultural aspect of literacy acquisition, focuses mainly on the cultural content of English language lessons and the curriculum materials used. The classroom lessons clearly show that cultural elements in the lessons are treated superficially by the teacher. Cheah's study however, does not look at the cultural factors that affect the classroom interaction and the learning that is to take place. The study is more inclined towards evaluating the role of English as an identity marker in the process of nation building in Singapore. Nevertheless, as an ethnographic study, it marks an important beginning in situating the study of literacy in Singapore within a sociocultural context.



Prior to Cheah's study, there has been no research pertaining to literacy practices in particular sociocultural contexts in Singapore. Neither has there been any detailed study on the literacy practices introduced into the local classrooms. Yet the language curriculum in particular, has undergone several major changes since the Goh Keng Swee Report of 1979.

### **Pedagogic Research**

In the early nineties, interest shifted to the pedagogic approaches to language learning and teaching. Although the trend in teacher training has been on teaching Language Arts focussed on whole language, research on literacy per se at the primary school level has concentrated on reading. Ng's (1987) research into children's language and reading development" reveals significant findings about the reading skills of primary school pupils. She argues that the teachers lack conceptual understanding of the goals and processes of reading. Chan (1987 examines the oral reading behaviour of a class of grade four pupils whose home language is not English. Oh (1984) focuses on beginning reading in English and Mandarin and notes a wide disparity in the oral proficiency of the pupils in the two languages. Approaches to teaching reading were also studied as researchers sought to introduce new methodologies for English language teaching-- concept mapping (Sullivan, 1994), story-telling (Khoo, 1993), repeated reading (Appleton and Remedios,1993) and Reader's Theatre (Whitson,1993). Parental role in children's literacy development became a research focus from 1990 (Brown,1993; Hilleson,1993; Sripathy, 1991, 1993). Part of this surge of



interest in the approaches to teaching and learning may be attributed to the new interest in literacy and the learner in Singapore.

The increase in language education research is promising. But as in the past, the studies have been limited to experimental, product-process approaches of a quantitative nature. Ethnographic studies have not been undertaken till 1994 (Cheah, 1994). The longitudinal nature of ethnographic research and the absence of an ethnographic research tradition in language in Singapore may explain this situation.

The piecemeal research in language education also reveals the focus on language as a distinct linguistic phenomenon—an entity which may be studied discretely. This has resulted in the documentation of perceived achievements in a very narrow sense, overlooking the complexities of language learning. It may be worth noting that research on the appropriateness of methodological approaches implemented in the classrooms has been significantly absent. A possible reason for this is that methodological approaches are received from the Ministry of Education. So, while teachers are evaluated for their teaching styles and pupils for their cognitive abilities (not styles), the approaches themselves defy evaluation. It is significant to point out that the sociocultural context of learning English in the Singapore classroom has not been given much research attention. For example, pedagogic approaches that are based on a talk curriculum have been adopted and implemented. But, the conceptualization of talk in the different cultures in Singapore and its role in learning has not been studied. It is therefore necessary to understand the impact of the implementation of learner-centred, activity-based, talk-oriented literacy curriculum.



The absence of literacy research within a sociocultural framework, is also due to the time lag in following research developments in traditional centres of research such as Britain, the United States and more recently, in Australia. Though they have been following trends set elsewhere, it has almost always taken researchers in Singapore a time lag to adopt research findings or to undertake similar research. It may not be far-fetched to say that this reliance on 'traditional centres' has in some ways contributed to the neglect of research issues that have relevance to literacy education in Singapore. In a sense, the following of research trends in the main centres of research is similar to the adoption of pedagogic approaches to the teaching of English in Singapore from these sources.

To sum up, language research in Singapore has, in a sense, come full circle as new language policies, reflecting changing political, social and economic concerns have been instituted and as opportunities for action-based research have become more readily available. It is in studying the classroom as a social system that researchers can come to a better understanding of how culturally different interaction patterns influence educational access and achievement. Recognition of the inter-connectedness of language and culture may contribute significantly to knowledge of oral language use in the classroom.

### **Summary of literature review**

This review of literature has focussed on studies that are relevant to this research. The category system of Flanders and Bellack, the social action model of Mehan, the linguistic analysis of classroom discourse by Sinclair and Coulthard, the ethnographic studies by Philips, Au and Heath, the sociolinguistic description of classroom discourse by Gumperz and research on perspectives of literacy and culture by Street, Scribner and Cole and Scollon and



Scollon, and the study of home literacy practices by Rohl and Spreadbury show the development of classroom language research from the sixties to the nineties. Research in classroom discourse is vast but only those having direct relevance to this study have been included in this review. Each study has been concerned with different issues of language learning, reflecting the trend at a particular period of time. The theory of “linguistic disadvantage” and its educational consequences led to a focus on ethnic-minority children who were said to encounter disadvantages upon school entry. Stubbs(1974, 1983) and Edwards and Westgate (1994) point to the lack of empirical evidence to this by highlighting the demands made by the school which tend to isolate the learning experiences of ethnic-minority children. This was followed by the ‘deficit’ debate. Culturally-oriented differences with respect to literacy explained the failure of school-based literacy programmes. In the 1980s, with the incorporation of sociological and anthropological conceptions of literacy events and environments into literacy studies, research interest in literacy processes and instruction came together. Work by Scribner and Cole (1980), Cook-Gumperz (1986), Langer (1991), Spreadbury (1994, 1996) and Freebody and Luke (1991, 1995) emphasizes the importance of attending to the sociocultural context of literacy acquisition and the influence of home literacy practices on school performance. Studies done by Rohl (1994), Neuman (1996), Neuman & Gallagher (1994), Freebody, (1991, 1995), Heath (1983) and Malcolm, (1979) show different home [cultural] and school interaction patterns which determine school success or failure with regard to reading and writing. Research also shows that differences in language use result in differential access to literacy experiences (Greenwood, 1993; Horbury & Cottrell, 1997).

Research by Philips (1981), Au (1981), Barnhardt (1982), Erickson and Mohatt(1981, 1982), Heath (1983) and Freebody (1995) and studies by Breen et



al (1994), Gee (1992), Cairney (1994) point to the need for culturally congruent instruction. These studies demonstrate that participation structures employed in each system represent different sets of rights and obligations which govern both teachers and learners during interaction in the classroom. It can thus be safely concluded that the sociocultural context of literacy acquisition plays an important role in classroom pedagogy.

A significant observation of these studies (Barnes, 1976; Philips, 1972; Au, 1980; Heath, 1983) is that they are looking into classrooms with a culturally and linguistically homogenous student population. Literacy acquisition in the Singapore classroom occurs in culturally heterogeneous classrooms where practices, perceptions and expectations may be different and an indigenous variety of English [Singlish] is still evolving. Another major difference is that many of the studies were looking at the process of literacy or language acquisition in contexts where English is a second language ( Philips, 1972, 1983; Au and Jordan, 1981; Barnhardt, 1982; Erickson and Mohatt, 1981, 1982; Freebody, 1995) or where it is the language of communication at home (Heath, 1983; Wells, 1986, 1987). In Singapore however, English, while not being the first language of the students or the teachers, is being taught as a first language.

Another distinct feature of the Singapore classroom is that all pupils learn their mother tongue as a second language from the age of six, when they begin formal schooling. This renders the acquisition of literacy more complex. It also means that the observations made and conclusions drawn from the studies cited above may not be relevant to the Singapore classroom. Nevertheless, they point to the need to harness learners' embedded cultural patterns of interaction and perceptions about learning (Sripathy, 1991). They also reveal the dangers of adapting pedagogic approaches that may not be culturally congruent with



learners' expectations and practices. Also, as the above review of language education research done in Singapore showed, there is an absence of relevant research on the sociocultural situatedness of literacy acquisition or the cultural appropriateness of borrowed pedagogic approaches. The possibility of instructional adaptation and the extent and nature of such adaptation cannot therefore be claimed to be known.

This research is therefore timely because there is an urgent need to account for cultural differences which impinge on literacy acquisition in order to maximise successful learning. The perceived neutrality of English, together with the cultural variety in the classroom renders the introduction or use of culturally incongruent pedagogic approaches more complex.

In conclusion, whether we perceive of literacy in the functional, moral or cultural sense or define it in the light of societal, ethnic and individual meanings, the error of simplification is obvious. As the preceding discussion has shown, literacy is a mechanism for people to name their world. How they do this is determined by their practices as well as perceptions of literacy and the role it plays and their view of the world. Literacy according to Freire (1970) can be an emancipatory ideology by transforming the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed or it can be an autonomous one as defined by Street (1984).

In Singapore although policy makers may believe that language and culture can exist as separate entities, their assigning status to the languages in use, shows both social and political manoeuvring. The government, through its various campaigns, both cultural and language, has raised the status of some languages (Mandarin) and implicitly diminished others. In cautioning politicians not to use the sensitive tool of language to drum up political



support, the government has acknowledged the function of language and literacy as a political tool. In attributing the swing of votes to a Teochew-speaking (Chinese dialect) opposition candidate, the government has pointed to the cultural load of language. Bakhtin's view of language as a dialogue between self and society highlights the argument of international intelligibility of any variety of English. In learning English, Singaporeans must situate themselves in the context of other speakers of English, while at the same time appropriating language to convey their own meanings and culture. This may make them internationally intelligible while giving them a cultural identity of their very own. To do so they must have the ability to adapt their use of English to contextual demands. This is the purpose of communication —to make meaning. Meaning is made by contextually appropriate language, which reflects the sociocultural forces at work. Literacy, seen in this sense, is empowerment. To create this empowerment and nurture the dual ability to use any one language in varying contexts, requires dialogue in the classroom. It is this perception of literacy as dialogue, as socioculturally influenced, that needs consideration in any discussion about literacy in English in Singapore. A view of literacy along these lines may influence and have implications for its acquisition. A sociocultural perspective of literacy in Singapore necessitates the use of culturally appropriate approaches in its teaching and learning.

Literacy in any language must incorporate a personal level of meaning although it is bound to be immersed in the larger contextual setting of the particular society. Bakhtin describes this relationship between self and the greater society as dialogue -one permeating the other and at the same time resulting from the other. This dialogue is necessary because Bakhtin describes language as being culturally loaded (1981). The cultural load is that of the learner (his own culture) as well as the culture of the linguistic code



being used and the cultural orientation of the person being communicated with (Bakhtin, 1981:293). Freire (1990) perceives literacy as liberation and empowerment. The conceptualization of literacy as dialogue and as empowerment implies a view of literacy as continually evolving, adapting to the changing demands and needs of society and at the same time contributing to it. It also emphasizes the sociocultural situatedness of literacy and the contextual influences which determine its form and function. Viewing literacy as dialogue conveys a sense of negotiation between the individual and the larger society and this allows for the existence of a variety of literacies, which the individual can access according to his perceived needs and abilities.

Definitions of literacy and practices of literacy can thus vary from society to society. What counts as literacy, as Bakhtin (1981) says, must therefore have a cultural context. This is because whether in literate, semi -literate or illiterate societies, language is the medium of communication. Whatever form the language takes, it embodies the culture of the people of that society. It arises out of their beliefs , expectations, fears and practices and functions as a medium through which these can be expressed. As the society develops, its beliefs and the very basis of the society undergoes change and language and the practices to which it is put to also evolve. This means literacy practices and perceptions originate within a culture, evolve with it and change with it.

In Singapore, literacy, I believe, takes on a very narrow definition. The Census of Population (1990), which is the official document on literacy levels in Singapore, defines literacy as “the ability to read and write”(1990:3). Because literacy is perceived in a limiting way, the learning of language is not perceived to be culturally linked. For example, it is an unstated belief that English can be learnt for its functional use, focussing on forms, and the



mother tongues can be learnt devoid of their economic trappings, purely to imbibe the culture. This separation of roles for the languages is due to the belief that language and culture are separate entities and the perception of literacy as an all or nothing embodiment. This views literacy as a neutral process, distinct from the social context of its use and function, along the lines of Street's (1984) autonomous view. Gopinathan states that "English ... does not seem to take into account the need for an understanding of a different culture..." (1974:9). But English, like any other language, is not neutral because language, thought and culture are interconnected. The perception of the world differs from culture to culture, and so will the language used to express this perception. The scientific knowledge that can be accessed through English is not neutral, ways of thinking and organizing the information is bound by Western culture. Knowledge, thinking patterns and the use of language are culturally loaded.

The issue of the neutrality of the English language has been accepted without question mainly because most of the research that has been undertaken, has been in linguistics or applied linguistics. This has resulted in the sociocultural aspects of literacy acquisition being ignored. Besides, English lessons are referred to as language lessons rather than as literacy lessons.

### **Definition of Literacy**

Although literacy encompasses a range of practices determined by the needs and perceptions of a society, in the context of this study it is defined as involving the shared reading and shared writing lessons in the primary classrooms in Singapore and the reading and writing activities engaged in at



home by the participants comprising of the parents and their children. This will include the tuition classes and computer classes that children attend and the doing of assessment books. This practice of literacy is situated within the Singaporean culture. A definition of Singaporean culture is therefore in place.

### **Defining Culture**

In some societies culture is defined in terms of its manifestations such as artefacts and practices. In others, it is defined in terms of the beliefs and values the cultural group subscribes to. Edward Said regards culture as :

a system of values saturating downward almost everything within its purview; yet paradoxically, culture dominates from above without at the same time being available to everything and everyone that it dominates. (1983:9)

This makes culture exclusionary because access is not free to all. At the same time it seems to exercise a certain control, while itself remaining independent. If culture is said to reflect peoples' beliefs, then it cannot be above them but of them. Hirsch (1987) states that to be a member of a culture one must possess a fair amount of knowledge, a large part of it tacit, concerning the culture, its rules, rituals, mores heroes, gods and demi-gods. Seen in this light, it is the everyday experiences and practices of a group or community of people that permeates the language and language use, and make transparent the values and meanings of that group. These determine the nature and patterns of interaction among people belonging to the group and, by implication, guide out-of-group interaction. These rules, rituals, mores and belief systems inform the cultural load of the language of that particular group of people. It is this which distinguishes and sets apart one cultural group from another.



In defining culture thus, it can be seen that literacy as social dialogue, as negotiation between the individual self and the larger society (Bakhtin,1981) is ongoing. Literacy practices take off from the individual's culture and since culture evolves with external contact over time then, literacy practices sanctioned by the group will be negotiated and renegotiated to reflect the changing beliefs, rules and rituals . At the same time the literacy practices enable access to new ways of thinking and doing and result in the abandoning of old or outdated practices and the formulation of new ones. Thus literacy practices are embedded in the sociocultural context of a community or society (Bakhtin, 1986; Anstey & Bull, 1996; Gee, 1991). In acquiring literacy, an individual is then negotiating within his/her sociocultural context of day-to-day existence to derive a personal meaning from the larger public or societal forms of literacy and the uses to which the acquired literacy is put to. This negotiation and dialogue is ongoing and may empower or disempower the individual. As social dialogue it is contextualized within the cultural experiences of the particular society. Culture in the context of this study, therefore, refers to the lived day-to-day experiences of Malay, Chinese and Indian Singaporeans. These are guided by the specific values and practices of each ethnic community as well as by the larger Singaporean values espoused by the government and daily practices.

The next chapter describes aspects of the cultural scripts of Chinese, Malay and Indian Singaporeans that will elucidate the practice of adult-child talk and perception of children.



## CHAPTER 3

### CULTURAL SCRIPTS

This chapter presents the cultural scripts of Chinese, Indian and Malay Singaporeans with a view to providing a perspective of some of the ethnic values and beliefs which guide each community's day-to-day living and which may give an insight into the adult-child talk patterns that prevail in each ethnic community. This description is followed by a discussion of Western pedagogic approaches and the representation of culture in the primary English language syllabus.

Language influences the culture of a group of people and is in turn influenced by it. At a personal level, individuals are socialized from birth into using language in culturally appropriate ways. This establishes the norms of interaction and the discourse strategies that guide individuals in their use of language (Bakhtin, 1986, Freire, 1987; Lankshear, 1995). Consequently, ways of speaking vary from culture to culture. Culture-specific ways of speaking have been studied by ethnographers, contrastive pragmatists and linguistic anthropologists. Ways of speaking and norms of interaction reflect the shared understanding that prevails within the particular speech community and may not always be transparent to the outsider, whose interpretation may be coloured by a personal, linguistic and cultural perspective. The implications of this for language learning and teaching are significant. Cultural scripts are defined as "cultural rules" of speaking (Wierzbicka 1991, 1992) which are embedded in the cultural values of a particular group. Goddard explains cultural scripts as:



**an improved method for stating 'rules of speaking', equally compatible with the search for broad generalizations about discourse and with attention to the particularities of individual cultures. (1995:5)**

**In the context of this study cultural script is defined as a framework established by a community, which guides communication by providing the rules of discourse. This script would then reflect the community's values, beliefs, practices and expectations. In short, it would encompass the particular culture. A society with different ethnic communities would thus have several cultural scripts which come into contact with one another. These cultural ways of speaking or cultural scripts, play an important role in language teaching and learning. In the context of this study, they are one of the factors which determine learners' participation in the classroom and the nature and patterns of teacher-pupil interaction.**

**But values, beliefs, perceptions and ways of speaking are not static. They change in response to changes in society. Culture, therefore, is constantly evolving and changing. Within a culture, too, there is no homogeneity. However, through a description of the profiles of particular groups of people, it is possible to identify particular features that may help explain the ways of speaking of the people who are members of that group.**

**The cultural scripts discussed in this section are not exhaustive. Neither are they binding on all individuals of a particular culture at all times. The cultural scripts**



function as frameworks to describe some factors which guide the interaction patterns of the teachers, parents and children in this study. While much of the script can be generalized to the population at large, it must be remembered that as Singapore is at a cultural crossroad, its people have been at the receiving end of Western and other cultures and have inevitably embraced symbols of Western life from Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen to MacDonalds and K-Mart. These symbols, together with their inherent values of liberty, sense of self and individualism have influenced the Chinese, Malay and Indian cultural scripts in some way.

The cultural scripts of the teachers, pupils and parents in this study vary by virtue of their different cultural (ethnic) affinities, social class and age. What are the cultural scripts of the Chinese, Malay and Indian pupils in the Singapore classroom? Although Singaporeans by nationality, the Chinese, Malay and Indian pupils have distinct cultural values which impinge on their interaction patterns. Over and above this ethnic uniqueness, all Singaporeans also share a Singaporean cultural script enshrined in the White Paper on Shared Values (1991) and by government dictates which are aimed at influencing both values and conduct of the populace in general areas. Also, within each ethnic community there are other mediating factors such as the language or languages spoken at home, the socio-economic background and the aspirations and values the individual family espouses. These would not be the same for all members within a macro ethnic community. The cultural scripts described in this chapter were observed to be present in the families in this study.



As it is not possible to describe the various cultural scripts in their entirety, aspects of the three cultures which have a direct bearing on this study will be the focus.

To understand the interface between English language teaching approaches and cultural orientation of the learner and teacher in the Singapore classroom it is necessary to discuss the adults' perception of children in the different ethnic communities in Singapore. This will also elucidate the adults' perception of talk in learning, its use at home and its occurrence or non-occurrence in the English classroom.

### **MALAY CULTURAL SCRIPT**

To understand the Malay cultural script, it is important to look at the history of the Malays in Singapore. Originally hailing from Malaya and Indonesia, the Singapore Malays were a 'kampong' (village) people, who relied on fishing, rice cultivation and market gardening for economic existence. They are the indigenous people of the land (in Malaysia they are referred to as the Bumiputras - King of the Land). Their cultural values and social norms are tied to this early history of independence, ownership and proximity to nature. They have been described by sociologists and politicians as courteous, warm, easy-going and charming and at times, negatively, as fatalistic and indolent. The latter labelling is more a result of a misconception of the Malay way of life (Li, 1993; Zawaiyah,



1994). This labelling is a stereotype and persisted despite the economic strides that have been made by the Malays in the last decade.

### **Political and Social History**

Contrary to popular belief, very often endorsed by the government and believed in by the Malay elite themselves, Malays and other natives of South-East Asia, because of their ownership of land and rural subsistence, were in a position to reject virtual slave labour on colonial mines and plantations.

Non-Malays imported to meet colonial labour needs were told that their presence was required because the Malays were not able or willing to do the work and their respective roles in the colonial division of labour shaped the images the subject peoples held of each other. (Li 1993 : 168-169)

This cultural explanation has been used over and over again by the government and the population in general, to explain the lack of social mobility among the Malays in meritocratic Singapore. Interestingly, the Malay elites themselves, the ministers in government believe that 'day-dreaming', complacency and living in the past images of the Malays are unique, cultural and deriving from an assumed failure to change (Li, 1993). Reports of social/ family problems faced by Malays in the 1970s and 1980s asserted that Malay parents paid less attention to their children's education (Mokhtar, Abdullah 1968-70 : 17), and that Malay children were brought up not to ask questions, were too shy to talk in class and were undisciplined through permissive child-rearing practices. The image of the Malays as contented, obedient and without inquiring minds was cited repeatedly to explain their 'backwardness'. The constant image of the rural, unchanging



Malay, the reverence for Islam and their preference for a gracious lifestyle are other explanations which have been ventured.

The effect of this popularized image of the Malays is that it has been used to explain away all differences between them and the other races. One of the community leaders, an academic interviewed for this study, Dr. Shaharuddin, noted that the Malays are different, like any other community, not because of Islam or their attitude but their preferences. Islam has very often been cited by politicians and social workers in Singapore for the perceived economic backwardness and the relaxed attitude of Malay Singaporeans.

### **SOME CULTURAL CONCEPTS**

Some cultural concepts which manifest themselves in the language and interaction of the Malays will be described. Malay culture and daily speech is characterized by numerous sayings (peribahasa). Evocative verses (pantuns) and narrative poems (syair) add to the speech repertoire. Day-to-day Malay life is guided by peribahasa which stipulates both conduct and manners.

The fundamental cultural concept which guides (stipulates) Malay interaction is "the social emotion of "malu" (shame or propriety). "Malu" is regarded positively as a social good because it 'forces' the Malays to value highly other people's perception of them. Things or behaviour which will bring shame to oneself or the family are not to be condoned. The concept of "malu" also carries with it a sense of modesty, which is displayed when one receives a compliment, praise or gift, by negation (Tidak, tak-apa) or deflection.



Tied to the concept of “malu” is “maruah” (dignity), which carries with it a moral sense of integrity or character. While “malu” functions at a community or collective level, “maruah” deals with the personal level. A related concept is the notion of feeling - “senang hati”. This describes a person who is relaxed and easy-going and not anxious or worried about the future. This notion has often been negatively interpreted by other cultures (Alatas, 1977). This social value stresses the importance which Singapore Malays attach to personal happiness (Djamour, 1965:145-6). In fact, related to this notion is an often cited saying “goyang kaki” (shaking legs), which some non-Malay Singaporeans use negatively to mean “lazy and aimless”.

These social values determine Malay interaction patterns. The relative detachment, personal disregard, and the regard for another person's dignity and pride may explain Malay parents' gentle dealing with their children. The fact that negative feelings are not expressed but conveyed non-verbally by facial (eye) expressions (pandangan bermakna) may also explain the lack of shouting or using a raised voice to discipline children.

Malay culture discourages the outward display of personal feelings. This may explain the description of the Malay race as “externally impassive” (Goddard 1995:19, citing Karim, 1990A). As explained earlier, evocative sayings are used to allude to sensitive matters that one is not supposed to give expression to. The Malay individual is expected to always display a calm disposition and show concern for and consideration towards others. Mahathir (1970:160) describes it thus:-



**The good Malay is always unobtrusive and self-effacing, unwilling to impose his will if it conflicts with others, and ever willing to compromise.**

Omitting unpleasanties, negating and deflecting compliments and praises are in keeping with this cultural way of conducting oneself and of maintaining one's "face" and consequently respect.

### **Perception of Children and Family Interaction**

“Malays love children and value kinship sentiment very highly. Singapore Malay adults find great pleasure in the presence of small children. This explains why they have children in abundance” (Li, 1993:124). Unlike the other ethnic groups in Singapore, it was the Malays who defied the government's family planning policy of stopping at two children, despite the severe disincentives, including that of school enrolment. Children are loved in themselves although they are not creators of wealth for their parents. “This desire for children is seen in the practice of parents whose children have grown up, adopting a child because their home has become too quiet” (Li, 1993:132). Friends or neighbours 'borrow' small children for fun and buy them snacks and clothing as gifts. In brief, Singapore Malays enjoy children. Conceptually for the Malays, children are pure pleasure. Children in the Malay community are not segregated or differentiated from adults in day to day living. They are seen as much as heard. They partake of all family functions actively and are showered with affection. "Kasih" (love and concern) dominates this dealing with children. Malays address their children



affectionately as "sayang" (love). It is a very endearing term and may be said to be the English equivalent of "love" but is more culturally loaded than "love". It is used by family members and by parents and grandparents to children. In fact, much parent-child interaction is prefixed with "sayang".

They are listened to and played with as much as possible. The height of this togetherness and affection was best seen in the 'kampong' days when Malays lived as one big family. There is a great deal of interaction between adults and children in the Malay family.

### **Authority and Hierarchy**

How does this concept of children affect their attitude to authority? Hierarchy exists in the Malay community and children, for the love showered on them, must display appropriate respect to and for elders. Respect for parents and elder siblings and relatives is not subject to question. This is not enforced in an authoritarian manner but through the expression of kinship sentiments, bearing of gifts and use of salutations.

In the past, in rural areas of Malaya, land was the major asset parents bestowed on their children. But, in Singapore, today, education, not land, is the investment made by Malay parents. The parents in this study stated that as parents, they see it as their duty to give their children a good education but they do not pressure them to excel. In the past, low incomes, large families and absent or ineffectual parental guidance and control accounted for the poor educational



performance of Malay children. This has changed significantly today.

### **Perception of Education**

The approach of Malay Singaporeans to education is different from that of the other communities. The unwillingness to pressurize children to achieve against all odds is not the result of a negative valuation of education or discipline. In the 1980s, with constant government exhortation and the inevitable influence of the dominant Chinese approach to achievement and academic excellence, the Malays have assumed a higher professional profile. Despite this marked change, the Malay parents interviewed felt that their children should not be stressed in school and wanted teachers to adopt a more understanding and gentle approach towards them. The three teachers in this study confirmed this request in their interviews.

### **Concept of Face**

Admonishing children is not a characteristic feature of the Malays. Problems are dealt with through discussion and consultation with elders. The notion of 'shaming' children is looked down upon because they are regarded as innocent, vulnerable and requiring guidance from better-informed adults. The child, however bad, is never ostracised by the family. Errant children are always taken back lovingly into the fold.

At home, the Malay child is praised for every small step towards success. Parents refer to them proudly in discussions with others. Malay children are not caand in



extended families they gain the support and affection of many relatives. Malay families do not employ foreign maids. Despite the ethnic decentralization in urban housing development, Malay families maintain kinship networking nevertheless.

To conclude, Malay interaction patterns are guided by the cultural values of “malu” and “maruah” and a language that is colourful and emotive with numerous traditional sayings (peribahasa) and pantuns. The need to avoid “malu” when speaking to strangers and in public implies the use of gentle language and avoidance of negative expressions and confrontation.

This brief description of the Malay cultural script may help explain the reason why Malay parents handle their children gently and expressed the feeling that the teachers deal with them in a caring and affectionate manner. Professor Ann Wee of the Social Work Department at the National University of Singapore pointed out that “Malay children who had problems in school responded positively to praise, encouragement and tender treatment rather than reprimand and punishment”.

### **THE INDIAN CULTURAL SCRIPT**

The Indian cultural script presented here is culled from information obtained from interviews with community leaders, parents and social workers. A detailed search (including an Inter-Net search) did not reveal any research that has been undertaken on concepts of face and risk-taking in language- learning by Indians or a description of Indian cultural scripts.



The Indians came to Singapore as indentured labourers and merchants and were responsible for the development of some of the major infrastructure, such as roads, in Malaya. They were also heavily concentrated in the shipping industry. The British, who brought the Indian conscripts from South India, also brought the Jaffna-Tamils who occupied middle class jobs in the administration. The Chettiars, who came to Singapore on their own, led a thriving money-lending business. Thus, the Indians of Singapore today had a range of different origins. Their child-rearing practices varied with their background and experience.

#### **Perception of Education**

Generally, a large majority of the Tamil-speaking Indians have a high priority for education. Education is regarded as a source of wealth and status and the “educated man” is held in high esteem and reverence. “Learned men” are thus regarded with esteem and treated with great reverence and respect. The teaching and learning of Tamil in school is focused not on the grammar of the language, but on precepts which guide an individual's behaviour and conduct. Hence children are taught the ancient sayings and the emphasis on memory (rote learning) is high. This also means that precepts guiding social and moral conduct are conveyed through word-of-mouth. The practice of lending credence to one's beliefs and actions by citing ancient precepts and proverbs explains not just the literary wealth which is passed down from generation to generation but also the rich oral tradition which exists among the Indians.



## **Religion**

**Religion is another factor that unites the Indians. Hinduism provides a common thread and links the people through its numerous festivals and celebrations. Community networking is very strong and this has accounted for the many kin working in the shipping industry. Tied to religion is the concept of Good and Evil. The Indians believe that man is basically good and that by engaging in good deeds he prepares for a better after-life. Bad deeds on the other hand, will invite divine retribution. Linked to this deeply ingrained sense of good and evil is the concept of Fate (Vithi) and Retribution. The Hindu Indians believe that their present life (both the pleasures and miseries) is the result of their Karma (or previous deeds). Pleasure and happiness in their current life implies that they are enjoying the fruits of their good deeds in the past life, while misery and suffering are regarded as payments for past bad deeds. This belief in "Fate" and an after-life guides social conduct and places tremendous emphasis on both atonement and contentment.**

## **Concept of "Maanam"**

**Respect for elders and authority is present but not at the expense of individual rights. Diligence is upheld as a necessary virtue in attaining success in life. Day to day life is guided by two dominant cultural concepts - "Maanam" (honour or dignity) and "Mariyaathe" (respect based on age, position or wealth). Both these concepts are rooted in the sense of "what others would think" and "others would laugh at us", with the implication that others should always think good (well) of**



one. This living of one's life by "others" precept is an important moral principle, having a major influence on daily living and on talk patterns. When engaging in talk one has to bear in mind both one's sense of respect and face. Action that would ruin an individual's "Maanam" and consequently that of the family, is to be avoided. The importance of this is embodied in the rich collection of traditional sayings used generously in daily communication by ordinary people. The different precepts collated as poetic sayings are contained in various collections, such as "Aathisoodi", "Ulaga Neethi", "Konrai Vehnthen", "Muthurai" and "Nanmozhi".

The concept of "Maanam" is also closely linked to a sense of shame and loss of face. For this reason, Indians are known not to communicate their personal or private matters to members outside the immediate family. There is a folk saying which emphasizes that "whatever happens in the family must be kept within the four walls of the house". The basic morals of the Tamils are couched in their religion (Hinduism) and the numerous proverbs (Pazhamozhiggal). Both these regulate social conduct.

Children are taught these precepts from a very early age, not in the formal classroom but by their mothers who incorporate them in the lullabies (Thaalaattu) they sing, or in the stories they tell while they are feeding them. Indian mothers transmit cultural values and precepts of good conduct to their children almost on a daily basis in the course of engaging in their daily routines. This situation is changing with more mothers in active employment and the inadequate learning of Tamil in school (by young parents) because of the perceived economic non-viability



of the language).

### **Concept of Face**

From a very early age the sense of "what others would think" is instilled in the child. The child is told that if he/she does not conduct himself/herself as expected (listening to parents, behaving respectfully) others will laugh at him/her. This sense of others and the consequent sense of 'being shamed' carries on into the school years. A child's success or failure, like his/her behaviour, is regarded as reflecting on the parents. It is the parents who stand to lose face in the society if their child misbehaves or fails academically.

Related to this concept of discipline is the practice of controlling one's feelings. Outward displays of feelings that would hurt other people are strictly prohibited and restraint is considered to be a virtue. Praises and compliments are thus deflected and children in Indian households are rarely praised. Good behaviour and good performance in the examinations are regarded as unquestionable, expected duties of children requiring no encouragement or reward.

On the other hand, Indian parents readily 'shame' their children in front of others, including strangers, to teach them correct behaviour as well as a form of punishment. This sense of shaming children in front of others (to make them realize their mistake) ties in with the concepts of "Maanam" as well as parental responsibility of disciplining (Kattupaadu) children.



## **Respect for Authority**

**The concept of "Mariyaathe" requires children to show absolute respect to all elders (including strangers) and especially to people of power and position such as teachers. This is ingrained from young and, in addition to being taught formal forms of address for immediate relatives, children are taught to address all strangers to whom they are introduced as Uncle, Aunty, or Akka (big sister) and Annai (big brother).**

**The emphasis on the observance of this respect for others dictates the use of language. The forms of address create a natural distance and ensure children use appropriate language and content in their conversations with people outside the immediate family and talk to them with respect and formality. Addressing older people or teachers by their first name would be seen as rudeness and bad upbringing and is sufficient to invoke instant punishment.**

## **"Kanniyam" and "Kattuppaadu"**

**Two other concepts that influence the Indian cultural script are "Kanniyam" and "Kattuppaadu". "Kanniyam" refers to preserving one's self-respect while, at the same time, extending respect where it is due (a sense of decency). "Kattuppaadu" refers to discipline. Although the former is applicable more to adults, the latter is emphasized with children. Discipline, or more appropriately, controlling children, in the sense of teaching them the right behaviour and**



ensuring that they grow up to be successful and responsible people is seen to be the duty of parents. For this reason, Indian families emphasize disciplining of children - from the way they behave to the way they talk. Parents' authority is ultimate. Parents, whose children become social problems, are seen not to have 'controlled' (disciplined) their children. This is loss of face (maanam and mariyaathe) for the family.

### **Perception of children**

Children are highly valued in the community and regarded as great treasures. In the extended family system, they are showered with warmth and affection. Good behaviour, discipline and the right values are inculcated through story-telling and by precept. The success of children is seen as the parents' success. Similarly, children's "failure" in life is parents' failure of duty.

The Indians believe that children should be seen and not heard. Therefore adults avoid making an outward display of affection and diminish compliments extended to children, by pointing out some negative trait. The Indians also believe that outward praise of a child may actually result in some ill befalling him/her.

While individuality is encouraged, most adult Indians do not expect children to express an opinion unless invited. Unsolicited expressions of thought will be admonished as a sign of bad upbringing and disrespect. Despite children being considered God's gift, Indian parents feel it their duty to teach them moral values



so that they live to be good citizens and bring honour to the family. Provision of basic necessities of education, food and clothing comes next.

Thus the concepts of “Maanam”, “Mariyaathe” and “Kattupaadu”, together with the multitudinous proverbial sayings and precepts, comprise the Indian cultural script.

### **THE CHINESE CULTURAL SCRIPT**

The cultural script of the Chinese in Singapore differs from that of the other ethnic groups by virtue of their history. Seeking a better life in their new homeland in Singapore, they were determined to make the best of prevailing conditions.

#### **Hierarchy**

Respect for elders and authority is unquestionably enforced in Chinese families. Very specific forms of address exist for different members of a family and those outside. These must be observed by children, regardless of age at all times. Children are expected to invite people to join them before they eat a meal or when they leave home or return home.

The Chinese concept of hierarchy is seen in the top-down approach to most things. This harbours within it a superior-inferior structure. At the family, community and societal levels, power position and gender play significant roles. In the Singapore context, all campaigns are instituted top-down. The concern,



cause, consequence and cure for erosion of Chinese cultural values, is generated, analyzed, presented and instituted by the government. Any policy change is always top-down (Kuo, 1992). Expressing one's opinion or challenging established authority is sacrilegious. The bottom ranks cannot question or comment on the doings of those at the top. The response to a comment on changes on the Prime Minister's agenda by local writer and educationist Catherine Lim, was met with serious admonishment from people in power. The inability to deal with this may be attributed to the Chinese view of each person's place in society summed up in the Hokkien expression "Boh Tua Boh Say" (Lim, 1995). Lim explains it thus:

a severe reprimand to those who are mindful of the proper behaviour towards those up on the social scale (the *tua*, or "big") and those lower down (the *say*, or "small").

#### **Display of affection/praise**

The open expression or display of affection towards children is considered bad for the children. In her study of a Taiwan village in the sixties, Wolf said that:

Village mothers state, as do the fathers, that you must not let a child know you love him or you will not be able to correct his behaviour, assuming, of course, that if you love him you will forgive anything. (1970:44)



**Praising children for achievements is taken in the same vein. This conforms with Wolf's finding:**

**...a child who is placed second in the class is admonished to reach first place by next year, and if he is first, he is warned to do well the following year or expect a beating. (1970 : 44)**

**Praise from others is tempered by parents. A parent whose child is praised by another adult for having done well in the school examinations or having been good, will counter that with deprecating remarks such as "he's very playful" or "he doesn't study at home". Pride in the child's achievements is never to be displayed especially in front of the child. In a study by Kwok, Chang and Ko (1993), parents pointed out that "if you praise your children frequently, all kinds of ill-fate would befall them".**

**While children's achievements are not praised in public, children's negative qualities are put on display. The reason for this is the belief that this will "teach the child a lesson". Thus, the slapping of children and scolding them in public places like shopping centres and restaurants is very common among Chinese Singaporeans. Retribution is always swift and immediate for misbehaviour, however minor.**

### **Discipline**

**Discipline has a major role in Chinese child-rearing practices. The traditional Chinese method of child training relied on scolding and spanking. Threatening children with punishment for misbehaving and not attaining good results is very**



common (Kwok, Chang & Ko, 1993). This practice of negative moral restraint is aimed at keeping children in check and ensuring discipline.

Teaching children what is morally right is considered an important goal by many parents. An upright moral character is deemed important and children who fail in this respect are seen to have brought shame to the family. In fact, in Kwok's survey (1993), 82% of Chinese parents maintained that "to promote a good moral character in a child, parents should strictly discipline their children".

### **Education**

The Chinese value education and perceive it as a form of self-realization. This means that the moral aspect of life is emphasized and children are taught from an early age how and when to speak to elders and to behave correctly in all social roles that they assume. In school, the student is "expected to listen to the teacher" who has to be shown the utmost respect. Books are revered (Lee, 1991; Hong, 1991) and learning is a way of passing on tradition. The Chinese are more focused on preserving tradition than on "self-expressive development of ideas" (Scollon and Scollon, 1994:20). The preferred return to Chinese schooling (see Chapter 1:39-40) with the increasing number of Special Assistance Plan (SAP) Schools, emphasizes this orientation.

### **Communicating with children**

In Chinese families, children are not expected to speak except when spoken to. Even in speaking, they should not dominate an exchange or display any



disrespect. In Kwok, Chang and Ko's survey, 65.1% of the parents agreed that when parents discipline their child, the child should obey and should not "talk back". Talking back is interpreted as disobedient and defiant behaviour.

Tied to the mode of communication is the sense of individuality. Singapore Chinese have become increasingly individualistic compared to the past when group representation characterized many facets of life. This explains, among other things, the death of Chinese clan associations. While individualism, as an outcome of consumerism, is on the rise, individual assertiveness is not regarded a Chinese virtue. The Chinese do not display their disagreement verbally. To do so is considered rude and disrespectful. Related to the negative view of assertiveness and talk, is the notion of face. "Face-saving" characterizes all communication. The fear of losing face by giving a wrong response seems to stall any attempt to express personal opinions and thoughts in public or engage in any kind of talk (Sripathy, 1986).

### **Concept of Face and Risk-Taking**

An individual's action in the Chinese culture is directed by two salient concepts - one is that of face and the other, risk-taking. Mandarin has two words for psychological "face" - *lien* and *mientzu* (Naerssen, 1988). "*Lien*" refers to the literal or physical face that one is born with. "*Mientzu*" is achieved on the basis



of the status of one's family or through doing good deeds. Mientzu can therefore be lost but it can be redeemed because it relies on one's performance. "Lien", on the other hand, is irredeemable and therefore its loss is serious. It is "lien" which maintains the structure of society. And when an individual's action or behaviour affects another member of the society, loss of lien takes place. Although this concept of face may vary across dialect groups, all Chinese hold in high regard the need to 'hold' one's face. As Huang (1986) notes:

Not everyone is eager or needs to gain face, but everyone who cares to maintain a minimum level of effective social functioning must work to protect his face from being lost. The fact that Chinese lexicalizes losing face, but not gaining face, is a potent reminder that losing face has far more serious implications for one's sense of self-esteem or decency than gaining face.

Although younger children may not be concerned to the same degree with the idea of losing face, they are made to feel ashamed of disapproved behaviour from a very early age. In the course of disciplining children, adults - and parents in particular - threaten children with telling others about their misdeeds or shaming them in front of others (Lim, 1995, home observations).



**Maintaining the status quo is seen to be important in the Chinese culture because it ensures harmony (Scollon and Scollon, 1994). By not taking risks, the individual loses nothing. If he/she takes risks and fails, he/she will at worst be at the point where he/she started. But as far as face goes, the whole person is involved and the loss is both greater and negatively valued. In her study of most face-losing and least face-losing situations in the language classroom, Margaret van Naerssen (1988) pointed out that Chinese students are most concerned about being scolded, not being able to understand teachers' questions and raising obvious questions. The concern over raising obvious questions revolves around peer group opinion and impression. Children do not want to look stupid in front of their peers. Although this may, in part, be due to their age and consequent lack of confidence, it may be more significant that they feel the need to maintain face among their peers. Perception by others ranks high for the Chinese students and for this reason the loss of face (Mientzu) is greater when being scolded. The possible hurt, therefore, may prevent them from participating in class discussions. Their waiting to be nominated by the teacher before participating or giving a response is the result of a combination of fear of venturing the wrong response and therefore being scolded as well as not wanting to appear 'stupid' in front of their peers, both of which would mean a loss of face. The implied need to always provide only correct answers is another factor that may inhibit classroom talk by students.**



The important role this concept of face plays in the daily life of the individual Chinese is explained by the use it is put to by parents as a disciplinary tool (to be shamed in front of others) as well as the maintenance of hierarchy. The emphasis on respect, discipline and authority may place a premium on interaction.

Professor Ann Wee of the Social Work Department, at the National University of Singapore, who has had extensive experiences with the different ethnic groups in Singapore, states that:

Chinese children and parents do not banter with each other and to do so would be a mark of disrespect to elders.

( Sripathy, M. 1994: Interview on Cultural Scripts)

To sum up, the concept of face maintenance appears to play a very important role in the interaction patterns of Chinese families. By virtue of the values that it engenders, this cultural orientation influences the nature and extent of Chinese students' participation in classroom talk and it may also underline the importance assigned to listening and rote-learning in the Chinese culture.

Although many of the characteristics discussed above still hold for many Singapore Chinese families, variations exist. This is because the dynamics of Singapore as a constantly changing society brings into play regular influences of a varied nature from varied sources. For example, communicating with children, or interacting with them on a regular basis is more possible today than it was a decade ago, because of the sheer size of family today. It may be more possible to interact with two or three children than with ten as was the norm for family size



in the seventies. This in itself affects parents' perception of children and their willingness to enjoy them. Another changing demographic feature relates to the role of the mother. A Chinese proverb says "strict father and tender mother". But community leaders and parents pointed out that in current families, it is the mother who admonishes and punishes while the father tends to spare the rod a lot more.

## **SUMMARY OF THE CULTURAL SCRIPTS**

In conclusion, it may be said that Chinese and Indian Singaporeans share similar child-rearing practices in terms of emphasizing discipline, respect for authority and adult-directed interaction. A hallmark of both ethnic groups is the emphasis on achieving economic success through education.

This discussion of cultural scripts which guide adult-child interaction (talk) patterns in the three main communities in Singapore and their respective cultural scripts will have to be seen in the light of their historical background and current economics. Whatever their histories, the British practised a policy of divide and rule. So each community developed its own schools, businesses and social and political agenda. With self-rule in 1959, the Singapore Government built another racial model.



**Ethnicity in Singapore structures, but it also distracts from the profound underlying economic developments taking place in the republic. Indeed a key feature of the Singapore ideology is to try to show that while the economy is dynamic, ethnicity is static.(Clammer, 1982 : 138)**

**Patterns of interaction that have come to prevail are also influenced by the ethnic cultures, the Singaporean perception of children and the Singaporean way of life (see Chapter 1:54-61), and the affluence, development and changes that are taking place in Singapore. One aspect of this change revolves around the role of women.**

**The changing role of women in Singapore society, with more women entering the labour force and improved financial standing contributes to a further change. The father is no more considered the sole breadwinner, the mother making an equally significant contribution to the family rice bowl. But while the mother has taken on the added responsibility of contributing to the household income and at the same time attending to the family's needs including that of raising and disciplining children, the father's responsibilities seem to have diminished.**

**The ethnic differences in Singapore have led to ethnic stereotypes becoming entrenched. Singapore's economic success has been portrayed in official publications such as tourist brochures, social studies textbooks used in schools, commemorative histories and even a Science Centre film presentation entitled "Pioneers of Singapore" 1994, as the result of the industrious and intelligent attributes of the Chinese migrants. In 1982, members of government expressed in public the view that Confucianism embodies the best of Chinese culture, a**



culture which, they maintained, was instilled through the discipline of traditional Chinese education.

The strong official tendency in Singapore appears to link culture and race (Clammer, 1981 : 224) and to postulate that positive Chinese cultural characteristics are permanently inherent in the Chinese race (Li, 1993 : 180). Former Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee and Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, have pronounced that diligence, material/economic success and progress are invariably Chinese virtues. In referring to the economic miracle of Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore, Confucian ethics has been cited as the sole contributor. The success of educational measures and of methodological approaches may be influenced by these entrenched cultural images which marginalize some communities and promote others.

With affluence and increasing consumerism and social and cultural engineering, the typical Indian, Chinese and Malay family in Singapore has undergone tremendous changes, notably the dependence on foreign maids (regulated by the government) increased female labour force participation rate (highest for the Indians), an increasingly competitive education system, the constant reminder to strive towards excellence and the obsession with excellence and the political exhortation to maintain ethnic roots with the implicit message that some cultures are superior and preferred to others. As Goh states:

**In the ethos of Malay society, the unrelenting pursuit of an objective, like the accumulation of wealth, is not held in**



**esteem. The spectacle of the Chinaman working like a demon possessed and ruthlessly brushing aside any one or any obstacle that stands in his way is not one that arouses Malay admiration. (Goh, 1977 : 45)**

**These changes place tremendous pressure on families and parent-child interaction patterns.**

**This brief description of the cultural scripts of Chinese, Malay and Indian Singaporeans shows some similarities despite the distinct differences of the traditions from which they come.**

**The values encased in the three cultural scripts may explain the nature and patterns of teacher-pupil classroom talk in primary schools in Singapore. The contrasting feature of the cultural scripts lies in its relation to the Western cultural script. Some non-Asian societies value individuality above community and society. The concepts of face (malu, maanan, mien), dignity (maruah, mariyaathe) and respect in the three cultural scripts emphasize the need to consider the others in society and in a sense, consider others' feelings above one's own. Western culture, on the other hand, favours a sense of self-identity and individuality. Teachers are esteemed highly in the three cultures. In some Western societies, persons in authority are looked upon disdainfully as representing restriction and limitation, while for the Singaporean, authority represents success "care and benevolence" (Scollon & Scollon, 1994:21) and parents' , teachers' and public officers' authority is esteemed. The respect for authority is also outwardly demonstrated.**



Teaching methodologies originating from a Western (foreign) context and based on a Western (foreign)cultural script, emphasizing individuality, autonomy, creativity and self-expression differ from the cultural scripts of the Chinese, Malay and Indian teachers and children, who perceive learning as a disciplined activity aimed at teaching them good behaviour, knowledge and revered traditions of their society, and the teachers as the source of that learning. The value placed by these cultures on respect, consideration for others, modesty, silence (as a virtue in learning) and the sense of others and loss of face nurtures children who become quiet listeners. It would be interesting to study the implementation of pedagogic approaches which require active spontaneous participation through engagement in oral discourse, in contexts which have a different perception of how learning should be approached.

### **WESTERN PEDAGOGIC APPROACHES - CONGRUENCE OR CONFLICT?**

The discussion of cultural scripts described the factors which guide adult-child talk and interaction in Singapore and showed that cultural values directed these patterns of interaction. In this section the basis of the pedagogic approaches and their cultural congruence will be considered.

The issue of Western pedagogic approaches in the primary classroom in Singapore entails a consideration not only of the use of English as a curriculum subject but also of it as the bearer of sociocultural practices and perceptions.



The use of English as the official language of communication arises from the premise of its role as an international language, by virtue of which it is associated with many cultures across the world and embodies several variations. This has contributed to the policy belief that it is a neutral language which can therefore be loaded with any culture (see discussion on Literacy in Singapore-Chapter 1:34-38). This view of the English language contributed to the adoption of pedagogic approaches without adequate consideration to the cultural experiences and perceptions of Singaporeans. The perception of neutrality or universality of approaches is, in part, the outcome of the perception of culture. As Said (1978) states, the "Orient" was constructed in the discourse of Western writers as an established and homogeneous entity (cited in Pennycook, 1990:163). This poses fundamental questions about how we perceive the dominance of Western modes of thought. These paradigms may not be culturally congruent or compatible.

The unitary concept of progress and development the predominance of positivism in the social sciences, the claims made to forms of rationality and objectivity, are all modes of thought particular to the European origins of enlightenment and to the social, cultural and political conditions that gave rise to that mode of thinking. (Pennycook, 1990:161)

The historical basis of Western thought processes aside, the use of English although giving access to a wider variety of cultures and being associated with diversity because of its international inclusivity, emphasizes international rather than national affiliation and focuses on a transfer of knowledge rather than the creation of knowledge.



**Nayar (1989:3) states that views of applied linguistics are inapplicable and ethnocentric because:**

**several facts about ESL that nearly have the strength of canonical truths in the West (especially the United States) reveal an ignorance of and perhaps an indifference to the socio-cultural, attitudinal, pragmatic and even economic realities of Afro-Asia.**

**He goes on to identify these canonical truths as follows:**

- 1        learning must be "fun and an enjoyable experience".**
- 2        students must be self-motivated.**
- 3        there must exist informal interaction between the teacher and the learner.**
- 4        oral communication is the goal of second language learning.**
- 5        teachers have access to materials and technology.**
- 6        teachers have flexibility in the classroom, and**
- 7        cognitive, learning and communicative strategies and styles are universal.**

**(Nayar, 1989:14-15)**

**I would like to counter Nayar's argument by saying that it is not the inapplicability of applied linguistics or ethnocentrism that is at fault. Nor do these canons fairly represent applied linguistics. Rather, the lack of consideration for cultural appropriacy may lie with the curriculum planners who accept these canons in their desire to appear progressive and innovative.**



These are the canons on which the process approach to language learning and teaching of English in the primary Singapore classroom is based. That these beliefs about learning and teaching are grounded to a greater extent in British and American social, cultural and political circumstances than in scientific knowledge pertaining to language teaching is obvious. What is occurring with regard to pedagogic approaches is a replication of the manner in which English is exported to the world, together with its discourses of education and social interpretations. If notions of discourses are defined as ways of giving meaning to the world, ways of organizing social institutions and also constitutive of our subjectivities, then language becomes one vehicle for doing this. Can pedagogic approaches be imported without their respective sociocultural discourses? If we subscribe to the post-structuralist theory of society being constituted by discourses, then it means discourses "have cultural and political corollaries and are implicated in the way we perceive ourselves and our role in society" (Peirce, 1989:405). This leads to the natural conclusion that English is not a neutral language and implies social relations between its users. It also means that it may not be possible to adopt approaches to teaching without their philosophical and sociocultural basis.

The research emphasis in the work of Michaels (1986), Collins (1987), Gregory (1994), Newson & Newson (1975) and Bruner (1987) on the social, cultural and historical underpinning of thought and discourse, not only elevates the role of language and culture but, more significantly, explores their interconnectedness. Pedagogic approaches to language must therefore have a cultural fit as



demonstrated by Gee (1995, 1991), Ladson-Billings (1992), Erickson & Mohatt (1982), Au & Jordan (1981), Cazden & Legget (1981) and Dyson (1992). The whole issue of learning a language revolves around the learner . At the macro level, it relates to a society's use of language. All Singaporean children learn English in school. Through their various literacy lessons, they are socialized into English language literacy. For all the ethnic groups, English is supposedly a neutral language. The teacher of English then becomes the power broker (Olson, 1986; Freebody et al, 1991; Freebody & Luke, 1990 ). She decides the culture she is going to convey to the learners. In so far as English is a second language for her, her culture is going to be the mediating factor between the learner's culture (if it is different from hers) and the culture of the language being learnt. Littlewood (1989:285) states that "teaching and belonging to a particular culture cannot be separated". This is situated in an overall school culture which in turn is shaped by a national or societal culture. The sociocultural as well as political factors prevalent will materially affect the beliefs, perceptions and practices finally taking shape in the English literacy classroom.

In its desire to maintain internationally-acceptable standards, Singapore has continually borrowed educational pedagogies from the West. Ho (1993), in evaluating the influence of Western learning theories on learning pedagogy in Singapore schools, discussed the adaptations made to suit the local learning context. This adaptation stops short at the level of curriculum planning. Adaptation of theories may not imply appropriacy or cultural fit. The



ideological basis of a theory or a pedagogical approach might not lend itself to adaptation. It is what originates from this ideology that might be adaptable. In learning theories this could become decontextualized and developing a new set of approaches in the name of adaptation entails greater risks.

Ideological trappings of pedagogies are not always visible. In the last fifteen years, there has been a shift from "visible to "invisible" pedagogies (Bernstein, 1981). Atkinson (1985 : 166) suggests this shift has been made in the "rhetoric of progressivism". Pedagogies are not universally applicable. Walton's (1986) study of young Northern Territory Aboriginal children learning to write in an urban English medium programme is a case in point. The children were from an oral cultural tradition with Kriol and other Aboriginal languages as their first languages. The implicit model of teaching and learning developed from research with English-speaking children from literate cultures, failed when applied to another sociocultural context. Fairclough's (1989 : 91) contention that dominant discourse types come to be seen as natural and universal is borne out in attempts to introduce pedagogical approaches such as process-writing and language experience to other cultural contexts. The models advocated are ethnocentric, assuming all learners entering school come from a literate culture.

Thus, in conclusion, it can be said that the three ethnic cultures in Singapore have their respective beliefs, values and perceptions. These are also influenced by the government through its various policies. In fact, the government itself is caught in the tension between the need to modernize and the concern with



preserving a traditional and consequently, a conservative approach. On the one hand, there is the desire to be open and to encourage dialogue. On the other hand, there seems to exist the cultural script which favours hierarchy and emphasizes authority. There is therefore a constant battle. These tensions are felt in varying degrees by all Singaporeans and they influence their practices of literacy and the patterns of adult-child talk. This study aims to find out the effect of the pedagogic approaches of Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story, which encourage a talk curriculum revolving around shared experiences, negotiation and collaborative talk and the cultural practices and perceptions of talk in the three main ethnic communities in Singapore. The cultural scripts discussed in this chapter will help elucidate the nature and pattern of talk that occurred during these shared literacy lessons in the three primary two classrooms in Singapore.

The next chapter presents a description of the Shared Book Reading and the Class Dictated Story approaches and the primary English Language curriculum within which they are situated.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL**

#### **The Syllabus and the Approach**

This chapter describes and discusses the development of the English language curriculum in Singapore. The description will review only the primary English syllabus and is not aimed at providing a historical analysis of changes. The review will provide a perspective of the development of literacy and the place assigned to talk in the literacy curriculum. The old English language syllabus implemented in 1982 was in use until 1995. As of 1996, all primary schools were required to have fully implemented the new syllabus. The new syllabus has been implemented in stages - beginning in 1991 with Primary One. It was implemented in each grade the following years. In 1996, it was implemented in Primary Six. The two syllabuses will be compared to describe the pedagogic changes that have been made over time.

#### **PRIMARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE SYLLABUS**

All language policies and school curricula are implemented by the Ministry of Education. Instructional objectives are clearly stipulated by the Ministry and directors of different curriculum subjects attend to their manner of implementation. Materials used in the classrooms are developed by the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS) which works with the Ministry of Education. All textbooks in use in schools are locally produced by the pool of CDIS writers. Schools, however, have the choice of using supplementary materials published by other companies. It is not an uncommon practice for teachers to adapt materials from other books to supplement their own teaching or to meet particular needs of their pupils.



The 1958 English language syllabus emphasized accuracy over fluency. The focus on spelling, pronunciation, grammar and drills was thus to be expected. This emphasis has changed only slightly today. With repeated exhortations to abandon the use of drills, many teachers have tended to move away from this technique of teaching. But older teachers and those who feel a good foundation in English is based on doing structural exercises, still revert to books which allow this. A popular book used unofficially in many primary schools is the "Revised Primary English" which provides exercises on aspects of English Grammar. The dependence on Britain for secondary examination purposes and the colonial heritage (see Chapter 1:51) may perhaps have been responsible for the over-reliance on a British model. Singapore's education system itself is based on the British model. It is only since the late eighties that the Ministry has been diligently looking at other models of education. The reliance on curriculum specialists from Britain is another reason for this continued dependence.

The 1982 English language syllabus emphasized "correct use of language". To this end, the syllabus contained "a list of skills and grammar items" (1984:223). In addition to the grammatical items to be mastered, the syllabus contained some functional skills reflecting needs of day-to-day living. Communicative functions related to writing letters, filling in forms and questionnaires and the ability to "communicate orally on everyday topics" were included. Neither the materials used nor the syllabus explained how these communicative functions were to be taught to the students. English language teachers used an eclectic approach to teach English, many using the very methods they had learnt under, thus re-inventing the wheel. An interesting observation is that while the Ministry emphasized that its approach to English language teaching was communicative, neither the materials used nor the examination system attested



to this. The examination was still based on discrete testing of language. In fact, the structural focus of the syllabus allowed little scope for the development of any linguistic skill (English Language Syllabus, Sec 1-4 Express/Special Course, 1982:1).

That the skills-focus was missing is evident from the English Language Syllabus, Primary 1-6 (1982:1). In spelling out its general aims, the syllabus states:

"The acquisition of a higher level of proficiency and creative use of English is limited to 'more capable pupils'."

On paper, all children are to be given equal treatment. But in practice, differentiation is evident at a very early stage of schooling.

The 1982 syllabus necessitated a new set of textbooks and coursebooks. To cater to different abilities, two sets of books were published. The Primary English Programme (PEP) and the New English Series for Primary Education (NESPE) were introduced. PEP was aimed at the "better" pupils while NESPE was meant for use with weaker pupils because it was "simpler and closer to the traditional approach of teaching English". It was identified for use with children from non-English speaking homes (New Nation 4-4-82). Recent research (Gupta, 1995; Sripathy, 1993) suggests that it would have been the children from non-English speaking homes who would have needed a more activity based book to learn language in context. But the focus on structural items shows the entrenched belief that English was best learnt via a 'mastery' of discrete language items. In addition to these coursebooks, basal readers workbooks and a range of audio-visual materials were produced as supplementary resources. The content and use of language in the basal readers, meant for use with poorer readers, was monotonous and uninteresting to say the least. The language was very much controlled and resembled "Key Words" reading schemes. Structured use of language and vocabulary meant shorter



sentences and repetitions, both of which made the text far from motivating. All readers were graded. Despite this conscientious effort, children found some texts difficult (Ng, 1987). A number of factors contributed to the monotony of these texts. The concern for grading, the felt need to impart moral values through texts, the promotion of multiculturalism, the dependence on classroom teachers turned material writers, and the rushed and short-time frame for textbook production may have contributed to the poor quality of the texts.

Reading for interest, pleasure or personal development was thus not the explicit purpose of teaching or learning reading under the 1982 syllabus. Writing in the primary schools revolved around the descriptive and narrative genres. Even then, the skills of description or narration were not taught. Writing was not linked to reading. It existed as a separate and distinct skill. Good pupils' writings were printed out for the class to be read and to be used as a model for exam purposes. Teachers selected recurrent topics to prepare pupils for important examinations. Standard phrases were taught so pupils could use them to make their writing interesting. No feedback was given to pupils on the quality of their writing except for grades. Descriptive and narrative writing was restricted to four pieces a term. This overwhelmed teachers who were already burdened with marking. Teachers felt that so long as they met the quota of writing pieces for each term they were 'covered' from questioning by the headmaster. Hence, it is unlikely that the majority of pupils engaged in either meaningful or purposeful writing.

In evaluating the 1982 syllabus, it can be said that the personal dimension in language learning was virtually non-existent. Literacy for empowerment or personal aesthetic growth was unheard of. Examination requirements controlled and informed all language teaching. Pupils were taught skills that helped them with performing a limited number of examination tasks. Even



these seemed to be so poorly mastered that often pupils seemed to have difficulty in applying them outside the classroom context. Secondary English teachers complained about pupils' inadequate mastery of the descriptive and narrative genre. The 1982 syllabus makes no mention of differentials such as attitudes, motivation, culture or socio-economic background which influence language learning. The only consideration given is the linguistic background of the pupils - whether they are from English/non-English speaking homes. This focus implies a belief that everything else is equal for all pupils. Pedagogic approaches, it was assumed, would suit all pupils and like items on a conveyor belt all learners are given the same 'treatment'. The neutrality of English expressed by former Primer Minister Lee Kuan Yew, (see citation in Chapter 1:37) holds little currency if the socio-cultural context of literacy is taken into account. Influenced by industrialisation and technology, curriculum developers look at changes in the manner of the factory floor focusing only on school productivity. The cultural and social framework of learning, and in learning language in particular, is overlooked. Language is perceived as comprising a set of skills and units to be learnt.

#### **THE 1991 Primary English Syllabus**

This new syllabus was the result of several pilot projects in the teaching of English at the primary level. Preparation for the new syllabus (1991) began in 1987 with a committee of eleven officers, consisting of specialist inspectors, project officers, professional officers from CDIS and Research and Testing Division, and lecturers from the Institute of Education.

The syllabus was trialed in a representative sample of schools in 1989 and further revision undertaken before they were approved and distributed to schools. (English Language Syllabus Dissemination, Core Training Package 1990:6)



In essence, the 1991 Syllabus follows the old syllabus and the principles and strategies adopted in the English Language programmes such as REAP (Reading and English Acquisition Programme) and ACT (Active Communicative Teaching) very closely. REAP and ACT were introduced into the Primary English Curriculum in 1985 (three years after the 1982 syllabus had been implemented). A significant change is the similarity in the pedagogic approaches advocated in the primary and secondary syllabus. This means a continuity in the development of pupils' language and language-related skills. This was absent in the old syllabus.

The 1991 English Language syllabus was the outcome of two projects implemented in the primary schools in 1985. The first project named REAP was introduced in all lower primary classes by 1989. It was:

"an attempt to adapt recent ideas in applied linguistics and developmental psychology to language education." (Ng 1989:363)

The REAP methodology, guidelines and materials involve a book flood and features selected from the Language Experience and the Shared Book Approaches. The main thrust of the programme was a meaning-based approach to language and reading acquisition. Given that both teachers and pupils were non-native speakers of the language, it was felt that such an approach would facilitate language learning. In the Language Experience-based programme, the teacher begins her lesson by providing pupils with an experience. This activity-based lesson involves pupils in using language 'naturally' in meaningful situations in spoken and written forms. In REAP, based on the Fijian Book Flood Experiment<sup>1</sup>, the pupils are exposed to a variety of books. Ng (1987:58) explains the rationale as follows -

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<sup>1</sup> Based on work by Elley and Mangubhai (1983), in Fiji



**This heavy reliance on books in our language programme is especially important for the South East Asian scene because the language of books provides precise models which will not be distorted by the errors of teachers whose mother tongue is not English.**

**In addition to the LEA and the Book Flood, REAP also incorporated Holdaway's (1979) Shared Book Approach. The teachers used this approach to provide opportunities for children who were unable to read for themselves, to acquire reading skills and learn English at the same time. "Sharing common elements with LEA", SBA emphasizes getting meaning from books and the pure enjoyment of them. Big books with large print size, are used so that the entire class of pupils can see both picture and print as the teacher reads to them.**

**REAP was based on research attempting to identify aspects of early linguistic experience associated with early school success, which claim that listening to stories benefits children. Ellis and Wells (1983) argued that children derive meaning of words by hearing stories. REAP was thus seen as the best means for non-English speaking Singaporean children to acquire English. It catered to the language needs of the lower primary pupils. There was no equivalent programme for the upper primary. The Ministry realized that if the advantages of REAP were to be maintained then the upper primary curriculum would have to be revamped. So, in 1986, ACT (Active Communicative Teaching) was launched. ACT took a communicative stance to teaching English, stressing communicative competence, language use and language functions. The new approach included an integration of the four macro skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, the use of a range of different materials and a greater emphasis on oral activities. Grammatical competence was important but only secondary to communicative competence. This meant a greater focus on fluency in language use. A salient introduction into ACT was USSR (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading), process writing and thematic units.**



**This approach thus saw the introduction of a number of new features, many of them foreign to English language teachers who had been used to a traditional, structural approach hitherto. To successfully implement REAP and ACT, the teachers were therefore retrained.**

**Teacher retraining programmes focused largely on the methodological aspects and implementation procedures. Overnight, experienced English language teachers found their sacrosanct beliefs, values and practices pertaining to English language teaching outdated and valueless and themselves redundant if they did not move with the times. The changes were rapidly implemented and teachers were expected to be able to apply their knowledge to a range of things immediately. The old chalk and talk method and heavy reliance on set coursebooks, which had provided many teachers with a more definite sense of direction and systematic development, was now completely replaced with activity-based involvement which introduced relatively more situational teaching by the teachers.**

**A feature which had the potential to cause great stress was the increased learner participation the new approaches generated. Emphasis on group work and pupil interaction in a class size of forty-five meant chaos for many teachers. Through close working association with the teachers involved in the implementation of the new approaches, I learnt that the sudden demands of the new approaches, the changes in teaching styles which they necessitated, the increased amount of preparation they entailed, their rapid introduction and the absence of an open channel to communicate their apprehensions made many teachers unhappy and stressed.**

**In summary, the complexities of the curriculum renewal process were undermined in the enthusiasm to implement the innovations. Research suggests**



that any curriculum innovation, to be successful, must be internalized by the practitioners. This is because any innovation possesses a -

culture with its implicit values, beliefs and norms located in the conceptual framework of the innovation and in their materials and in its advocated teaching strategies and approaches and classroom organization. (Ghani, 1992 : 5)

The new curriculum approaches required a culture of change on the part of the English language teachers and adjustments to the cultural context of implementation. But because, as in many countries, curriculum change in Singapore is centrally mandated and teaching viewed as a technology which has a specifiable content and procedure which can be transferred easily to a great number of settings (House, 1979:3), the importance of tacit knowledge and experience to increase the conceptual clarity of the innovation in the teachers' minds (Corbett & Rossman, 1989), was seriously overlooked. Thus, while the Ministry provided some support with regard to prepared thematic units and books, the teachers were not provided the psychological support necessary for the successful institutionalization of the innovations. The lack of consideration for the context of implementation may be due firstly to the top-down approach to decision making that characterizes Singaporean society and secondly, the belief that education can be developed through a technological process.

These innovations in the primary schools were officially set in place by 1989 and necessitated a change in the secondary school syllabus. REAP and ACT had been in place for five years when the new syllabus was introduced in 1991. Teachers with whom I worked in the in-service courses, saw the introduction of the new syllabus as a disruption to their established practice, to which they were slowly becoming accustomed. Despite the Ministry's assurances that the new syllabus was not a major change and incorporated REAP and ACT principles and pedagogy, the teachers generally detested the change (within a short time).



## **Rationale and Philosophy of the 1991 Syllabus**

**In an introduction to the new syllabus, it was pointed out that change was necessary because trends in English language teaching and learning were focusing on process-oriented approaches in the language classroom (English Language Syllabus Dissemination Package 1990:2). The new syllabus is based on the following rationale:**

- 1 the principle of integration;**
- 2 focus on learners' needs;**
- 3 acquisition of language skills for life, and**
- 4 instilling of national policies (core values).**

**This rationale is couched in an organisational framework which stresses active processes of learning and creative methods of teaching and testing, contextualized learning, a thematic approach and feedback on pupils' progress. The six key elements in the new syllabus are themes, skills, grammar, integration, objectives and evaluation. In its rationale and organisational framework, the 1991 syllabus thus differs drastically from the 1982 syllabus. The 100 page syllabus articulates in detail the principles underlying English language teaching and learning in the primary school. It consists of an introduction which spells out the role of English, the nature of language and language learning, the framework and the contents, and six chapters which look at various components of the syllabus in detail:**

- \* Aims and Terminal Objectives**
- \* Pedagogic Approaches and Implications for Methodology**
- \* Suggested Themes, Topics and Activities**
- \* Spectrum of Skills and List of Communicative Functions**
- \* Inventory of Grammar Stems**



**The Appendix carries a "Guide to Pupil performance".**

### **Features of the 1991 Primary English Syllabus**

**The new syllabus, unlike the old, recommends an integrated approach, using the topic as an organizing principle for English Language lessons. The principles underlying this approach are based on the following assumptions:**

- 1      Language is for communication.**
- 2      Language is a learning tool.**
- 3      Language is best learnt when contextualized.**
- 4      Language is best learnt when learners interact.**
- 5      Language is best learnt when the four skills are integrated.**  
**(English Language Dissemination Package (1990:3))**

**The syllabus goes on to explain that :**

**contextualization of learning, interactive learning and integration of the four language skills are the characteristics of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach; thinking skills are intrinsic to the process approach; while learner-centredness is at the heart of the humanistic curriculum. (1990:3)**

**In short, an eclectic approach is advocated. The syllabus also combines content with methodology, specifies attainment targets by blocks (Primary 1-3), perceives language as an important means of maximizing individual potential, and views learning as an organic process. The sum of all these features is the focus on language functions.**

### **Aims and Terminal Objectives**

**The terminal objectives are classified under four domains "reflecting the complex function of language in society" (Primary English Syllabus, 1991:5):**



- 1        Communication and Language Development**
- 2        Thinking Skills**
- 3        Learning how to Learn**
- 4        Language and Culture**

These terminal objectives are not to be viewed as behavioural or examination objectives, as they were in the old syllabus. All the terminal objectives are attainable, though attainment may be at varying levels of pupils' competence (1991:5) and teachers are to determine their pupils' attainment levels. The new syllabus thus provides for some flexibility within an organizational framework. A number of features distinguish the new syllabus. They are the emphasis on learners' needs, thinking skills, and culture.

#### **ISSUES IN IMPLEMENTATION**

Other features clearly spelt out focus on a process approach and the use of literature. In essence, these were features of the old syllabus. Their main distinction lies in their very clear description in the new syllabus. With Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading and Shared Book Reading in force in the English Language curriculum, the extensive use of literature had already begun. But the books which were in use originated in USA, Australia and New Zealand. The number and range of books available have been greatly expanded since the implementation of Shared Book Approach in 1985.

But while the list has expanded, not all schools have the new titles. In addition to this, the number of locally written books in the list is very small. At the Primary Two level there are only six locally written books. The introduction of literature provides a good context for the development of the themes, while at the same time integrating language and context (Mok 1987: 153). While some



research suggests that literature provides a basis for learning language, the question of whose culture is being imparted in these texts needs to be answered (Freebody, Luke and Gilbert, 1991; Baker, 1991; Heap, 1991; Street 1984). The contextual setting of the stories and the related vocabulary may not be accessible to children who come from a non-English speaking background. The onus of making this meaning available therefore, falls on the teacher, who given her limited knowledge of children's literature in English (Ow & Ho, 1993) may not be able to bridge the gap. Many primary school teachers have limited exposure to children's literature, their own reading having been limited to Enid Blyton, Nancy Drew, Perry Mason and Agatha Christie (Ow and Ho, 1993). Using books written in a Western context to teach early reading and language makes additional demands on the second language learner of English. This is especially so in Singapore, where many pupils' introduction to English and reading begins only upon entry to school.

### **The Place of Culture**

Culture plays an important part in language learning. And for the first time in the history of language teaching in Singapore there is a definite statement on culture. The terminal objectives state that pupils should be able to:

appreciate that there are varieties of English reflecting different cultures and use this knowledge appropriately and sensitively in communication.

and -

adopt a critical, but not negative, attitude towards ideas, thoughts and values reflected in spoken and written texts (in English) of local or foreign origin. (Primary English Syllabus, 1991 : 8)

While a direct reference to culture is made in the new syllabus, using the knowledge that the English language reflects the cultures and speech habits of



different users and an implicit acceptance of non-native varieties of English, the focus is on content or vocabulary which again has a Western orientation. The following description on Language and Culture given in the syllabus (1991: 50-51) spells this out:

- \* recognizing that many words and expressions have historical and cultural references and connotations;
- \* recognizing that words or phrases denoting apparently similar ideas and objects can have different meanings and associations in different linguistic or cultural context;
- \* understanding that English users of different cultures and nationalities can use different conventions, words, expressions, spelling or pronunciation to mean the same thing.

These culturally based language skills, the syllabus says, are important to communicate effectively in the target language. In line with this, pupils are taught archaic expressions such as "fair maiden" and "to meet one's Waterloo", and told to refrain from using derogatory terms in reference to Negroes in the USA (1991: 51). These show clearly a concern with a Western bias in language use.

The apparent neglect of the local culture in the teaching of English may be due to the technological perspective of language teaching and the relegation of values teaching to the mother tongues or ethnic languages.

Another skill listed in the syllabus is the need for learners to review or evaluate their values or beliefs in relation to those expressed by a character in a story read. This, potentially, will mentally develop valuable critical and thinking

skills. But in a multi-ethnic classroom, children would have differing values. A common ideology of values (national values) may perhaps have to be presented and discussed before this critical level can be attained. Unfortunately, the



syllabus provides for neither. The dichotomy a young learner thus faces given his own set of values and confronted by another set of values presented in a story may give rise to a feeling of displacement and confusion. He thus has to struggle not just with learning the language but making meaning of it for effective communication.

The emphasis in the new syllabus on thinking skills and a process approach conveys a particular perception of learning English in the Singapore context. The desire to develop thinking skills is in recognition of the view of language as a tool for analyzing and problem solving. These are essential skills for learning other subjects. Besides its general function in helping pupils adapt to changing demands of society as they enter adulthood and working life, thinking skills may also help the learner to develop skills of discretion and critical evaluation - seen as essential tools in the technological era. The thinking skills advocated appear not to be aimed at critical evaluation in the Western sense but in the Asian sense of understanding and accepting .

In developing thinking skills, the new English Syllabus states that pupils should be able to explore an idea, situation or suggested solution, analyze and evaluate an idea and think creatively to generate new ideas and to find new meanings.

The teacher needs to guide the learner into inferencing and predicting. She teaches the specific micro skills through discussion, evaluation and questioning (Primary English Syllabus, 1991) . In all this, talk comes into play. But neither the word 'talk' nor 'literacy' are mentioned explicitly in the new syllabus. The syllabus argues for talk although it does not state how the talk is to take place in the classroom. In fact, the focus on speaking skills falls completely on aspects of pronunciation, phonics and intonation (as in-service and pre-service teachers have pointed out). Even these features of speech, however, are sadly neglected in implementation because non-native English teachers seem to feel inadequate at



handling these issues. The heavy demands the syllabus places on reading and writing skills relegates the teaching of speech to a non-existent position because speaking skills are tested only in terms of reading skills, fluency and grammatical accuracy at the Primary Six Leaving Examination.

The process approach complements the learner-centred approach in so far as it focuses on the cognitive aspect of learning. This necessitates a new approach to teaching and learning because the teacher must now understand the processes involved in the learning of any skill. Similarly, the learner must be able to apply the skills and talk about them. All this fits in with the notion of learning how to mean (Halliday, 1975). For this to be implemented successfully, teachers may have to be aware of the processes themselves, but given the fact that teachers themselves are second-language users of English, the process of reading and writing that learners experience may not be transparent.

A close look at the key features of the new syllabus presented above, shows very clearly the extent of adjustment teachers and learners have to make. The learner-centred approach, the focus on thinking skills and the process emphasis all require active participation from the learner and a willingness on the part of the teacher to listen and guide. They require the teacher to acknowledge that the learner has relevant input and requires the opportunity and encouragement to convey it. This challenges the traditional role and perception of the teacher as the source of knowledge and as one who commands complete authority in the classroom. To develop in pupils thinking skills means creating an environment for discussion, debate and evaluation. To incorporate this the teacher's perception of her role must change. Differences of opinion can no longer be viewed as defiance or rudeness. In addition to this, a society which is oriented towards quantifying achievement in productive terms will need to reorientate itself to thinking along process lines. For an emphasis on process necessitates a focus on means and not just the ends. In an examination-oriented curriculum



with high parental expectations and heavy tracking, the process approach may be given little attention.

### **THE PLACE OF TALK IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM**

Given the heterogeneous composition of the Singapore primary classroom, the best way of incorporating each of the key features of thinking skills, learner centred approach and a process orientation in the day-to-day teaching of language, is through the use of talk.

Talk played no role whatsoever in the old syllabus (1982) with its product orientation and teacher-centred, text-book based, structural approach to learning English. With the introduction of REAP and ACT, the role of talk in learning English took on a new importance and dimension. The 1991 syllabus clearly underlined the need for interactive patterns of learning and for greater pupil input (English Language Dissemination Package (1990:4). The four domains of communication, Thinking Skills, Learning How to Mean and Language and Culture depend to a great extent on the development of oral skills in the English language classroom. The Terminal Objectives for Oral Communication in the 1991 syllabus which focus on speaking, state that to develop competence in speaking "pupils should participate in a wide range of speech situations" (Primary English Syllabus 1991:7). They should therefore be able to:

- \* speak fluently, clearly and audibly using correct pronunciation, expression, stress, rhythm and intonation;
- \* speak with confidence in a variety of speech situations, taking into account the purpose of the delivery, the setting and the target audience;
- \* participate actively and constructively in discussion;
- \* observe accepted social conventions and etiquette in oral interaction, and



- \* read aloud written material with fluency, expression and good articulation.

To attain each of the terminal objectives in three of the four domains described in the syllabus, the learner must engage in active talk during the language lesson. Given the nature of English language teaching in the primary school, this is only be possible during the reading and writing lessons. In the area of skills development (in the primary classrooms in Singapore), reading and writing take centre stage in the English language curriculum. The emphasis in reading is on comprehension and therefore responding to a text via the use of prediction and inferential skills and participating in spontaneous discussion and exploring a text at different levels and for different purposes are identified as important skills (Primary English Syllabus, 1991). Writing emphasizes reconstructing a dictated text, engaging in continuous, imaginative writing and creative writing with a focus on problem-solving, information transfer and process-writing skills (Primary English Syllabus, 1991).

Research suggests that the learner needs to talk about the ideas a text generates in the mind, the development of thoughts, the feelings and the reasons for expressing particular thoughts and ideas in particular ways (Heath, 1986; Baker and Freebody, 1989; Gilbert, 1991; Rumelhart, 1980; Freebody, 1991).

To develop these skills, pupils may have to be provided with opportunities and be encouraged to talk in class (Cummins, 1981; McLaughlin, 1990; Wells, 1991). Talking is important in the new syllabus not just to develop the above-mentioned speaking skills but also in the domains of acquiring knowledge about language, thinking skills and learning how to learn.

In conclusion, despite the emphasis on knowledge about language, thinking skills and terminal objectives delineating active participation and construction through discussion, the 1991 Primary English Syllabus seems to make only indirect reference to talk as a learning tool. This may reflect the technological



perspective extended to English language teaching and the view of language learning as a linguistic activity with a limited range of skills to be mastered. Because language learning is not seen as a socio-cultural practice, the cultural context in which it is embedded and the social factors which influence its acquisition may have been ignored. It may be for this reason that the thematic units have samples of cultural events - for example, Chinese New Year Customs - and not cultural practices and beliefs about learning. It is thought that through collaborative, negotiated talk with and about language that pupils understand and appreciate their different ideological perspectives and socio-cultural experiences because in talking through them with an adult (teacher), they shape these experiences to fit the new learning (Gee, 1992, Anstey & Bull, 1996, Wells, 1987; Genishi, 1992; Cazden, 1991; Halliday, 1991). The need for encouraging talk, particularly in the English language classroom, has become more significant because of the implementation of the National Education Curriculum in 1997. The aim of this new curriculum is to instill a sense of national pride and an awareness amongst Singaporean students of their national history. English language lessons are seen as a vehicle for encouraging dialogue on these issues.

### **The PETS Textbook**

Having examined the syllabus, it will be appropriate to discuss the language teaching materials which are used in the classroom to see the implementation of the objectives. The current materials in use in the classrooms are known as the Primary English Thematic Series (PETS) materials. All grades were using this series by 1996 - the last stage of implementation. The materials were written by a team of writers at the CDIS. The materials were trialed in schools and feedback obtained on improvements to be made to them. The materials writers, though not authors, are all experienced teachers. The materials are available as a package to teachers - coursebook, worksheets and a Teachers' Handbook. The books are based on themes which run the length of the grades. The need to fit materials to themes means a heavy reliance on 'foreign' materials. Some reading



materials (stories) have been written for the lower grades. These are available as Big Books. The stories in these Big Books focus on local characters and use vocabulary familiar to Singaporeans. The illustrations reflect Singaporeans in their various walks of life. Although useful, they are in small supply to take into account the cultural context of learning English. The cultural familiarity is limited to the vocabulary of the story.

A lack of adequate knowledge of what constitutes the various cultures in Singapore and the absence of experienced writers, may perhaps explain the dearth of materials with a local flavour. Another reason is the relegation of the teaching of culture to the mother tongues. Thus, folklore, legends and stories that characterise ethnic cultures have been used reluctantly and sparingly. The ignorance of many English language teachers with regard to ethnic beliefs and stories may be another reason for the omission of culturally familiar contents. The need to maintain a balance between national values and Western values which run counter to these, required careful selection of materials as shown in the interview with materials writers. The themes and the materials available for use tended to reflect a Western orientation. The Big Books suggested for use during Shared Book Reading have a Western origin.

To sum up this discussion, the new English Language Syllabus, in emphasizing the process approach to shared reading and shared writing and assigning an important place to thinking, conveys the role of talk in literacy acquisition. However, scant attention is paid to culturally different ways of learning and talking. This may be the result of a common misconception of perceiving literacy as a singular entity or thing (Graff, 1986). And as Luke, Baty and Stephens (1989:47) argue, "modern ideologies tend to cloud the cultural and historical diversity of literacies". The absence of a socio-cultural perspective to innovations in language curriculum may contribute to pedagogic approaches which may be poorly understood and weakly implemented. The impact may be



more deeply felt when the innovation is transplanted from one context to another and institutionalized without consideration for the context of use and practice and the users.

The discussion will now focus on the two main approaches in use in the lower primary classrooms in Singapore, namely, Shared Book Reading and Language Experience, with particular reference to the Class Dictated Story.

### **SHARED BOOK READING - RATIONALE**

Shared book reading was introduced into the primary school English language curriculum in 1985. It was felt that since a large majority of children came from non-English speaking homes, a good way to facilitate English language acquisition was through shared reading on a regular basis in the classroom. The experience of hearing stories read aloud is widely recognised as one which gives uniquely powerful lessons about literacy (Holdaway, 1979; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Meek, 1982). Psycho-linguistically, listening to stories helps a child develop familiarity with meanings and linguistic forms of the printed text. This may later lead on to independent reading. Reading aloud, Smith (1971) argues, paves the way for children to store useful 'information in the head'. Besides this stored knowledge which they can draw upon later (Rumelhart, 1980), reading aloud also teaches the child about the functions of written language. Both these enable the child, over time, to appropriate words to meet her own needs of expression. This appropriation requires the child to imbue words with her own meanings based on her own experiences - an appropriation which becomes pertinent in a context where the language being learnt is in many ways a transplanted language and a school language. Thus research suggests that the virtues of reading aloud to children are many. It is set in a context where a competent adult (here a teacher) reads to children to model the process through



her reading as well as her use of prosodic features to create a 'tune' in the listener's head. By initiating responses and guiding children through talk to explore the ideational framework and the discourse framework of the story, the teacher models not just language but also the nature of the story and the structure it takes. Repeated sharings of this kind, research shows, will provide children with an essential means of language acquisition as well as create in their minds a structure for stories (Heath, 1982; Baker and Freebody, 1989; Singer and Ruddell, 1985; Schallert, 1980; Gilbert, 1991). The reading aloud sessions also establish a foundation for writing (Baker and Freebody, 1989).

### **Social Construction of Meaning**

The social interaction which potentially sharing a book generates between the children and the teacher and amongst the children is said to create ample opportunities for the expression of different responses and the sharing of experiences. Peer sharing is seen to provide an encouraging support for children who may otherwise feel shy and withdrawn (Bruner, 1978). The social nature of the reading session, it is felt, will create a warm and non-threatening environment in which to acquire the life long skill of reading (Ng, 1987). The interactive nature is claimed to have the added advantage of generating a fair amount of talk which may facilitate learning and language acquisition. As children share their experiences in the context of the story, they are thought to be learning to appropriate language to meet their individual needs and express personal meanings. This creation of personal meaning is said to bring a text to life for the child. Through their conversational talk the teacher and children are said to create a story world and move about inside it, evaluating its features and components and exploring its boundaries. Shared reading of the Big Books, its advocates claim, thus opens up a whole world of experiences for the young child. The presence and participation of other children and the teacher's feedback may



provide young children with much needed scaffolding in learning language as well as in constructing meaning of a text. The teacher not only provides feedback but as one of the collaborators is said to mediate between children and the text, by reformulating the experiences they articulate. In the process, teachers help them evaluate the story, the characters and ideas conveyed therein, as well as make explicit their intuitive knowledge about language. When children share their anecdotes, they may not always be able to make clear the link between the ideational aspect of the story and their experience. It is the teacher who makes the connection for them. As Heath (1983) argues, the teacher's role is to assist children to see and to use their experience of the world and knowledge and use of language to facilitate their learning. If, through her reformulations, the teacher provides a link between the text, the child's world and experience and language, then the questions that are generated in this sharing provide a door for children to be aware of the sorts of things that occur to other readers and assures them that they are all actively grappling with the story. As Vygotsky (1978) states, it is in grappling with stories that children start reflecting and become aware of their own thinking processes. A description of the procedural development in a Shared Book session will help to explain how this scaffolding might take place.

### **Shared Book- Procedural Development**

Shared Book Reading in the primary classrooms is done four times in a week. For each unit, two Big Books are read with the class. The first book is shared on a Monday and the second re-reading is done the next day. Mid-week, the second book is introduced and the re-reading of this book is done the next day. In sharing the Big Books, the teachers are to follow a specific procedure (presented during REAP training by Ministry of Education officials) They discuss the cover page, introducing book conventions such as title page, author and the illustrator. Illustrations on each page are discussed before the accompanying text is read. This is done as a means of helping children to match print to the



illustration as well as to equip them with a story schema. They are told that the questions have to be open-ended and the teacher has to evoke a personal response from the children. In theory, through asking relevant questions, the teacher elicits children's responses. The questions are in many ways pre-determined by the teacher during her planning, to focus on skills or structures she feels the book or the story allows for. While exploiting this, she also has to try and relate the story to children's experiences, and establish a connection between the story world and the real world of the children. In doing so, she is to bring the story to life and thereby create enjoyment of the experience for the children.

The second re-reading is to recapitulate the story and is therefore read continuously. After this the teacher focuses on her Teaching Point - this may be the structure of the language or the vocabulary. Written exercises follow this focused lesson.

What the procedural development of the shared reading shows is the rich environment in which learning to read may take place (in theory, at least). It is an environment where children are expected to participate in a lively and engaging manner, sharing and listening to each others' experiences, prompted and supported by an encouraging teacher. Her role is to reciprocate and to coax the children into initiating responses and providing feedback to their shared experiences. She guides them into appropriating both language and meaning by accepting all responses and always extending positive feedback. The children are therefore eager to participate actively and it is thought in the process acquire both language and reading skills. All this is theoretically possible. The realities of the classroom and sociocultural factors which influence reading and writing, however, complicate the practical implementation of the approaches.



## **Philosophy of Shared Book Reading**

The Shared Book Reading session is based on the notion of bed-time shared reading in some homes and cultures with pre-school children. Thus it is supposed to simulate bed-time reading. The warmth, comfort and security it potentially affords is thought to induct a child into life-long reading for enjoyment. The adult in this situation is a caring, loving parent who enjoys the experience of sharing a book with his own child. In theory, in the process of sharing, the adult parent links the culture of the child with events in the text and relates the story to real-life experiences (Holdaway, 1979, Scollon & Scollon, 1982). In this situational context there is a shared cultural context between the parent and child. The child is in a way learning the skills or more precisely acculturated into the world of stories and books unconsciously by immersion with an adult who shares and functions as a facilitator. Both child and adult are equal participants. Being of the same family, they share cultural values and expectations and these are mediated by the story. The collaborative scrutiny of stories encompasses asking questions, sharing anecdotes and offering and challenging hypotheses. The ensuing talk is directed by a central purpose - that of giving personal meaning to a narrative. What emerges from this conversation is not just an external model for the construction of meaning which is essential for a beginning reader but also multi-level interactive processing (Spreadbury, 1994; Palincsar et al 1993; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1978; Pellegrini et al, 1990).

But this world of bed-time reading and sharing, valuable as it may be, is different in the Singapore context. Briefly, bed-time is not a cultural experience for many young children in Singapore. Similarly, sharing of experiences does not always occur in the context of reading and writing. The perception of reading is culturally embedded and enjoyment is not the focus or purpose (Sripathy, 1994; Lee, 1991; Hong, 1991). It is worth noting, though, that children



are encouraged by parents and teachers to read in their respective mother tongues in order to improve their command of the language (Mandarin, Malay or Tamil). Children, however, seem to dislike reading in their mother tongues (for a detailed description of literacy practices see discussion on Pupil Profile, Chapter 6:493-532 ).

## **TRANSPLANTING THE HOME TO THE SCHOOL**

### **The Constraints**

The home as a context for acculturating children into literacy practices has been taken for granted (Heath, 1983; Wells, 1987,1981). Recent studies have shown the important role of the home in literacy acquisition (Handel, 1992; Morrow & Paratore, 1993; Cairney, 1994; Rohl, 1994; Spreadbury, 1995, 1994, 1992; Whitehurst et al,1994; Brown,1993.).

Home environments vary according to a number of factors ranging from social class to parents' occupations, type of households (single parent), family size and culture, to name a few. They may not all be able to provide school-type literacy practices, which can be transferred from home to school. For example bed-time shared reading is not a universal literacy practice. Many studies imply the possibility of such a transfer (Wells 1981, 1987; Cochran-Smith, 1984) by decisively stating that learning to read in school can be done in the same way. All that needs to be done is to transfer the characteristics. The contextual characteristics can be transferred but the cultural embedding in which the shared reading occurs may not be institutionally transferable (Freebody, 1993; Freebody et al, 1995; Gregory, 1994) because, as Foucault (1992) maintains, the institutional site determines the discourse which takes place and the relationships of the participants. This means the school, the nature of the relationship between students and teacher and the perception of the teacher and by the teacher will all influence the outcome of shared reading. Formats and



techniques can be transferred but cultural practices defy transplant. Besides in Bernstein's (1981) view, the very nature of pedagogic discourse distorts discourse as it occurs in the home. The distortion is as much due to the context as well as the participants, their perceptions of the activity of reading and their role relationship. Each of these factors has a bearing on the other.

If the distortion is inevitable, the transfer may not be possible. In cultures where bedtime reading is non-existent, the distortions may affect success of implementation at the school level.

### **The Singapore Experience**

In introducing shared reading in the primary English curriculum, the language specialists at the Ministry of Education maintained that by simulating bedtime reading, SBR was "replicating the warmth and security of reading with a parent at home" (REAP Guidelines, 1987).

Shared Book Reading in the Singapore primary classroom ignores an essential start-up point for teaching beginning reading - the provision of familiar cultural practices within which children can position themselves. Bedtime reading is not a practice in most Singapore homes (see Pupil Profiles, Chapter 6:490-532) so the very premise of replication is non-existent.

This lack of familiarity aside, Shared Book Reading requires teachers to ask explicit questions which relate the story to pupils' lives. This way children, it is felt, may understand the story better. But this procedure is, in itself, new to many teachers. Relating the text read to pupils' life experiences requires the teachers to engage in negotiated talk, wherein pupils express their personal thoughts and feelings. This subjective response and its treatment may be culturally foreign to the teachers. Teachers are perceived to be the sole source of information and therefore are expected to provide the 'right' answers, not obtain



them from the pupils. The cultural adjustments both teachers and pupils may have to make in their perceptions of roles and talking to learn in using SBR are thus quite complex.

In addition, for many of the children in Singapore, whose home language is not English, shared book reading sessions pose the added complexity of having to associate new language and discourse structures with new semantic boundaries. Each child brings with him/her different meanings and assigns different meanings to the words and text encountered. Given that the mother tongue is still in the process of being mastered, the introduction of another language in the school may complicate the language acquisition process. Besides the vital skills of reading seem to be acquired in a language not familiar to the child. The teaching assumes a significant role in school because it has to be learned first for school success. The task of learning a language and simultaneously learning to read in that language may make the whole issue of learning to read seem such an effort for the young children or it could be helpful.

While the procedures and the process of reading via SBR may be obvious to the teacher, the explicit purpose of the task may not be clear to the children. For example, the teacher is required to praise the children who offer information on the text and extend it (REAP Guidelines, 1987). But she/he is not required to tell them how or what. Thus the rules of the game are not made known, which means some children may not know what is required of them or how they may go about offering or extending text information. As Baker and Freebody (1989) put it, the "teacher-text partnership" is aligned against children so that, despite repeated immersion in shared reading sessions, many children do not make the connections between the world of fiction and the real-life experiences in constructing meaning out of a text.

Given that there are children from at least three different ethnic groups in the classroom, this means that various cultural traditions and social practices are



also present therein. Neither are these static. They are continually changing in their interplay with a wider process. Interactional styles also differ across linguistic and cultural groups (Philips, 1982; Au, 1993,1981; Street,1995, 1984; Bond and Kwang, 1986; Berthoff, 1987; Clyne, 1981; Brown and Levinson, 1978). Ferguson (1978) argues that cognitive skills cannot be identical across linguistic registers and that appropriate rule learning is complicated and may sometimes need conscious instruction. This implies that the teacher may have to explain and demonstrate to the children the manner in which they are to participate and engage in shared reading and shared writing session.

Literacy events at home may not mirror school literacy events and practices (Heath, 1983; Freebody et al, 1995; Cairney, 1994; Breen et al, 1994; Rohl, 1994; Gallimore and Goldenberg,1993; Myers, 1992;de Castell et al, 1986b) However, they inform educational expectations, assumptions and imperatives and may conflict with school literacy practices. In doing shared reading, the teacher must be able to pull these threads together because it is not just the perceptions of reading and the perceptions of participants and the roles they are invited to play, which may differ, but the very worlds of existence and experience of each child ( Bhabha, 1994; Freire, 1994; Baker, 1991;Gee,1989; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Heap, 1991; Street, 1984). It remains to be seen whether all children can be acculturated into school reading through mere exposure and immersion in a practice which, however beneficial elsewhere, may be unreal for many.

The ideological mapping of each learner and teacher borne out of socializing process will find its way into the school. If learners are strangers to the school culture and, in this instance, the teaching approach itself, then it may be advantageous to harness these differences and make learning a conscious process.



## **SOME CONSTRAINTS**

**Shared Book Reading** was successfully used in the Fijian and New Zealand context with small groups of children. This enabled the teacher to engage as many pupils as possible in the process of sharing and reading the text. In the Singapore classroom of forty to forty-five pupils, however, the logistics of engaging most children in the process of sharing and collaborative talking and reading makes the approach susceptible to implementational difficulties.

It appears that Shared Book Reading has been successfully implemented in other school contexts such as Fiji (Elley & Manghubai, 1983). The Singapore classrooms, however, are very much examination-oriented. This means teachers are constantly under pressure to complete the syllabus and teach their pupils the skills that will be assessed in the examinations. The examinations are written and individualistic (as opposed to group) and speaking skills occupy an insignificant place in the process. Hence, the notion of learning through talk and negotiating understanding through collaborative meaning-making is not highly valued by teachers, parents and pupils (see discussion on Cultural Scripts, Chapter 3:155-179 and Pupil Profiles, Chapter 6:494-532).

Thus, the language used for Shared Book Reading, and the approach itself remain complex in the Singapore primary classroom. The distinct cultural orientations of the children, the perceptions and cultural orientation to reading and learning in general, and the emphasis on examination excellence may have an effect on the Shared Book Reading as a viable means for teaching children reading in the Singapore context.



## **SHARED WRITING**

Writing, once considered the poor cousin of reading, has seen a surge of research interest in the last decade. Accordingly, pedagogies for teaching writing have also proliferated. In the 80s, the attention was on early and beginning writers and on writing as a process. While the pedagogical parameters did not shift greatly, the emphasis on process as opposed to product caused some tensions in Singapore. They were unpopular with many teachers who had to experiment with a shift of power to the student as ownership and conferencing took on an unprecedented importance. An interesting and relevant outcome of this new wave process pedagogy was the question of the nature of writing, and its relationship within a social framework. Although 'writing as process' and 'authorship' (publishing inclusive) have been reframed in the late 80s, the importance of their role in the literacy development of Singapore children continues unallayed.

## **LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH-RATIONALE AND PROCEDURE**

The Language Experience Approach is seen as an organic approach to language and beginning reading and writing. It is based on the assumption that children can think and speak in the target language (English) and centres around the belief that experiences that are shared can be thought about, talked about, written down, read and re-read. REAP Guidelines, (1987) state that the Singaporean child, whose target language is not English, needs to be helped into English words and structures in order to talk and write about the experience. The adaptations made include the direct teaching of vocabulary and structures before and during the discussion of the experience. Sequencing of the language experience follows the sequencing of language items in the children's textbooks (prior to new syllabus). Under the new Thematic Approach, the experiences



match the themes and the language items derive from the themes. There are five stages in this approach namely:

- 1 Provision of experience for entire class
- 2 Sharing of children's experiences
- 3 Writing down children's experiences (CDS)
- 4 Children reading their story
- 5 Children writing their individual or group stories.

Stage One, which involves the provision of the experience to the whole class, is aimed at ensuring that all the pupils have had the same experience and therefore possess the content to engage in talk. In Stage Two, when children share their experiences, the teacher plays an important role in using open-ended, tag questions to elicit not just the talk but also the language items (structure) that is the focus of the lesson. To encourage pupils to talk about their experiences, the teacher is told to act as a sounding board, displaying interest, approval and encouragement to what the pupils say and assume the role of a keen listener. The teacher may use occasional prompts and work backwards from pupils anticipated responses. Teachers must not stop pupil talk but instead allow extra talk (even if it may not be directly related to the lesson at hand).

Following the shared talk about the experience, the teacher writes down the children's experiences as a Class Dictated Story (CDS). The guiding principle here is that it should be the children's words (not the teacher's) that are being written down. The teacher elicits the target language structure through conscious phrasing of questions. If the pupil volunteers an ungrammatical response, the teacher helps him rephrase. But the final version written down is the pupil's. The following example illustrates this :-



**T: Whose fingers are longer?**

**P: Mei Ling finger**

**T: Yes, Mei Ling's ... (prompt).**

**The rationale behind the CDS is that all the pupils are involved in the writing process and the writing is made easier because of the similarity of the experience and the shared discussion which precedes it.**

**In Stage Four when children read the story, they have dictated to the teacher, the language structure is reinforced and the writing serves as a good model demonstrating to the pupils the links between speech, writing, reading and listening.**

**As a follow-up to the CDS, pupils are required to write group stories. Some teachers may feel the need for children to acquire the skill of writing and may therefore decide to encourage individual writing. This final stage in LEA is thought to be possible because the pupils have been taught the language structures they need for their writing and the approach to writing has been modelled by the teacher.**

**The uniqueness of the language experience approach is said to be the multi-sensory and low-anxiety learning that it promotes because all children are involved although each pupil responds at his own level. The Class Dictated Story is claimed to be meaningful because it encompasses and expresses the pupils' own experiences. This in theory makes it highly motivational, meaningful and comprehensible.**



## **Singapore Teachers' Orientation to Writing**

**The entire philosophy of the Class Dictated Story is based on the view that language acquisition, reading and writing is a process. In relation to writing it claims that there are stages in its development which are acquired and learnt through modelling, observation, guidance and practice. This philosophy implies that teachers believe that writing needs time to grow - a philosophy teachers of English in Singapore do not seem to subscribe to, for various reasons.**

**Firstly, most teachers of English have been oriented towards a product approach to writing. Schemes of work, heads of department and school principals measure teachers by the quantity of written compositions they give a class per semester. In some schools, there is a given quota to be accomplished each semester. The time taken to provide the experience, talk about it, write about it as a class and then follow it up with individual/group writing appears to be too much for many teachers.**

**Secondly, within the LEA to writing, teachers have to devise activities that provide pupils with the relevant experience to talk about. Many teachers find this very difficult. In the new Thematic Approach such experiences are suggested in the Teacher's Handbook. Experiences that children may find interesting and which contribute to the theme are difficult to carry out because of the large number of pupils and other constraints of time and materials. So many teachers I have worked with in in-services courses stated that they do not carry them out.**

**Thirdly, many English language teachers do not seem to enjoy writing, having had bad experiences themselves, or feeling inadequate about their language abilities. For such teachers to model the process of writing can be an uphill task. Also, in doing writing as part of the LEA, teachers seem to become focused on the language items or structure that they fail to attend to other pertinent aspects of children's' writing. This concern has been voiced by many teachers I have**



had the opportunity to work with during in-service courses, particularly with regard to joint writing of the Class Dictated Story. Pre-service teachers are told that they should practise pupil ownership of writing and therefore leave uncorrected features of language that pupils have not as yet been taught/learnt - because the Class Dictated Story is children's words written down. Teachers in the lower primary classrooms seem to find this unacceptable because errors left uncorrected they feel may be taken to be accurate by the pupils who use the same forms in their own writing. This problem may arise out of the teachers' perception of their role - they must always write down what is correct - their view of what learning to write means - accuracy - and the pupils' perception of writing (instilled by parents and teachers) - no mistakes. The whole notion of writing as being developmental, as a skill learnt through trial and error and through practice is not a commonly shared Singaporean perception.

Both the Class Dictated Story and the follow-up writing are aimed at teaching children language as well as giving them practice in using language - new vocabulary and organisation of experience, using current language. Often the practice component is forgotten in Singapore because of the focus on product and product mastery. The idea of practising thinking aloud both the concepts and the language and its organisation seems to be overlooked by teachers who appear to be focused on eliciting the language item that has been planned for.

Modelling writing through the CDS may in fact have a negative impact on pupils' language acquisition because the teacher's focused elicitation may prevent children from exploring language and through language thought. Since the children are only now learning to encode their thoughts in English, the teacher's questions may hinder the creative aspect of writing - which may be what gives a piece of writing its shape, colour and personality. This emphasis on questions and language items is manifested in the PETS Teacher's Handbook (2A, 2B).



While the Class Dictated Story may work very effectively in native-speaker situations, in the primary classrooms in Singapore because of differing perceptions about writing and because English is a second language (for most children), there may be difficulties. Syllabus demands and examination pressure teachers' expectations and practices of writing, together with parent expectations, add to this difficulty. The perception of writing as a formal activity (as opposed to a personalised involvement), the emphasis on the product rather than the process of writing and reading and the practice of attaining accuracy through repetitious and rigorous practice (contrasted with thinking aloud and modelling strategies) will influence the new approach to literacy emphasizing a talk curriculum.

Thus, although the Class Dictated Story is aimed at developing pupils' language by integrating the skills and by fostering a shared environment where writing and talk are comprehensible, motivating and meaningful, given the language proficiency and the cultural practices and expectations about writing that pupils, parents and teachers in the primary classroom in Singapore seem to hold, its usefulness and appropriateness remain in question.

In viewing writing as a process, one has to look at the context in which it occurs, how it occurs and why it occurs. Writing, like reading, is socio-culturally embedded and conveys the perceptions and beliefs of the individual and the community. What can be said, how it is said, to whom and when, are all subject to socio-cultural norms and practices and expectations of the writer and the reader. In implementing the Class Dictated Story, the teacher is requested to model writing for children by thinking aloud and by directing thought through asking relevant questions and providing appropriate feedback. This may be a useful approach for children who are already fluent



in language (English) because they can then focus on aspects of writing such as choice of words, clarity of expression and developmental organisation of thought. In large classes of forty, learners with varying proficiencies in the English language, differing home languages, and widely ranging writing experiences, teacher thinking aloud and directing thought through appropriate talk, may be a tall order for both teacher and pupils. This approach to teaching writing also implies a teacher who fully understands the act of writing as defined in the LEA, enjoys writing, and has appropriated the English language to convey her meanings. It also calls on her professional ability to select appropriate instructional procedures to demonstrate thinking aloud and organisational procedures as well as linguistic knowledge - a loaded task to carry out with forty pupils - more than half of whom are grappling with beginning English. Add to this the different ways of composing in the ethnic languages which the children bring to the classroom and the difficulty of teaching writing as a personalized activity becomes evident.

If pupils and teachers can be oriented towards viewing learning as taking risks, making errors and gaining understanding through practice, then the Class Dictated Story and Shared Book Reading sessions may lead to successful language acquisition. How can this orientation or view of learning be achieved? Is the approach to shared reading and shared writing with the emphasis on shared talk implemented in the primary classrooms in Singapore culturally appropriate? These are questions this study hopes to answer.

The review of the Primary English Syllabus, the objectives in teaching and learning English and the two main approaches to reading and writing (Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story) show the important role assigned to talk in the primary English classroom. Although there is no direct reference to talk, in implementing the two approaches and in advocating the need for discussion of



responses and pupil engagement in the process, the place of talk in literacy acquisition is transparent in the Primary English classroom. How teachers interpret the notion of talk and how they use it in their shared reading and shared writing lessons is the focus of this study.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RESEARCH**

##### **Introduction**

**This chapter presents the procedure employed in collecting the data for this study and describes the criteria which guided the selection of the school and the participants.**

**The collection and analysis of data on the use of talk during shared reading and shared writing sessions in the classroom and in parent-child interaction at home was identified as the basis of this research because of the important place accorded to talk in the Shared Book Approach and the Language Experience Approach implemented in all primary classrooms in Singapore.**

**The stated aim of this study is to describe the patterns of teacher-pupil talk during shared reading and shared writing in school and parent-child talk at home. This will reveal the types of adult-child talk patterns that prevail in the three ethnic communities in Singapore and the extent of congruence these may have with the talk curriculum advocated in the primary English language classroom.**

**A description of the practices of talk and the beliefs and perceptions guiding the**



use of talk during shared reading and shared writing lessons in the classroom and during parent-child interaction at home in the three ethnic groups, would not have been possible within a quantitative framework. The Flanders System (Amidon & Hough, 1967; Flanders, 1970), which was reviewed in Chapter Two (pp.73-79), despite being a widely used quantification scheme of classroom interaction, ignores the contingent nature of classroom interaction. As discussed in Chapter Two, it focuses on frequency occurrences of teacher talk categories, overlooking the role of the pupils. The discourse analysis framework of Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) (see Chapter 2:80-83) also attends to the observable talk that occurs in the classroom but does not allow for a description of the beliefs and perceptions of the interactants which govern its use and occurrence.

To understand the occurrence of talk during literacy lessons, it is important to place the classroom in the context of the community and society. Classroom social organization and the interactional patterns are embedded in community and societal practices, perceptions and beliefs. Ethnography as a method of inquiry enables this observation. Very few ethnographic studies in language education have been done in Singapore. This is because it is relatively new in educational research in Singapore. There have been only two ethnographic studies done so far. The most recent one is by Cheah (1994) although an earlier study was done in 1989 (Chew) on the moral education programme in a Singapore secondary school. Chew's study is interesting in that she became a teacher in the school.



Cheah's ( Chapter 2:139-141) ethnographic study of English language education in Singapore was limited to the classroom observation of one upper primary teacher and four children. Data on home literacy practices was obtained from interviews with the four parents and their children. Although ethnographic studies are a rich source of data, they are difficult to implement in Singapore. Chew's problem in obtaining teachers' permission for classroom research observation is one reason why ethnographic studies have not been very popular in Singapore. Teachers are unwilling to consent to be observed for fear of being criticized and evaluated unfairly. Classroom dynamics is a sensitive issue and an "outsider", even if one is an "expert", may not understand fully how it functions. Even Cheah's study is not ethnographic in the 'true' sense as in Heath's study of the Roadville and Trackton communities, which was longitudinal as well as extensive in the amount of data that was collected.

## **QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO DATA COLLECTION**

This study thus used a qualitative approach, based on observations, video and audio recordings, lesson transcripts, interviews and activity logs. An ethnographic approach was used because it enabled the description of family, community (ethnic) and school literacy practices (Anstey & Bull, 1996; Breen et al, 1994; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Heath, 1983). Ethnography is defined "by the use of participant and non-participant observation, a focus on natural



settings, use of the subjective views and belief systems of the participants in the research process" (Nunan 1994:57). Le Compte & Goetz state that "by admitting into the research frame the subjective experiences of both participants and investigator, ethnography may provide a depth of understanding lacking in other approaches to investigation (1982:32). The subjective experiences of the teachers and pupils and community leaders in this study were obtained through interviews. Another reason for using an ethnographic approach is that it allows the description of classroom processes (Long, 1990). Goodson & Walker (1983) in fact argue that educational research should focus strongly on 'portrayal' (cited in Nunan 1994:55). An ethnographic approach allows the home-school talk practices and beliefs to be portrayed as they occur not in experimental contexts but in real-life contexts. This generated data not only on the frequency of talk in the classroom and at home, but more importantly on the nature of the talk, factors influencing it and the beliefs and perceptions guiding it. Thus, this framework of analysis has a sociocultural element. An analysis of the sociocultural context affecting talk is only possible if the underlying factors influencing talk and talk patterns between adults and children in the three ethnic communities can be captured.

Schools play an important role in imparting particular types of literacy. The lack of synchronization between home and school literacy practices can make the acquisition of literacy problematic. In Singapore, the school and consequently teachers, enjoy a revered position. The school is viewed as being



sacrosanct and the teacher, the deliverer of all knowledge that needs to be known. This has led to a situation where, often, home literacy practices are pushed aside by teachers, curriculum planners and policy implementers, as being irrelevant. With the increased emphasis on literacy in English for economic well-being, this can severely impede the literacy acquisition of those whose home practices are incongruent with those of the school:

The greater the cultural and linguistic distance between the home and school, the less successful will be the learning and teaching of the school.

(Boudieu & Passeron, 1977:72)

At the social level this can create over time a loss of cultural literacy. To study the multi-faceted aspects of classroom life and to place the classroom in the larger social context from which it draws its life as well as contributes to it, field research yields valuable information. Field research involves detailed descriptions of a school event (Wolcott, 1988).

In matching data collection methods with the aims of the study, the context, and participants, it was possible to do video and audio-recordings of classroom lessons, interviews and activity logs. The use of talk by parents and children at home could not be captured by audio recording because the interactants were conscious of what they were saying. Similarly, mere observation of the occurrence of talk in the classroom would not have been adequate in analyzing the nature of the talk that was occurring. This was best provided by the transcripts. The additional use of interviews and logs to collect data also



enabled information to be cross-referenced. Information obtained through interviews with teachers, heads of departments, curriculum planners, parents, members of the community and pupils was thus compared with notes made during observations. The advantage of this was that it enabled clarification of information. A number of data collection methods were used to obtain a more complete picture of the use of talk and occurrence of talk in the classroom. Nunan states that such an approach “enables the researcher to obtain a more complete picture of the phenomenon under investigation” (1994:103).

The qualitative approach used in this study has two major limitations. Given the intensive nature of the description, it limited the number of participants who could be included in the study and the findings may therefore not be generalizable to other contexts or participants. Although the number of participants (teachers, parents, pupils) who could be observed, interviewed and recorded was reduced because of the sheer amount of work involved and the availability of time, the description gleaned from the various methods of data collection, was intensive. Although the findings of this study will provide relevant information to curriculum planners and teacher educators in Singapore, the small number of participants may or may not limit its applicability to other primary classrooms in Singapore. Culture is a complex entity and this study has endeavoured to look at it from the point of its influence on talking to learn (reading and writing) and sharing of experiences. Having decided on the data collection method, the next step was to select a suitable



school.

### **Criteria For The Selection of The School**

The focus of the study was on talk that occurred during shared reading and shared writing activities and the cultural factors which determined its occurrence and pattern of use. This required the selection of a primary school. In selecting the school for this study, it was felt that it was important to select a school in a housing estate neighbourhood so that it provided an accurate representation of the types of primary schools in Singapore. The mix of pupils in non-housing estate schools would be very different in terms of socio-economic background and home language. Pupils in housing estate or neighbourhood schools are generally of similar socio-economic background and have common points of reference with regards to their neighbourhood.

Another factor that had to be considered was the practice of shared reading and shared writing in the lower primary classrooms. This was important because it was during these shared literacy lessons that talk could be observed. All other English language lessons revolve around teacher instructions and the completion of worksheets. Some schools had also stopped using the Shared Book and Language Experience Approaches because of the large number of prescribed, standard worksheets and the limited time within which these had to be completed, as well as the non-availability of some of the suggested Big Books.



An important consideration was also the availability of teachers from the three ethnic groups, primary two classrooms with three pupils from each of the ethnic groups and the accessibility of the classrooms and their teachers over a fairly long period of time. Some schools only cater to children from a particular ethnic group and therefore are very often mono-cultural. In some schools, many classrooms are mono-cultural. A significant factor in all this was the school principal's willingness to allow research to be undertaken in his school.

### **Criteria for Selecting Children**

In order to describe the patterns and use of talk during shared reading and shared writing by the three ethnic groups, the study was based on children who were from one of the three main ethnic groups (Chinese, Malay or Indian), who spoke their mother tongue at home and who were identified by the teacher as willing to talk during shared literacy sessions. Subsequently, the lack of accessibility to the parents of some of the children, resulted in one child being selected from each ethnic group from each class. The final sample thus had a total of nine children. The small number of children also enabled focus on their talk patterns during shared reading and shared writing in the classroom and at home with their parents.



## **Choice of Subject**

**Much of the literature on the Shared Book and Language Experience Approaches has focused on children who are native speakers of English. There have been relatively few studies on the use of these approaches where English is being learned in a non-native context, in particular with Asian learners of English. It was therefore felt that studying the use of talk by Asian children and teachers during shared reading and shared writing sessions, would fill the gap that exists in the literacy-culture research.**

**The principles and practices of shared reading and shared writing (REAP Guildelines, 1987) are that the teacher facilitates the acquisition of reading skills by modelling reading for the pupils, and generates talk about the story with and by the pupils. The negotiated talk enables pupils to learn language as well as reading and writing skills. The shared sessions are meant to be non-threatening and therefore all pupil responses are to be accepted. The negotiated talk that develops draws upon what the pupils already know and extends it to a newer or higher level. The teacher is required to follow the procedural development for the shared reading and shared writing sessions and is expected to involve as many pupils as possible in the interaction (described in Chapter 4:209-214).**

**Although an ideal shared reading or writing session may feature all the above aspects, in this study the focus was on the occurrence and use of talk by teachers and pupils from different ethnic groups to facilitate the learning of reading and**



writing in English. English was selected for this study because it is the subject in which the two approaches focused in this study are used, it very often is the only subject during which pupils interact with the teacher and it is the medium of instruction in school.

The decision to focus the research on Primary Two pupils was because the national streaming and examination activity in the school takes place at Grades 3, 4 and 6. This meant only Grades 1, 2 and 5 were available. Grade Five pupils and teachers would be very much focused on completing the syllabus in preparation for the eleven-plus national exam the following year. Grade One pupils would have been difficult to study because both teachers and pupils would be in the process of making adjustments to their new classroom learning and teaching demands. It was thought that Grade Two pupils would have overcome the adjustment problems of Grade One and would not be as anxious about the impending streaming and examination activities as pupils in the higher grades. In addition, they would be familiar with Shared Book and Class Dictated Story sessions (introduced in Grade One).

### **Meeting the Teachers**

The principal of a school which met the outlined criteria was approached. Once the principal informed me of the teachers who would be involved in the study, I made individual appointments to explain the nature and purpose of my study.



The Indian and Malay teachers were selected by the principal who informed them of the research. The Chinese teacher in the study had already been known to me when I supervised a teacher-in-training. I therefore informed the principal who then spoke to her and requested that she provide the necessary assistance. The teachers were told that the research on the use and occurrence of talk during the shared literacy lessons of Shared Book Approach and Shared Writing was being undertaken for my doctoral studies. The research methodology using video and audio tapes to record a total of six shared reading and six shared writing lessons and the need to interview the teachers and discuss with them issues related to the lessons and approaches was also explained. It was felt that if teachers know the purpose of the study and the data collection method, they would be more forthcoming in their willingness to share relevant information. The selection of shared reading and shared writing lessons to be observed and the days were left to the teachers. There were two shared reading and one shared writing lesson every week. The teachers would inform me which of the two shared reading lessons I could observe. They were informed of the time frame within which the data had to be collected. The teachers' assistance was sought in establishing the initial contact with the parents of the focal children. The need to visit the homes of the focal children to interview the parents about their practices and perceptions of literacy was also conveyed to the teachers so that they could establish the initial contact with the parents and allay any fears or concerns that may possibly arise. This was done because it was felt that parents would be more willing to accommodate a researcher



sanctioned by the teacher.

It was felt that by observing the shared reading and shared writing lessons, it would be possible to find out if teacher-pupil talk was taking place during these lessons, describe the nature of this talk and compare the classroom talk with the type of talk that was being generated in the homes of the three main ethnic groups. The Shared Book Reading and Language Experience Approach (LEA) were selected for the study because both these approaches have been in use for ten years, and it was timely to describe their implementational success. Shared Book Reading is the main approach teachers use to teach lower primary children to read in English, while the Class Dictated Story in the Language Experience Approach, is the main approach used by teachers to model writing for the pupils. Both the approaches require both teacher and pupils to engage in talk. It was largely only during these sessions that pupils could have the opportunity to talk and interact with the teacher. Based on the data collected during these lessons, it might be possible to identify and describe the perceptions that the teachers, and children have about talk and about talking to learn.

### **DATA COLLECTION METHOD**

The data for the above was obtained through a combination of methods namely, the audio and video recording of the Shared Book and Class Dictated Story lessons; keeping written records of observations during lessons; interviews with teachers, parents and focal pupils; observations made during home visits and



interviews with curriculum planners, Ministry of Education Specialist inspectors, English language textbook writers and representatives of the community. In addition to these, pupils were also requested to keep a daily log of the type of activities they engaged in over a period of two weeks. Documents such as the Teachers' Guides, Textbooks, Workbooks, Unit Plans and Schemes of Work were also studied.

### **Lesson Observations**

Detailed notes were kept of each lesson. Besides date, duration and lesson objective, information pertaining to teacher comments and pupils' participation such as unsolicited voluntary comments on teacher questions and peer responses, interruptions and lesson development were recorded. These notes were then discussed with the teachers and the pupils to obtain clarifications, where necessary.

### **Interviews**

The oral interview has been used as a research tool to investigate conversational analysis, linguistic variation and cross-cultural communication. The oral interview was selected as a means of obtaining information from the parents, pupils and teachers in this study because unlike the questionnaire, it allowed for flexibility in providing for topics and issues to determine the course of the interviews. In this study, semi-structured interviews were used because while



having a focus for the interviews, which thus guided the interaction, there were no pre-determined questions. This allowed for interviewee responses to guide the interview. Dowsett, arguing in favour of the semi-structured interview says that:

the interactions are incredibly rich and the data indicate that you can produce extraordinary evidence about life that you don't get in structured interviews or questionnaire methodology - no matter how open ended and qualitative you think your questionnaires are attempting to be. It's not the only qualitative research technique that will produce rich information about social relationships but it does give you access to social relationships in a quite profound way. (1986:53)

As this research aimed to identify practices of adult-child talk, a semi-structured interview it was felt would best meet the purpose because practices of talk cannot be identified through direct questions. Besides, the word 'talk' may be interpreted differently by the interviewees. Thus, while practices of talk in terms of content, occurrence and participants, was the focus, each interview session developed according to the interviewees' responses.

The interview questions were piloted with parents attending workshops (for parent interviews) and in-service teachers (for teacher interviews). This provided the opportunity to eliminate ambiguous questions and questions that were confusing to the interviewee. Interviews were used because they allowed for the gathering of information specific to this research, which audio and video recording and lesson observations would not yield. It was felt that interviews would yield additional data on teachers' beliefs about the role of talk in learning



to read and write and parents' practices of talk with their children. Interviews also made it possible to obtain clarification on lesson observations. Unlike a questionnaire, which may be restrictive because it requires information to be written down, interviews allowed the researcher and the respondents to explain and elucidate the questions as well as the responses.

The teachers were interviewed on five occasions to obtain information on their knowledge of the background of the pupils in their respective classrooms; their perceptions of talk in learning, their perceptions of children and interacting with children and their understanding of the place of talk in the English language curriculum. The teachers' understanding of how pupils' talk can be generated during SBR and CDS was also sought. The teachers were also asked for their views on the adequacy of the training they had received in the implementation of REAP. In addition to these interviews, after every lesson, I talked informally with the teachers on their lesson objectives, pupil participation, their questions and pupil responses. The sharing of Big Books with children, the difficulties they have in implementing the approaches and their choice of books for the lessons were also discussed with the teachers.

Parent interviews were carried out in the homes of the pupils. These were arranged at a time convenient to the parents. All interviews were conducted in English. Although I speak both Malay and Tamil and used it accordingly at my first meeting with the parents, all the Malay and Tamil parents responded in



English so the rest of the interviews were conducted in English because the parents could communicate fluently in English. The interviews were recorded and notes were kept. The need for recording the interviews was explained to the parents and most of them accepted it. The interviews sought information on parents' perception of talking to their children and the nature of parents' talk with their children. The interviews also focused on the occurrence of parent-child talk (time, place, frequency) and parents' reading and writing with their children as well as the parents' own reading and writing. In addition to these matters, the interviews also obtained information on parents' educational levels, their job-related literacy practices, the expectations they had for their children and the home environment they perceived to be providing for their academic and social success. In some homes, the children were present during the interviews but they were not directly involved in the discussions. A total of four interviews was carried out with each child's parents.

Pupil interviews were conducted in school in the teacher's lounge or in the common reading corner. There were a total of four interviews per child which were audio-recorded for reference. These interviews sought information on the frequency of parent-child talk at home; the type of family activities; the nature of weekend activities; the number of books at home; parent-child reading at home and the pupil's participation in class during shared reading and shared writing. The information provided by the pupils provided the background to the parent interviews and helped in the explication of both teacher-pupil and



**parent-pupil talk.**

**Interviews with curriculum planners, inspectors of school and textbook writers were carried out to obtain information on the curriculum changes and implementation; the rationale for these changes and the implementation procedure. The respondents were also asked to talk about problems they perceived in the changes that were being implemented. The information thus obtained helped elucidate the procedural development of the English language lessons in the classroom and their theoretical framework. Information on the rationale and philosophy of the approaches advocated for the teaching and learning of English in school and the nature of the materials that are mandatory in the classroom, provided insight into the teachers' use of particular approaches and the nature of talk they were expected to generate in the classroom.**

**Ten community representatives were interviewed to gather information on ethnic patterns of interaction. The representatives were identified by their involvement in community affairs and their accessibility. Many have been representatives of their communities for a long time. Others have been established and popular writers or educationists. In selecting and interviewing the representatives of the three ethnic communities, I was aware that one person cannot represent a culture or know what happens in the everyday interaction between parents and children at home. There was also the danger that they**



might provide an 'idealized view' of what life and talk patterns were supposed to be like in their respective communities. To overcome this, three representatives were interviewed for each of the three ethnic communities. They were also selected from a range of occupational backgrounds. These factors, it was felt, would provide balance in the accuracy of the information obtained. The use of more than one community representative for each ethnic group enabled information to be compared and verified. Despite these drawbacks, it is possible to identify some key features which characterize each ethnic community.

The interviews with representatives from the three different ethnic communities focused on the perception of children, talking to children and the perception of education and talk. Community representatives were also requested to describe the cultural ways of interacting within their respective communities and the values which influenced interaction within the community and at a societal level. Their views were also sought on the expectations of the community. Information obtained from these interviews was used to draw up the practices of talk and perception of children in the three ethnic communities in this study. This information was then used to elucidate teacher-pupil interaction in the classroom and parent-children interaction at home.

All interviews were conducted in English because the respondents chose to speak in English. Each community representative was interviewed once.



## **Home Visits**

**Three home visits were made for each pupil. These were over and above the two formal and one informal interviews with the parents at home. During these home visits, in addition to clarifying doubts pertaining to the earlier interviews, observations were made on the books available in the home; the existence of a room for the child and its contents; the nature of the interaction between family members and the children's general schedule from the time they returned from school. The home visits generally lasted four hours or about half a day. Sometimes, I was invited to join the family for lunch or dinner. During these times, the parents discussed their children's schooling, related problems or their own childhood experiences. The home visits provided more information and clarified parents' talk patterns, their expectations and their perception of talking to their children.**

## **Document Study**

**Although the documents did not form the major part of this study, they provided much needed background information on the language policies in education; language teaching and learning objectives; implementation procedures and the availability of teaching materials. The documents also provided information on the lesson development, and the school's and teachers' expectations. The documents studied included the following:**



- 1) curriculum materials pertaining to the rationale and philosophy of Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story (within the Language Experience Approach);**
- 2) the Teacher's Guides of the Primary English Thematic Series materials;**
- 3) the school's Scheme of Work and Unit Plans for English;**
- 4) the School Plan (1994, 1995);**
- 5) the School Report (1995); and**
- 6) the Primary English Thematic Series Coursebooks.**

### **Pupils' Daily Logs**

**Logs were used because it was felt that they would capture the kinds of activities or tasks the pupils would be engaged in when they were at home (Anstey & Bull, 1996:157). This information could then be used to described the occurrence of talk in the family.**

**The nine focal pupils were requested to log in the types of activities they were engaged in over a two week period. This was done much later in the study, because information derived from teacher, pupil and parent interviews appeared to show a lack of pupil activity. All pupils were doing, it seemed, was attending school and going back home to do their homework and attend tuition classes. It was felt there might be some time in the day when these children did other things. The log identified ten major activities the children were likely to be involved in on a normal day and the participants (mother-child, father-child, child-siblings or child alone). The ten activities were identified through interviews with the pupils. The frequency of each activity and the participants**



involved were then tabulated for each child. Information obtained from the logs was then compared with information obtained from the parent and child interviews to derive a profile of talk patterns at home for each child and to describe the talk that was taking place. This profile would be used to understand the occurrence of talk during shared reading and writing sessions.

### **ISSUES RELATED TO SCHOOL-BASED RESEARCH**

My decision to do school-based research was not without problems. In addition to framing my research questions without offending cultural and individual sensitivities, I had to convince the school principal and teachers of the unthreatening nature of my research and assure them of confidentiality of information. Accessing parents, who had generally little contact with the school, was another aspect that needed careful handling. The biggest difficulty was in trying to discuss curriculum matter with policy makers and implementers. Information was withheld in the name of confidentiality or expressed in confidence and therefore could not be revealed. For these reasons, I had a larger than necessary pool of informants and had to be constantly careful not to offend sensibilities. At the same time, I had to fit information received into the context of my study for an accurate interpretation. This was an ongoing necessity. Hence, on approaching the school principal for permission to undertake research in his school, I had to couch my research intentions honestly but cautiously, because any indication felt of threat would have jeopardized my chances of gaining access to the school. To facilitate ease of access and reduce



the evident threat of my research, I explained in detail my research purpose, the reasons which prompted my study, the nature of my classroom involvement and the intended benefits of the study. I decided, therefore, to be a non-participant observer in the classrooms. This suited my needs as a researcher who was interested in recording and describing the talk which occurred during literacy lessons.

To have been involved in any small way in the day-to-day teaching would have imposed a tremendous burden on me. In addition, I might not have shared the teachers' objectives and targets of achievement they might have set for their pupils. Also the short duration of involvement might have disrupted the teachers' overall planning.

As a researcher and a trainer of English language teachers, parents too, assigned me status and power. In a society where teaching is considered a noble profession and teachers held in high regard, a teacher-educator is ranked even higher. Parents pointed out my fluency and competence in English and felt reticent about discussing their own school experiences. On the other hand, their perception of me helped with my data collection because they were willing to discuss their literacy practices. I tried to make them feel comfortable by reverting to the use of Singlish wherever appropriate.

Being an English Language teacher-educator complicated my research somewhat. The teachers felt I would be evaluating their teaching methodology



and their language competence. This was especially so because I was studying the Shared Book and Language Experience Approaches. I had to assure them that it was the relevance of the approaches, and the use and occurrence of talk that I was interested in and not evaluating their competency in teaching English. But their perception of my status as an English Language teacher-educator, training teachers to teach English at the primary level, would have had an effect on my research. For some of the reasons discussed above, school-based research in Singapore has been quantitative-evaluative in nature, with teachers and pupils being requested to fill in questionnaires or perform particular tasks. The results are very often evaluated and presented as conference findings. For all the time spent, neither teacher nor pupils seem to be briefed on the outcome.

## **BENEFITS OF SCHOOL-BASED RESEARCH**

School-based research, on the other hand, can make a positive contribution. Some of the parents and two of the teachers became fairly active participants in my research. Parents helped me to understand the nature of parent-child interactions in different cultures by giving me relevant examples and talking about educational issues that concerned them while I shared with them my own experiences as a parent. This helped me formulate my research questions more clearly and helped them with solutions to problems related to literacy acquisition. As I exchanged ideas and discussed observed pupils' responses with the teachers, they responded openly and discussed their thoughts more readily. The teachers' unreserved comments about English language teaching, their



views on the Shared Book Approach and shared writing within the Language Experience Approach, and the problems they encountered in implementing the two approaches enabled me to gain valuable insight into literacy teaching. The rapport we had, enabled them to clarify doubts and discuss issues pertaining to their lessons without fear of being evaluated. Although the three teachers were apprehensive at first, within weeks, two of the teachers became accustomed to my presence in class that I was considered part of the set-up. The third teacher was nervous and tended to feel I was evaluating her (despite assurances to the contrary). Despite the numerous and varied attempts I made to make her feel less threatened, I did not succeed. Being a newer and younger teacher, the balance of power was not in her favour. The threat was very real to her as seen by her late entry into class for every lesson and the numerous fumbles she experienced. Part of this might have been due to her inadequate preparation (the audio tapes she used in class for pre-activities tended to begin at the wrong point or were incorrect ones).

Thus, although I did not participate in the classroom, I developed rapport with the teachers in my study, as well as other staff members and the principal of the school. The duration of my field work in the school also contributed to the development of the rapport with the school and staff. In fact, mid-way through my data collection, I was mistaken on several occasions by non-academic school staff to be one of the teachers. I had become part of the furniture. It not only provided me with access to research information, but sometimes also made me



**privy to staff-room gossip.**

**Developing rapport with the pupils and their parents was much easier. After the initial wariness and as I discussed my research concerns and gave parents advice (upon request) on what books their children would find interesting to read, or answered questions relating to school, parents became very helpful. The willingness with which they shared information, adjusted their schedules and welcomed me into their homes has left me with not just valuable data but lasting impressions and some good friendships. They shared many insights with me and this assisted me in consolidating my research stance. The pupils were cooperative and were always willing to share their experiences. Some of them were a little curious about my home visits initially, but this diminished over time.**

**The information sharing, discussions and comments between the parents, the teachers and me enabled me to obtain a deeper understanding of the nature of literacy in each of these homes, the individual perceptions and practice of literacy and the sociocultural context of literacy acquisition, Without them, my observations would have been confined to the limited context of the classrooms. The multi-level inquiry and sources of data have helped to enrich my understanding of the role of culture in literacy acquisition and the place of current pedagogical approaches in non-native English speaking countries like Singapore.**



## **Data Collection- Time Framework**

The entire data-collection took me thirteen months. I began my data-collection in March 1994 and continued till January 1995. I spent a further two months in July and September 1995, collecting additional data and completing interviews.

I divided my data-collection into four phases:

- Phase I - March to May, 1994 - (Class B - Chinese Teacher)
- Phase II - July to September, 1994 -(Class A & Class C - Indian & Malay Teacher)
- Phase III - September to November, 1994 - (Class C - Malay Teacher)
- Phase IV - December 1994 to January 1995 ) Interviews, filling in  
- July 1995 and September 1995 ) details with teachers  
and parents.

### **Phase One**

I had spent two months in Classroom B earlier in the year while supervising a teacher-in-training. This had given me a good idea of some of the pupils, the framework of classroom interaction, the teacher's agenda and the general set-up of the school. I had also seized the opportunity then to talk to the Head of Department and some staff members about English language teaching and learning and the school's expectations and pupils' performance. The conversations also gave me an idea of the backgrounds of the general pupil population.

### **Phases Two and Three**

Phases Two and Three involved Classes A & C. The longer duration of the



observations for these two classes was due to interruptions because of examinations and other public holidays. During this phase, the interviews with parents and children also commenced. The observations were done twice weekly in each class as the class schedules dictated. After three weeks in each class, I asked the teachers' assistance in selecting my focal students. As they understood the nature of my study, obtaining their assistance in establishing initial contact with the parents was not a problem.

#### **Phase Four**

Phase four was spent on clarification of information that was not clear. This involved contacting parents and teachers. Clarifications with parents was usually carried out over the telephone. A total of sixteen visits were made to Class B. I visited the class regularly, thrice a week, between March and May 1994. Not all visits involved recordings. Some of the visits were spent observing and making field notes of talk that was occurring during the shared reading and writing lessons. Each visit lasted for about one hour. Following the lessons, I talked to the teacher about matters concerning my observations or clarified ideas relating to the research. I also spent time talking to the teachers and principal on issues related to teaching of reading and writing and their perception of the role of talk in learning.



## **Establishing contact with parents**

**Parent interviews commenced in July, 1994. Visits to pupils' homes were usually carried out in the evening at a time convenient to the parents. Initial contact with some parents was made in the day because they worked shifts. Some parents were only free after 10.30 at night. Even though this was late, I went along, because I appreciated the time they were making. This might have affected the interviews to some extent, because parents would be tired after a full day's work. For this reason, I tried where possible to schedule subsequent interviews on their non-working weekdays. But most of the time, their schedules were observed and their preferences accommodated. This had the advantage of giving me an insight into the nature of the talk patterns and literacy practices at home.**

**The pupils were interviewed in school during their recess break or before they started school. This was done before and after the home interviews with parents. The former provided me with information about the family and what to anticipate, the latter enabled me to fill in missing information or clarify doubts.**

## **Classroom Observations**

**All lessons involving shared reading and shared writing were video and audio recorded. A total of thirty-six lessons were recorded. Of these, twenty-four**



were subsequently used for the analysis. One video camera (panasonic) manned on a tripod was used and focussed on the teacher. A simultaneous audio recording of the lessons was also done. This was as a standby should the video recordings fail (as they did on three occasions) as well as for transcription purposes. It is easier to transcribe from an audio rather than a video tape.

The audio recordings were done on a palm-corder. The video-recorder was placed at the back-centre of the classroom and focussed on the teacher. The audio-recorder was placed either on the teacher's table or on a pupil's table, close to the left front of the classroom. The video-recorder was set on automatic to cover the one hour duration of the lesson. I checked on the recording periodically.

Once the recorders were switched on, I took my place at the back of the classroom, at a pupil's desk to record the proceedings of the lesson verbatim. Where I missed out on teacher's or pupil's response, I left a space to be filled in later. This happened either because the interaction was rapid or because I had made other observations pertinent to the lesson and was writing it down. These field notes were dated and the lesson heading and details such as title of book shared and duration were noted. All field notes were written out in full at the end of each day in order to ensure relevant information was not missed out, as well as to clarify doubts with the teachers. Together with the field notes, I kept a journal to record my personal reflections on the day's lessons and questions that arose out of the observations. This, I felt, was important because as an inside researcher, I had the task of making the familiar, unfamiliar (Mehan, 1982). I



also kept notes of ideas related to my research, that arose in the course of the observations and reflections. These were used in the discussions (about teaching reading and writing) I had with the teachers.

The video-recordings were transferred from the palm-corder to a VHS tape at the end of each day. This was to ensure the recording was not erased and that the video-tape was available for the next recording. Also, it allowed for immediate reviewing of the lesson, gaps in the observation notes to be filled in and, more importantly, to formulate discussion questions for the post-lesson teacher interviews. The transferred video-cassette tapes were labelled with the lesson title, date and the teacher's name. This was to allow for quick reference and playback during analysis. Copies of the master tapes were also made as a precaution against possible erasures and damage due to weather conditions.

All lessons were audio-recorded. These recordings were clearly labelled with details of lesson, date and teacher's name. They were transcribed in full at the end of each day and omissions in the verbatim transcripts were filled in. The audio recorder taped the teacher's voice very clearly but did not record many of the children's voices, because they were very soft. The noise from the construction work outside the school together with the noise from the traffic did not help the recording. For this reason, a large portion of my verbatim record of the lesson had pupils' responses ( because I could hear them). The teachers' responses were filled in during the transcription of the audio-tape. The teachers' repeating of the pupils' responses helped in the recording as well. The tapes were transcribed in full and selected interactions were used for the



**analysis. All transcriptions followed a simple coding system.**

### **Parent-child reading/ pupil logs**

**Parents were requested to record on audio-tape two instances of their reading and talk related to the reading with their children. The choice of material, time and method was left to the parents' discretion. They were also requested to read as normally as possible (in their usual manner). The choice of language was left to them. Each family was asked to record two story readings and one talk related to any of the two readings. In families where parents said they did not read to their children this recording was not possible. The duration of the speech events was left open, but the recording had to be completed in two weeks. Almost all the parents, however, failed to record a talk session with their children, saying they did not set aside time to talk to or with their children. In view of this problem, it was decided that both parents and children would be given a log-in form, in which they would record the type of activity they had been engaged in, on the hour. This would provide information on the nature of talk that was taking place between parent and child. The interview would pick up this information and obtain more details on the use and occurrence of talk in the home.**



## **Carrying out the Interviews**

**Before the interview, the nature of the research and the purpose of the interview was explained to the parents. This was not done with the teachers and the pupils because they had been briefed at the beginning of the research. They had also been told clarifications may be sought after the lesson observations. All respondents in this study were informed that the data gathered would be used for writing up the research, but names would not be revealed.**

**The semi-structured ethnographic interviews that were conducted involved the use of a range of questions. This was because the focus was to encourage the respondents to share their experiences, expectations and opinions about adult-child talk. The interviews were tape-recorded, except in the case of parents who said that they felt uncomfortable. The interviews were tape-recorded only to facilitate reconstruction of the exchange at a later date and not for the collection of linguistic data. Where the interviews were not tape-recorded (about 3), more elaborate notes were taken.**

**Interviews were conducted with five different groups of people. The teachers, focal pupils, their parents, language educationists, curriculum planners and Ministry of Education officers, and community representatives formed the five groups. In addition to this, I also carried out interviews with academics and other language teachers. Interviews with the teachers, pupils, parents and curriculum planners were audio recorded. Verbatim notes were made of the interviews with the community representatives because many of them did not**



want the interviews to be recorded.

The pupils were interviewed three times - once at the beginning, then mid-way and finally after the respective classroom observations had been completed. In addition to this, I also spoke with the pupils informally when I visited their homes. There were four formal and several informal interviews with the three teachers. Many of these interviews were conducted during the teachers' free time or during their recess breaks. I was very conscious of scheduling interviews during the teachers' free time, because they had very little non-work time and whatever time available away from class was being used for marking and additional lesson preparation. Since recess was only twenty minutes, it was not easy to use it for any discussion. The interviews were therefore scheduled after discussion with the teachers on a suitable time. This way, I felt they would be more prepared to give of their time to the discussions. I also chatted with the teachers while I waited for lessons to begin or for another teacher. I made it a point to either go to school early or stay behind after my classroom observation so that I could talk to the teacher.

The interviews focused on the teachers' backgrounds, their language learning experiences, their beliefs and perceptions of teaching and learning, their views on the rationale and conduct of the Shared Reading and Language Experience sessions, their attitude and perception of the role of talk in literacy acquisition and their thoughts on adult-child talk patterns across the three ethnic communities. Discussions also centred on pupil participation, home environments of the focal pupils, literacy practices across cultures and day-to-



day events in the classroom and the school. Similar issues were discussed with the Head of Department (English) and the Principal of the school. The interviews with the focal pupils were aimed at obtaining information about literacy practices and the nature of parent-child interactions at home, as well as the pupils' perception of reading and writing and the two approaches used in the classroom for these purposes. I also interviewed two textbook writers and two Ministry officials (one of whom had just then retired) on the English language syllabus, the Primary English Teaching Materials (PETS) and the rationale and procedural development of the Shared Book and Language Experience Approaches. Questions also centred on the role of talk in learning to read and write and talk and interaction patterns among the different cultures in Singapore. Discussions were also carried out with English language teacher trainers and language educators regarding pedagogic approaches used in the teaching of English at the primary level.

All parents, except two, were interviewed three times each. One parent was interviewed once at her home and twice later over the telephone, because she was very busy at work and returned home only at ten in the evening, spending Saturday at the office as well. Despite this constraint, she was very helpful and apologized profusely for not inviting me home. The telephone interviews lasted forty-five minutes each. Another parent was too busy at work to fit in a third interview. All interviews (apart from the phone interview) were done at the focal pupils' homes, usually in the evenings. Initially, I was conscious of intruding into the privacy of the families. However, once I had explained the



purpose and nature of my research and assured them no real names would be used in my thesis, the parents were very warm and frank in answering my questions. Many of them sympathized with my having to work late and odd hours. An interesting comment all parents made was their admiration for my interest in studying “even at this age”. Open university and adults going back to school was not heard of in Singapore until recently. (Open University courses were introduced into Singapore only in 1994). The concept of life-long education is, however, slowly setting in. The contact with parents was initially established through the teachers. I later telephoned them and requested permission to talk to them about their ideas regarding learning to read and write and how they themselves helped their children. I believed telling them what I was going to talk to them about would make them more comfortable and less hostile.

For this reason, I also avoided using the term “interview” which gives an air of officiousness. In most cases, I was able to meet both the parents, although, very often, only one parent responded to the questions or was involved in the discussion. The parent who participated least during the interviews was usually the father. It was also the fathers who were not at home during the interviews. This happened with four of the focal families. In addition to questions on their own language learning experiences and other background information, parents were asked about the time they spent reading and writing, with their children, talking to them, supervising their school work, playing and watching television with them, buying books and sharing childhood stories with them. Their childhood experiences of interacting with their own parents and their practices



and beliefs about parent-child interaction were also discussed. Observations were also made of the amount and type of reading material at home. These would inform me of the literacy practices at home. All interviews, except one, (for which permission was declined) were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

## **Documents**

Official documents, such as the Reports on Education in Singapore, the English Language Syllabuses, the Schemes of Work and Unit Plans for the lessons taught, were used in analyzing the key issues in this study. The Primary English Teaching Series Book 1A, 1B and 2A, 2B were also examined to find out the place assigned to talk in the SBR and LEA (CDS) lessons. All documents were read in order to understand the philosophy, beliefs and perceptions underlying the role of using talk in language teaching and learning.

The school principal also provided me with the School Plan (a report on the targets to be achieved by the pupils in each subject) and the school's Self-Appraisal Report which presents past performances and future directions. These documents are of a confidential nature and rarely made available to non-school personnel.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The aim of this study is to describe the occurrence of talk during shared reading and shared writing sessions in the classroom and at home between adults and



children to see the congruence of practices. The data for this were obtained through video and audio-recordings, observations, interviews, field notes and the pupils' daily logs. Transcripts of interviews and classroom observations and field notes were used to interpret the sociolinguistic data.

To describe the patterns of talk, I looked at the talk occurring during shared reading and shared writing lessons in the three classrooms. The shared reading and shared writing lessons were the key literacy events in the classroom where the teacher and pupils engaged in talk about the story being read/written. The lessons were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed for the type of talk that was being practised by the teachers and pupils. The major categories are given in the pages that follow. In analyzing the talk, I was also interested in the beliefs that both teachers and pupils had, which guided the talk in the classroom. I thus supplemented my analysis and observations with interviews with the teachers and the pupils, in order to obtain their perspective of the practice of talk and the nature of the talk that occurred in their shared reading and shared writing classrooms.

In the second part of my analysis, I focused on the nature of talk at home. The bulk of the data for this was obtained through interviews with parents and pupils. To supplement the information obtained through the interviews, I also made use of observation data obtained during my home visits and the pupils' activity logs. This provided additional data not only on the type of activities families engaged in on a daily basis, but also the opportunities for talk that arose as a result of the type of activities.



For the analysis of classroom talk, all the shared reading/shared writing lessons were transcribed. The transcripts were then analyzed and categories of speech acts which characterized classroom talk during shared reading and shared writing were drawn up from the numerous analyzed transcripts, specific episodes were then selected from the lessons of the three teachers and the patterns of talk that occurred were described.

Speech acts were used to analyze the talk that occurred during the shared reading and shared writing sessions in the classroom because they allowed for a description of both teacher and pupil talk as well as the participation patterns. The main features of talk that were looked at included, teacher questions, responses and feedback, pupil responses, the content of the talk, the development of talk and participation patterns with specific reference to turn-taking and topic maintenance.

The Speech Act framework is the most suitable to deal with the key research question in this study, namely, “what is the nature of the talk and how is it used during shared reading and shared writing”. As Sinclair & Coulthard (1975), Khoo (1988) and Nunan (1994) point out it is the best means of capturing both teacher and pupil talk and allow for a description of the interaction that takes place in the classroom.

However, since the Speech Act framework only allows for a description of the nature of the talk that takes place in the classroom and does not consider the sociocultural dimension of that talk, information derived from the interviews,



the activity logs and the documents was used to describe adult-child talk practices at home. Research has shown that sociocultural views of literacy, focussing on practice “are more useful in attaining common ground” (Anstey & Bull, 1996:153). The sociocultural framework provides for a documentation of literacy events and practices and was first used by Heath (1983). It has since been used by many researchers (Breen et al, 1994; Anstey & Bull, 1994; Barton & Ivanic, 1991). The sociocultural documentation will elucidate practices of talk and literacy, with particular reference to reading and writing, which were specific to the families in this study. It thus makes it possible to identify similar practices within ethnic groups. This sociocultural description together with the speech act framework will provide an important link between home and school practices of talk, reading and writing (Handel, 1992; Morrow & Paratore, 1993; Myers 1992; Breen et al, 1994; Cairney, 1994). It would also enable curriculum planners to be aware of and informed about sociocultural practices which may influence the teaching and learning of English in the school context. It would thus allow for the integration of school and community literacy practices. The sociocultural documentation of adult-child talk patterns at home and the types of reading-writing practices engaged in by the families will help explain the type of talk occurring during shared reading and shared writing in the classroom. It will thus help identify the relationship between home and school talk patterns.

To describe and understand the use of talk in literacy acquisition, I focused on the Shared Reading and Shared Writing lessons in the classroom and parent-child talk in the homes of the focal pupils from the three different cultures.



**This main source of data was supplemented by the interviews and relevant documents.**

**The data analysis will first describe the occurrence and use of talk during the shared reading and shared writing as captured in the audio-recordings. The teacher interviews and questionnaires will elucidate the type of talk that was occurring. The second part of the analysis will present profiles of the families. The classroom data will be analyzed for the following -**

- 1        the type of talk within the speech event  
          (shared book reading and shared writing lessons), and**
- 2        participation patterns.**

**The profiles of pupils will provide information on the aspirations, expectations and family activities. This will also show the occurrence and type of reading and writing activities and more particularly, the type of adult-child talk taking place in each of the homes. The description obtained will assist in explaining the use of talk in the shared reading and shared writing lessons.**

### **IMPLEMENTING THE DESIGN**

**This study took place in three second grade classrooms in a Singapore primary school. This school was chosen because of my familiarity with it, having been there for three months, supervising a teacher in training. In addition to that, the principal was amenable to educational research and the teachers were receptive to the idea of research in language teaching.**



## **A Description of the School**

For reasons of confidentiality, the real name of the school will not be used. Throughout this study the school will be referred to as Singapore Primary School. The school is situated in a fairly large middle-income public housing estate and the pupils in the school come from this housing estate. The composition of the pupils in the school reflects the population make-up of the housing estate it serves. It is therefore, a fairly typical Singapore school and is representative of the average neighbourhood school in Singapore. It is a co-educational, multi-racial school of 2,400 students with a staff strength of 90. The Chinese comprise the largest ethnic group.

The school was officially opened at its present site in 1985. It is forty years old. Today, Singapore Primary School is perceived as a top school, well sought after and respected by the residents of the constituency. Parents have been known to queue overnight to ensure a place in the school for their children. The school is located in a new town which proudly houses many new amenities and, because of its sheer size, is divided into two constituencies. It is within minutes drive of some excellent recreational and educational attractions such as a Bird Park, a Chinese Garden and a Science Centre. It also boasts of many modern shopping centres and entertainment facilities. It has a modern, well-equipped public library and sports stadium. Five primary schools and four secondary schools are located within this new neighbourhood. It is also one of the first to have a modern polyclinic and a retirement home for the aged. It is the only new town that enjoys the natural beauty of a hill, which has become a tourist attraction in



recent years.

### **The School Set-up**

The school has three floors and a small courtyard in the centre. This has been converted into an eco-garden which houses poultry, plants and a pond. Pupils in the upper primary levels visit the garden for some of their science lessons.

A second eco-garden was set up in 1993 to attract aquatic life for pupils to have a first-hand experience in studying pond life. Plants related to the Primary Science Syllabus are planted in the garden for pupils to observe, study and experiment. Pupils also plant vegetables and plants related to the syllabus. Plants are also grown by hydroponics.

The bookshop, canteen, staff room, principal's office, printing room and six junior classrooms (Grades 1 and 2) are housed on the first level. The second level comprises the hall, library, nine classrooms and two audio-visual rooms. The second language rooms are on the third level. A large, open, concrete space between the canteen and the staff room, fronted by the Principal's office, is used for short assemblies and class gatherings after the recess breaks. The bookshop sells only stationery and school textbooks. The canteen, equipped with long benches and tables has stalls selling a variety of food. No snacks are allowed to be sold in the canteen. The new principal who took over in December, 1994, has striven towards educating the stall holders to sell healthy food. Therefore, fried foods and aerated drinks are banned in the canteen. The principal emphasizes the need to have a balanced diet of greens and fruits. The school has a small,



open field which is used for physical education lessons. The absence of a proper field together with the hot and humid weather means that most pupils do not play during the recess break. Since the school faces a very busy road, the gates are usually kept closed and monitored by prefects during recess. This proximity to a busy road and the construction of a home for the aged next to the school, mean a tremendous amount of noise which can interfere with classroom talking. Although this is a common feature of many schools in Singapore which are located near or on busy traffic junctions, the noise pollution faced by Singapore Primary School is exaggerated by the constant flow of heavy vehicles during peak hours (9am-3pm). The teachers seem to have become accustomed to the noise and generally talk very loudly in the classroom. Close by, the school is surrounded by large blocks of Housing and Development Board (HDB) apartments on one side, and low-rise HDB shop/houses on the other.

The school as a whole is painted white with blue doors. Pictures and names of teaching staff, the school advisory board, and a large plaque bearing the names of former students, who have been recognized for their academic or extra-curricular contributions to the school are prominently displayed.

At the covered entrance to the school is a long bulletin board displaying students' writing in the four languages. Along the corridor, leading to the classrooms, is a bulletin board with mathematical brain teasers. Outside the staff room is a long, glass cabinet, stretching the full length of the staff room, carrying various art and craft pieces done by students. These are clearly labelled in English and kept locked. The space under the stairs, next to the



canteen has four, low, student tables with six chairs each. This is used by students to do either project work or homework while waiting for after-school activities to begin.

Given the rectangular shape of the school building, the classrooms are located all round the courtyard. The air-conditioned teachers' staff room, which includes a lounge annexe with teaching resources for the various subjects kept in locked cupboards, has drawered desks in classroom style. The staff room is very congested and leaves little room for movement. The four Heads of Departments and the Sports Head occupy another smaller room to the left of the main staff room. The school library was recently computerized with the help of a new member of staff.

### **School Population**

The school has a student population of 2,400 and professional staff of 90. It is a double-session school (almost all primary schools are double-session with the exception of a few) with classes from Grade One to Grade Six. Students in Grade One enter school at six years and complete Grade Six at age eleven or twelve.

Primary Ones, Threes and Fives are in the afternoon while the Primary Twos, Fours and Sixes are in the morning. Years Four and Six are major examination years, and it is felt that morning sessions give students time after school for homework and additional coaching. The morning session begins at 7.25am and ends at 12.50pm daily, five days a week. The afternoon session commences at



**12.55pm and ends at 6.15pm.**

**Saturday mornings are used for extra-curricula activities, remedial lessons and extra lessons for examination classes. Students in the morning session assemble in the car park daily before proceeding to class. Afternoon session students assemble in the concrete space in front of the Principal's office before going to their respective classes. This assembled time is used for making brief and urgent announcements pertaining to school activities, usually games. Students in the morning sessions, raise the State flag, sing the National Anthem, and say their pledge daily during this time. Afternoon session students gather daily in the car park at 6.10pm for the flag-lowering ceremony. These sessions are cancelled only if it rains. Formal assembly, where the Principal and Vice-Principal talk to the children, is held on Monday for half an hour. The talks focus on moral values and include topics on courtesy, honesty, punctuality, tolerance, consideration, loyalty and concern for others.**

**There were about seven classes at Grade Two level with each class comprising between forty and forty-two students. The number of classes at each level reflects the size of the school-going cohort of children born in any particular year. For example, the school had to increase the number of Primary One classes in the 1994 registration exercise because the more than 50,000 children born in 1988 (Census of Population, 1990), an auspicious Dragon Year in the Lunar Calendar, far outstripped the usual number born in other years. So, all primary schools in Singapore were requested to create additional classes and single session schools had to revert to double sessions. This was in addition to**



**new schools being built. The children at Singapore Primary School come from the three ethnic groups, the largest group being the Chinese.**

**Most of the children in Singapore Primary School come from middle-income households. 42% of them live in four room (three bedrooms and one living room) HDB flats. These flats were purchased from the Housing and Development Board (HDB is a government housing department under the Ministry of National Development) under the subsidized, home-ownership scheme. There are various designs and the new ones cost more, prices ranging from 170,000 Singapore dollars.**

**The occupational grouping of parents is as follows:<sup>1</sup>**

<b>White collar/Managerial</b>	<b>25.82%</b>
<b>White collar/non-Managerial</b>	<b>22.35%</b>
<b>Blue-collar/skilled</b>	<b>34.02%</b>
<b>Blue-collar/semi-skilled</b>	<b>2.43%</b>
<b>Blue-collar/unskilled</b>	<b>14.29%</b>
<b>Housewives</b>	<b>29%</b>

<sup>1</sup> **Figures obtained from the school principal**



30% of the mothers and 20% of the fathers have less than a secondary school education (ten years)<sup>2</sup>.

	<u>Fathers</u>	<u>Mothers</u>
Primary six and below	20%	30%
Secondary	59%	57%
A-level/Polytechnic Diploma	12%	8%
University	6%	2%

Ethnic languages are the common home languages with English being used only by about 26%<sup>3</sup>.

**Languages spoken at home:**

English and Mandarin	19.56%
English and Malay	3.92%
English and Tamil	2.79%
English and Dialects	1.58%
Mandarin and English	33.26%
Mandarin and dialects	8.11%
Malay and English	17.12%
Malay and Mandarin	0.05%
Tamil and English	2.75%

This compares well with national figures where English as the predominant household language (spoken) is 20%, with Chinese dialects at 38% and Mandarin at 23.7%<sup>4</sup>. 40 % of the 86% of Singaporeans in HDB flats live in four room flats. 45% of Singaporeans are in production and related work and 76% of the working population is in lower skill or unskilled employment. A large number of students attending the school take the public transport. The school

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<sup>2,3,4</sup> Figures obtained from the school principal



population, therefore, is a reflection of the average middle class background of many Singaporeans.

### **The School's Performance**

The school's vision as stated in the School Plan, 1994 is "to strive to become the top school in the constituency" and its mission is to be "loved and respected by the community for nurturing and developing citizens of honour and distinction in their life-long careers". Singapore Primary School is considered a good school, having produced bilingual winners at the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). The PSLE results have been better than the national average level (90%). The school has had consistently good results from 1988. In 1989-92 it exceeded 95% overall passes (national average 90-94%). In the 1988-1992 period, PSLE passes in English was above 95%, the year 1991 scoring a 100% pass rate.

Percentage passes in Chinese and Tamil, for 1991-1993, were 100% and 97% respectively. The Malay PSLE results were not available, although 80% of the cohort obtained A's (above 91 marks) and As (above 75 marks). Percentage passes in Mathematics at PSLE improved tremendously from 72% in 1990 to 95.3% in 1993. The School's Self Appraisal Report (1993) pointed out that the percentage of passes for the 1993 PSLE Science was 86.8% as against the national level of 88.09%. The school is keen to improve its percentage passes in English, Mathematics and Science further. Comprehension seemed to be an



area of weakness in all languages taught and in Science. Weaker pupils, the School Self-Appraisal Report said, “find difficulty in expressing the outcome of their experiments”. “Pupils are not observant enough because of the lack of experience with nature” (1995:38). This was attributed to the fact that the majority of pupils lived in flats.

With a committed, professional staff ensuring that students perform consistently well in their school career, the school has gained a reputation for academic excellence. Parents in the study, and others I met in school, felt that it is a good school with a high academic standard and were prepared to do what they could to ensure their children’s academic success.

### **School Plan**

In addition to guidelines from the Ministry of Education, the school draws up its own plan annually. This formal plan spells out the school’s policy, its formula for success, targets to be achieved for each subject including extra-curricular activities (ECA), the time frame needed, the resources needed and the projected performance targets.

Another guide to the school’s performance is its Self-Appraisal Report. This report, published in 1993 and 1995, by the school, lists its achievements, targets and overall information on the academic and extra-curricular activities of the school.



## **Reading in the School**

**The school has a number of on-going programmes aimed at developing pupils' reading skills. SAB (Share A Book), and USSR (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading) were aimed at generating interest in reading. The target groups were the Upper Primary pupils. The Self-Appraisal Report states that pupils read books in the class library as well as the Central Library. Pupils, it stated, had become more aware of the types of books which they read and had developed the habit of collecting their own books. The school also organized sales of books by outside book vendors. These books consisted largely of popular fiction and local writings and were not usually screened for their linguistic or content quality. The reading cove set up below the stairs, near the canteen, was stocked with old, discarded books for pupils to read. Pupils were encouraged to read in English as well as the ethnic languages. Chinese pupils were required to borrow a Chinese library book for every visit to the Central Library. From Primary Three onwards, all Chinese pupils are required to keep a record of the Chinese books read for teachers to check regularly ( School Plan,1993:15). A period was allotted During the Chinese language lesson for Primary One and Two pupils to read Chinese books borrowed from the school library. Chinese pupils in P3-P6 were required to read Chinese library books every Friday during the USSR session. As far as the Tamil language went, pupils purchased individual copies of the monthly Tamil magazine and the Tamil daily (Self-Appraisal Report,**



1993). Primary One and Two pupils also had a library corner in the Tamil classroom to encourage their reading of Tamil books. Information on the reading activities for Malay children was not available.

### **Writing Activities in School**

The lower primary pupils were involved in writing through the Language Experience Approach. In addition to the class dictated stories, pupils also engage in group writing. Individual writing related to Course worksheets and were largely of a comprehension or penmanship nature. Process writing was implemented at the Upper Primary levels. However, it was pointed out that “weaker pupils were unable to cope with the number of drafts that they had to write ...and it was suggested that this be varied according to class ability” (Self Appraisal Report, 1993:4). Good penmanship was the writing target for pupils in Primary One and Primary Two (School Plan 1994:4).

With regard to the ethnic languages, Chinese pupils were said to be weak in “constructing meaningful sentences” in Mandarin so it was suggested that they be given regular practice in sentence construction (School Plan 1994:5). In 1993, the percentage passes for this component at Primary Two level was 80%. Pupils contributed articles to the Chinese newspaper and these have been selected for publication in the Young Writers’ Page (Chinese daily). Tamil pupils participated in various Essay Writing competitions, organised by the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation and other community organisations. Pupils from Primary Four to Primary Eight Extended, were taught editing skills through process writing. Their writing skills had, therefore, improved with fewer errors



**found in their compositions (Self-Appraisal Report, 1993:21).**

### **School's Major Concern in Language Teaching**

**The school's major concern centres around the teaching of comprehension skills. Regardless of language, this has been pointed out as the major area of weakness (Self-Appraisal Report, 1993). The report on the teaching of English language said that pupils were especially weak in "answering free response questions" and that pupils should be "exposed to the processes involved in reading a text and using inferential and evaluative skills" (1993:4). Effective questioning and varied activities and tasks were seen to be able to solve this problem (1993:4).**

**Primary Two pupils were noted to be especially weak in the Oral and Written (Composition) components of English as reflected in their examination performance. Improvement in Chinese pupils' comprehension of text (Chinese), it was felt, could be achieved through more exposure to reading and understanding as well as through varied activities and effective questioning.**

**Comprehension skills in Tamil, the report said could be reinforced, through the use of more comprehension worksheets (1993:22). Expressing themselves clearly and understanding and responding to texts which require higher-order thinking skills, seemed to be a particular problem encountered by pupils. As Mathematics and Science are also taught in English, the difficulty discussed above will affect pupil performance in these subject areas as well. In fact, it was pointed out that weak pupils have difficulty in expressing the outcome of the**



science experiments which they do (1993:38).

In summarizing the school's area of concern in English language teaching and learning, it can be said that both reading and writing are perceived and taught as school or examination skills. Penmanship in writing appears more important than purpose in writing and meaningful writing. Reading programmes tended to be passive in nature - silent personal reading - as opposed to discussing reading or information derived from the text. Although the school's unit plans for each level emphasized the integration of skills, talking seemed to be neglected. Listening was mentioned and 90% of the upper primary classes were said to have used the language laboratory in 1993. It is significant to note that this high percentage of use of the language laboratory by the teachers was for listening comprehension lessons - highly structured, fairly passive tasks which kept pupils orderly. Listening comprehension is also a component in the English language examination. The school's plan for 1994 for the teaching of English did not mention spoken language development. This may be the outcome of an examination which is focused almost entirely on reading-writing skills. The absence of explicit reference to talk in the curriculum planning at the school level may also point to the unstated perception of the role of talk in learning and the general belief that language and literacy acquisition can be achieved through reading and writing alone.



## **The Primary Two Classes**

### **Physical Context**

The study focused on three primary two classes. Two of the classes were situated on the second level, while one was at the first level. All classrooms had a louvred window on the right and two entrances at each end of the room, separated by a row of louvred windows on the left. All three classrooms overlooked the school car park on the right and the eco-garden on the left. All three classrooms were used by Primary One pupils in the afternoon. On the left and back of the classrooms were rows of cupboards about four feet high, which were used by the teachers to store pupils' books and other teaching resources. Classroom A and B had a number of story books placed on top of the cupboard, at the back of the room. These books were in fairly good condition and were there for the duration of my study. Although they were not arranged as in a display, they were placed fairly neatly. The books, numbering between fifteen and twenty, were fairly simple and below the reading age level of many pupils. Classroom C, on the first level, had a neat, locked shelf for the story books. Referred to as the class library, the books were arranged neatly for display. They, too, were in fairly good condition and generally below most pupils' reading levels. On several occasions, this library of books remained locked. In all three classrooms, pupils were never seen to borrow or browse through the books which were on display. All classrooms were equipped with an overhead projector and had a teacher's table on the right of the room. The pupils were seated on low tables and chairs. The students sat in groups in an L-shaped



seating arrangement on either side of the room. The centre of the room from behind the teacher's table was left empty. This space was used when the teacher wanted all pupils to be gathered in front of her, on the floor, for the shared reading and shared writing sessions. Otherwise, the children were seated in groups of six and there were about six/seven groups in all. The groupings were of mixed-ability and for the duration of my study, the pupils remained in their groups. There was no movement across groups for different activities or as a result of improvement in particular abilities or areas of learning. Each group had a leader, who was responsible for collecting and distributing handouts and maintaining a sense of order and silence. When children were engaged in group work, those sitting in front, facing the blackboard, turned their chairs around.

The classrooms were generally neat, with classroom C being decorated with various learning charts, information bulletins and samples of pupils' work. All displays had been put up by the afternoon session, Primary One teacher. No display of the Primary Two pupils' work was on display. In Classrooms A and B, there were displays of pupils' group writing. These were pegged to a rope which ran the full length of the windows on either side of the rooms. The writings on teacher-assigned topics were written on mahjong paper (white paper cut into vanguard sheet sizes). Some had colourful illustrations accompanying the writing. Evidence of teachers' corrections of errors in red ink were clearly visible.



## **Daily Lessons**

**All three teachers met their pupils daily for English and Mathematics lessons. These lessons were usually held in the first half of the morning. Each Primary Two class had fifteen periods of thirty minutes duration per week for English, thirteen periods for second language, seven for Mathematics, one period each for library and Health Education, two periods each for Music and Art and three periods each for Physical Education and Moral Education. This meant a total of forty-seven periods, over about twenty-six hours weekly, for five days. Most of the English lessons were double periods, (one hour duration). The English lessons either preceded or followed the Mathematics lesson. The teachers, therefore, were in class on some days for a length of two hours (except when the lessons are broken up by the twenty minutes recess break).**

**Recess break was from 9.40am to 10.00am. All children had to assemble outside their respective classrooms and wait for the teachers to lead them down to the canteen. The teachers demanded absolute silence and straight line queues of the children before taking them down. Threats of missing recess were used occasionally when pupils were noisy or took time to line up. Teacher C required her pupils to place their index fingers on their lips before she allowed them to walk down to the canteen. All pupils had to assemble on the front porch of the school five minutes before the bell signalled the end of recess and be led in an orderly manner, by their respective subject teachers, to their classes. This 'assembly' time is also used to make announcements regarding lost items and**



**other school activities.**

### **Discipline**

**Whenever too many pupils were talking or the classroom became too noisy Teacher C would place her index finger over her lips and pupils would immediately follow on cue. She would then warn them that she would not continue with the lesson unless they behaved/paid attention. Teachers A and B generally had the pupils' attention most of the time and, on occasions when the class became too noisy, would raise their voices, reprimanding the pupils for making noise.**

**The design of the classrooms, their facing a busy road, and the construction of a home for the aged next door meant a high level of noise throughout the day. Teacher B had a very loud voice and very often could be heard in the car park downstairs.**

### **The Teachers**

**The three teachers in this study come from the three main ethnic communities in Singapore, namely Chinese, Malay and Indian. They had been in Singapore Primary School from between two to five years. Teacher A was 35 years, Teacher B, 35 years and Teacher C, 25 years old. The fact that all three teachers taught at Grade Two level enabled some comparisons to be made. The three teachers taught English, Mathematics and Health Education in their**



classes and were also the respective form teachers. Art, music and physical education were taught by other specialist teachers.

All three teachers varied in their conduct of the lessons. Teachers A and B were prompt to enter class and, if they were already there because of an earlier lesson, were always on task. Teacher C was often late for class, sometimes as much as fifteen minutes, and would generally take time to commence her lessons. On several occasions, I had been in class for fifteen minutes before she arrived. She never explained to the pupils her reasons for being late. On one occasion, she did not turn up for an entire period (although my visit was scheduled by her) and the pupils were left to their own means. In classes A and B, the pupils were never left unattended. They were always kept busy with some task. In Class C, very often the pupils were left off-task, either because they finished a set exercise fast or the teacher had not commenced her lesson. Some (about three) pupils read books they had brought from home whenever the teacher was late.

### **The Pupils**

All pupils were selected after and in consultation with their respective class teachers. The class teachers established the initial contact for me by telephoning the parents, explaining the purpose of my research and getting their consent for home interviews. This was necessary to reassure the parents that my visits were not aimed at evaluating their abilities or the result of their children's poor performance or bad behaviour in school. Most Singapore parents hold teachers



in very high regard and are suspicious of any school-arranged visit, perceiving them negatively. The teacher's initial contact not only helped with my interviews but also made it easier to access pupils' assistance when clarifications were needed.

Each class had thirty-eight pupils. In Class A, there were fifteen boys and twenty-three girls. In Class B, there were ten boys and twenty-eight girls, and in Class C there were nine boys and twenty-nine girls. They were all about eight years old. In Class A, there were three Indians, three Malays and the rest were Chinese. In Class B, there were two Indians, three Malays, with the rest being Chinese. Class C had three Malays, two Indians and the rest Chinese. Most of the pupils came from the same housing estate, close to the school, or from another housing estate, fairly near. All the pupils had been in their respective classes since Primary One and have had the same class teachers for two years. The exception was Class C which had another teacher for the first five months of Primary One. Their current teacher had been with them for one and a half years. All the focal children in this study had attended a year of Pre-primary in the same school when the scheme was introduced in 1992. At the time of the study, they had been in school for three years and were therefore familiar with the school's aspirations and expectations.

For the study, one pupil from each ethnic group was chosen for each of the three classes. The final sample therefore had three Chinese, three Malay and four



Indian pupils. All the ten pupils selected were nominated by the teacher to respond to questions during shared book reading and class dictated story sessions or volunteered responses. Their names were thus familiar to me. They were also group leaders in their respective classrooms. Parents' willingness to participate in the study was considered crucial because practices and perception of talk and talking to learn was to be derived through interviews and observations of the pupils' homes. Parents had to, therefore, be willing to give of their time and share experiences of literacy practices they engaged in with their children at home.

From each Grade Two class, after three weeks of observation and with the teachers' assistance, I made a preliminary selection of six pupils for the study. Initially, the pupils were selected on the basis of their participation during class discussions or when nominated by the teacher to answer a question. The six students from each class belonged to different ethnic groups. From this initial cohort of eighteen pupils, I made a final choice (after observing three more lessons) of three pupils from each class. This final selection was guided by the pupils' ethnicity and teacher nomination.

### **ISSUES RELATED TO IMPLEMENTING THE DESIGN**

A major difficulty related to the maintenance of objectivity in collecting data for the study. Collecting data in 'naturalistic' settings such as classrooms is generally problematic. Because the participants are young children, their



attitudes, expectations, experiences and beliefs tend to change according to their perceptions of the situations they are in and the participants they are interacting with in the context. Their responses and the nature of those responses may be affected by the presence of an outsider in the classroom. Their perception of the teacher-visitor relationship may also affect their nature of interaction with the teacher in the classroom. Their perception of the post-lesson interviews may have been influenced by their perception of the researcher as another teacher and therefore one who is there to 'test' them, whatever they said would be 'evaluated' and they had to put on their 'best' behaviour. Although this was controlled to the best possible extent by chatting with the children about general things such as their favourite television programmes and weekend activities, the formality of the school context may have had an effect.

The nature of talk occurring during the shared reading and shared writing lessons in the classrooms was recorded verbatim regularly over a period of time. This would have ensured that the children were talking as 'naturally' as possible within the classroom and cultural constraints of talk. For it would be difficult for the pupils to maintain a mode of talk that they are not accustomed to, over a long period of time.

A second difficulty was in selecting the pupils for the study. In the case of the Indian and Malay pupils there was limited selection to be made. In all three classrooms there were only two Indian pupils each. Of these, one pupil in



Classroom A and another in Classroom B could not be accessed because the parents were not willing to be interviewed. This therefore made available only one Indian pupil each from Classrooms A and B. The two Indian pupils in Classroom C were used in the data collection - one as a standby, in case there were difficulties in accessing the other pupil or family. Class A had two Malay pupils, Classes B and C had three Malay pupils each. The first Malay pupil in Class A who was a spontaneous participant during shared reading and writing lessons had to be left out mid-way through the study when the mother could not be contacted for the home observations, because of family problems. But, fortunately because similar procedural and observation notes had been kept on the other Malay pupil, the data collection was not unduly affected. It did prolong the period over which the home observations and parent interviews could be conducted. In Class B, of the three Malay pupils, only one was accessible because one pupil's parents could not be contacted while the other pupil's parents were not keen on the home observations despite conceding to be interviewed. In Class C, of the three Malay pupils, one parent said 'no' to being interviewed, while another, despite agreeing to the first interview, could not be contacted for subsequent interviews.

The selection of the Chinese pupils was relatively easier. Of the three pupils in this study, two pupils participated spontaneously in talk during shared reading and shared writing sessions, while the third pupil (Class A) was frequently nominated by the teacher. Because of the need to describe parent-child talk at



home, the inaccessibility to some homes limited the choice of pupils available for the study.

A third issue related to the interpretation of teachers' comments on their lessons, on the pupils and the nature of their participation, and the pupils' and parents' statements. Interpretation of participants' responses based on the researcher's seemingly shared understanding would have been a major cause for bias. The researcher, therefore, made a conscious attempt to be aware of this difficulty by recording participants' comments verbatim and not assigning explanations except where they were provided by the participants.

A fourth issue related to the teachers' conduct of the lessons. Although the teachers were told not to make any special arrangements or organization to their conduct of the lessons, the regular visits, the presence of audio and video recorders and the observation notes that were being made, followed by post-lesson interviews and clarification of lesson objectives and pupil participation, may have impacted on the flow and nature of talk that occurred in the three classrooms.

Despite these constraints, the researcher's role as an observer in the background contributed to the study. The researcher's non-participation in the lessons allowed the objective recording of the occurrence of talk in the classroom. The talk that pupils engaged in was, thus, the result of teacher talk rather than due



to the researcher's participation in the lessons. Not being part of the conversation meant that the talk that was occurring in the classroom reflected the 'normal' communication/interaction patterns in that classroom.

Another factor was that the researcher not being directly a part of the interactional context also meant that clarifications could be sought from all the involved participants. The non-participant stance of the researcher also meant that notes could be kept on matters relating to the talk that the teachers and pupils were engaged in. This would help in the analysis of the classroom talk that was recorded.

### **INTERPRETATION OF THE ISSUES RELATED TO THE OCCURRENCE OF TALK**

Any interpretation of classroom talk is problematic. How teachers organize classroom talk, their stated intentions, actual occurrence of talk, the form it takes and the nature of pupils' participation through talk are all influenced by internal and external variables. None of these are static. They are constantly changing in response to participants' interpretation of the context, expectations and experiences.

In addition to this, the cultural orientations to talk will further impinge on its occurrence/non-occurrence and the form it takes. The presence of three different cultures in the context makes the interpretation complex as well as interesting.



The social context and culture play an important role in determining the type, duration and occurrence of talk (Gumperz, 1991). How pupils and teachers interpret and perceive talk and its role in learning is as much culturally influenced as it is contextually determined (Freebody et al, 1995, 1993; Luke, 1992; Au, 1981; Heath, 1982). While talk itself may be interpreted, discerning reasons for its occurrence and non-occurrence is complex because these very often have to be deduced through interviews with the participants, and their statements accepted as fairly accurate interpretations of the factors determining its use. The observation of contextual features that have a bearing on the talk are themselves subject to interpretation.

The use of various sources of information-documents, parent interviews, interviews with community representatives, pupil logs and interviews, observations and verbatim recordings ensured that the interpretation of the factors that facilitated/hindered the use of talk during shared reading-writing lessons was well triangulated.

The analysis of talk was based on the notion of speech acts which featured in the talk during shared reading and shared writing lessons in the three classrooms. This analysis will thus follow Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) and Halliday's (1977) pedagogical structure of a lesson, defined as a transaction, expressed in terms of exchanges. While the verbal classroom talk will be analyzed in terms of



speech acts, the parents' and pupils' practices of talk at home will be based on a sociocultural framework documenting practices of talk, reading, writing and other family activities. These will be obtained from the interviews, activity logs and audio-recordings or shared reading (done by some of the parents).

A number of factors will determine both the type and nature of talk that occurs in the shared reading and shared writing lessons. The profiles of the teachers and pupils will help elucidate the type of talk that occurred during the shared reading and shared writing lessons in the classroom. The analysis of talk during shared reading and shared writing in the classroom will then be matched with the home practices of talk to identify features which may or may not facilitate shared talk during the reading and writing lessons in the classroom.

## **Summary**

This chapter documented my approach to the ethnographic study of talk during shared reading and shared writing in three Primary Two classrooms in Singapore. The participants in the study, the context of the study and the reasons for adopting various approaches in the collection of relevant data pertaining to the use of talk during shared reading and shared writing lessons in the classroom and home talk practices were described. Some of the issues related to undertaking ethnographic research in Singapore were also explained. The chapter also described the framework within which the collected data would be analyzed.



## **CHAPTER 6**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

#### **CLASSROOM TALK**

As the review of literature in Chapter Two showed, numerous studies have looked at the occurrence of talk in the classroom. Many of them, have focused on the frequency and duration of teacher-talk or looked at peer talk during group work. Studies by Freebody (1995), Luke (1995), Malcolm (1979), Philips (1972) and Au (1980) have surveyed the learners' culture in the use of talk during literacy lessons. These studies had, as subjects, learners for whom English was a native or second language. As pointed out in the introduction, the learners in this study occupy quite a unique position in that they are learning English as a first language, although it is not their mother tongue.

This chapter places talk within the context of shared literacy lessons in the primary classroom in Singapore. This takes place during the Shared Book and Class Dictated lessons. The reason for this limited focus is that, given the English language curriculum for the lower primary classes in Singapore, opportunities for engaging in talk with the teacher are often only possible during the shared reading and shared writing lessons. The remaining time periods in the English language classroom are usually spent on individual written work which revolves around completing prescribed worksheets. The analysis of talk during the English lessons is best seen within the



framework of the English Language Syllabus at the lower primary level (presented in Chapter 4:189-203). The chapter is divided into three parts. The first, presents the profiles of the three teachers in this study and analyses the data to describe the occurrence and nature of talk during the shared literacy lessons in the three classrooms. The second, presents the profiles of the ten focal pupils in this study. The third part describes the patterns and practices of talk in the homes of the children in this study.

Classroom talk is a very highly researched area. A great deal of the research has focused on teacher talk (Hymes, 1972; Cazden, 1987; Mehan, 1979). Flanders (1970), the pioneer of interaction analysis research, who has looked at talk in the classroom, points out that in the typical American classroom, 68 per cent of the talk is teacher talk, 20 per cent is pupil talk and 12 per cent is lost in silence and confusion. The cultural assumption in many classrooms is that teachers must talk. And a teacher who chooses to remain silent has abrogated her role. Delamont (1982), dissecting teacher talk, states that 40 per cent of teaching acts fall into what Hughes called the "controlling" category - teachers rarely expand student ideas or respond personally to them. That teachers monopolize classroom talk and that the nature of teacher talk does little for pupil learning has been established in numerous studies.

Pupil talk in conventional classrooms is a rare phenomenon. If there is 70 per cent teacher talk and 20 per cent pupil talk in the "typical" 40 minute period, the teacher has 25 minutes and pupils 8. (Delamont, 1982 : 123)



However, with the increased focus on learners and learners' needs in the last two decades, new pedagogic approaches have been introduced into the English language classroom, particularly at the primary level. These pedagogies have shifted the paradigm towards learner-centredness and inevitably, the role of the home and the learner's culture loom as significant players in the implementation of this paradigm. It would be interesting, therefore, to find out if the nature of classroom talk remains weighted towards the teacher. For although paradigms may have shifted and learner-centred pedagogies have been introduced into the Singapore classroom, the number of pupils in each classroom remains large. This static classroom size may have an impact on the implementation of new pedagogies.

An important feature of the new pedagogies is to encourage learners to use the language they are learning. The provision of experiences to talk about, the immersion in the language being learnt, the modelling, the positive encouragement given and the general participation that is generated, is aimed at creating a nurturing environment for the young learner to use the language. What accompanies this is a talk curriculum where the four macro skills of reading, writing, listening and talking are woven into a connected web through themes.

All this is guided by the underlying value of talk in the language curriculum to promote learners' understanding and to evaluate their learning. Much of this is now widely documented. But the time allocated to such talk, given the realities of the classroom, varies. Interactive spoken language is a powerful means of learning.



**And it is a vital tool for learning when children are still in the process of acquiring language and becoming literate. It resembles the way language is used in some homes and families, when the information being communicated takes centre stage. The characteristic features of such talk are incomplete units, occasional errors, overlapping contributions, interruptions and vocal fill-ins of an adult. Such language is tentative and exploratory. In addition to creating familiarity and therefore continuity of communication, talk during shared reading and shared writing provides a supporting and encouraging framework for pupils to acquire both language and skills, and opens the lines of communication between teacher and pupils.**

**In discussing talk, it is important to bear in mind the relationship between teacher, pupil, knowledge base and questioning strategy. Teacher questions play an important function in generating such talk in the reading-writing classroom.**

**Barnes (1976) shows that teachers' use of open questions was limited and that teachers were always checking for information and hardly ever made genuine requests for information. Yet, talk is a means of representing the world. It is through talk that pupils formulate their sense of the world. It is through encouraging pupils to talk that the teacher gains an insight into the pupils' concept of the world and their experiences. This information is crucial for the teacher to ensure new learning is made comprehensible and possible and to map it on to existing knowledge. Barnes stresses that "until a child has**



acquired powers of verbal thinking, it is only by actual speaking that the interpretative process can function for him. Eventually his talking, reading, writing and thinking all contribute to it" (1976 : 74). Barnes' argument makes sense if we acknowledge that given an unfamiliar context or concept, a child may need to talk about it because in talking through it, he may refine his understanding of the concept or obtain assistance from peers and teachers to fine tune his understanding of the concept or experience. Moreover, exploring the experience aloud also assists in the acquisition of language.

The PETS Teacher's Handbook 2A states that when pupils are listening to stories being told or read aloud, teachers must "...encourage them to -

- \* visualize the people, objects and events in a story.
  - \* see patterns and relationships.
  - \* add on or make up details for a story.
  - \* evaluate people and stories"
- (1996:5)

All this is done in "short, enjoyable sessions aimed at maximizing opportunities for close teacher-pupil interaction" (PETS Teachers Handbook 2A 1996:6). This guideline clearly underlines the important role of talk in listening to a story. As for shared writing, the aim is to provide -



**opportunities for composing and writing sentences and longer texts and for helping children see the relationship between reading and writing. Young children will need guidance on ideas, vocabulary, spelling and handwriting.  
(PETS Teacher's Handbook 2A, 1996:10)**

**In writing the Class Dictated Story, the teacher "selects an activity which will provide children with the ideas or shared experience to talk about a topic" and then "asks carefully framed questions to elicit responses from the class which will be recorded as the Class Dictated Story" (PETS Teacher's Handbook 2A, 1996:10).**

**These guidelines on shared reading and shared writing place a premium on talk for literacy acquisition. When pupils visualize the people or events in a story or comment on patterns, details and relationships, they are engaging in talk of an exploratory nature, because their talk is tentative and punctuated by hesitations and pauses. The teacher, on the other hand, in encouraging the pupils to respond to the characters and the events and in seeking evaluation, is also engaging in talk. It is during discussions and sharing of this nature that the teacher herself may explore the avenues opened up by the story. The lesson is conducted in such a manner that the learners do not perceive her as a threat - a teacher who knows all the answers to the questions she is asking and whose sole aim is to test their knowledge. Through encouraging pupils to share their ideas, feelings and experiences, she helps them to jointly construct the story being read or written.**



During the shared sessions, the talk that ensues has potential to generate much discussion and thinking on the part of the learners. But the vibrant nature of the talk and its continuity and rapidity of flow means that the learning that takes place may have to be amassed, classified and consolidated at the end of the session. This may be particularly necessary when the shared talk takes place in a second language many of the children are still in the process of learning. The Chinese and Indian teachers in this study felt that the absence of direct linking of the shared talk to the story resulted in many pupils not being able to answer the comprehension questions asked in the next session, on the same book. The absence of this consolidation may result in some learners not learning anything from that interaction.

While reading is aimed at generating reader response, writing is focused on ordering one's thoughts in a linear manner (PETS Teacher's Handbook 2A, 1996). The centrality of talk in the language classroom may be undisputed. But talking to learn is not a prerequisite in all cultures. As Street, (1994), Heath (1982) and Ong (1995) have shown, in some cultures a long period of observation precedes actual participation or involvement. Children from such cultures may be culturally unfamiliar with the classroom requirements of talking to learn. Such children may then find themselves academically disadvantaged because their perception of learning does not match their teacher's or peers' perception of learning and participation. The question of such cultural mismatches arises in particular, when pedagogic approaches are transplanted



from one cultural context to another on the basis of their attributes and contextualized success.

## **PART ONE : TEACHER PROFILES AND CLASSROOM TALK**

The teacher profiles that follow provide an understanding of their experiences and practices of adult-child talk.

### **PROFILE OF TEACHER A**

Teacher A, of Punjabi ethnicity, is a mother of two very young children. She joined the Institute of Education after her 'A' levels to pursue the teacher training programme. She was trained to teach at the primary level and her two areas of specialization are English and Mathematics. She taught at another primary school for five years before joining this school in 1988. She also has gone through the specialized training for REAP (Reading and English Acquisition Programme) teachers conducted by the Ministry of Education. She is known in the school as a very hardworking teacher and parents have expressed very high regard for her. She was also the Primary Two level representative and has undertaken the task of preparing all the additional English worksheets for use by the other Primary Two English teachers. Her school responsibilities also include preparing materials for the Language Laboratory, producing audio tapes for the library and setting the Primary Five and Six Listening Comprehension Paper. She speaks Punjabi but does not consider herself fluent in the language. Her eight year old son is sent for



**weekend Punjabi classes so that he knows the culture. He does Malay as a second language in school and has a home tutor for the subject. She is very concerned about his second language grades and feels that he is struggling with the subject. She did not have the benefit of having books when she was young, but her father read to the family in English, from a young age. These were his books from India, the stories in many of which carried a moral at the end.**

**The reading she does now is largely related to the books she shares with her pupils in class and her children at home. Like other Singaporean parents, she is very involved with her children's education. This leaves her no time for pursuing any personal hobby. She teaches both her children and oversees their work. She checks on her son's performance in school by regularly contacting a teacher friend in the school. She teaches her daughter to read by reading her a story and then rewriting it in a simpler form on mahjong paper. This is pinned up in her daughter's room and she enjoys reading it whenever she wants to.**

**Teacher A said that the family usually spoke English at home. The children's grandparents on the paternal side communicate only in Punjabi, so the children are "very quiet" during the visits. The maternal grandparents communicate in English and the children are very close to them. They complain to the grandfather when they are punished. The children talk daily over the telephone to their maternal grandparents.**



**The teacher of Class (A) was very strict with issues relating to homework and general conduct. But she was always considerate and was prepared to listen to the pupils when necessary. She had tried very hard with a particularly weak pupil in her class (who could not read or write very well) by giving him extra help. However, the response of the parents left her feeling frustrated and helpless. This did not stop her from helping him with his work. The parents of the pupils in her class were full of praise for her, saying she was "very hardworking and understanding". Because Teacher A had a loud voice, the children were usually attentive in her class. Her instructions were very clear and pupils were informed about the time frame within which they had to work. When group work was assigned, the teacher walked around the class to assist pupils with problems they encountered. When it came to group writing, the better pupils tended to dominate by being the source of information and ideas or doing the writing task itself.**

#### **PROFILE OF TEACHER B**

**Teacher B, a Malaysian, is of Chinese ethnic origin and has been teaching in the school for eleven years. She has completed her 'A' levels and has a Certificate-In-Education from the Institute of Education. Her subject areas are English and Mathematics. She has specialist training in REAP. Her other duties in school include taking charge of Cadet Scouts and the Underachievers Programme. She speaks mainly English at home. Her husband speaks in Mandarin to the children because he is Chinese-educated.**



**She has two children aged eleven and seven years. Coming from a traditional family herself, she spoke a dialect at home. The family did not have any books and she hardly engaged in writing activities, other than doing school homework. She reads to her children in English.**

**Teacher B was strict and expected full attention from her pupils. She had the tendency, during class sharing, to dismiss the responses of pupils whom she thought were academically weak. She described a particular pupil as "always talking nonsense". The pupils got on well with each other with the better pupils dominating group written work and participating in oral interaction only when nominated by the teacher.**

#### **PROFILE OF TEACHER C**

**Teacher C, of Malay ethnic background did her training at the school and stayed on after that. She has done her 'A' levels and holds a Diploma in Education from the National Institute of Education. Her specialization subjects are English and Science. She has been in the school for two years. She is involved in the Malay society, and was very involved in the School's Hari Raya (Malay New Year) celebrations. She comes from a family of three. Her father is a clerk and her mother is a housewife. Her home language is Malay. As a child, she did not grow up with books at home and her parents were not engaged in reading to the children. As a child she remembers talking a great deal with her mother. She enjoys sewing. Her reading**



is confined to the books she shares in class . She has a five month old son and enjoys singing nursery rhymes to him.

Teacher C had certain established rules which she accessed whenever her pupils misbehaved. The usual perceived problem in this class was noise with several pupils talking at the same time. When this happened, the teacher would tell all pupils to place their index finger over their lips. The lesson came to a standstill until she had obtained absolute silence. This happened every shared reading lesson and language experience lesson which I observed. Many of the lessons appeared to be 'chaotic' because several pupils would respond at the same time. Many of the pupils used Singlish in responding to teacher questions. Very often, the responses did not seem to be relevant to the questions.

Pupils were aware of this but were using their turns as an opportunity to say something funny or to take a jibe at peers. During group writing, the class tended to be very noisy, with the better pupils, who were usually the group leaders, doing all the writing. The other pupils in the group would either be chatting or playing with each other. The teacher seemed to be oblivious to the noise generated during group work and tended to be busy doing something else or was out of the class. The pupils were generally not given a time frame for completing their work. This, in part, explained the pupils' apparent lack of focus and interest in assigned work. Some of the pupils in this class appeared to be very capable and seemed to find school work very boring.



**The data analysis that follows is aimed at:**

- 1 identifying the talk patterns in three shared reading and shared writing classrooms in a primary school in Singapore and**
- 2 describing the factors which influenced talk during shared reading and shared writing.**

**In writing the Class Dictated Story, the teacher is told to ask "carefully framed questions to elicit responses". To elicit 'acceptable' responses, the teacher must engage the students in talk. As learners formulate or reformulate their ideas and structure them, the teacher must facilitate tentative talk during the shared lessons. Also, if as the guidelines maintain "young children need guidance on ideas, vocabulary, spelling and handwriting", then talk by both learners and teacher is crucial during shared writing. The teacher needs to negotiate meaning and understanding of what pupils say and how they say it. She needs to scaffold to provide learners with a knowledge of writing - sequencing, organization, effect and interest. These necessitate her and the learners engaging in talk. Through exploring via talk the development of ideas and their presentation, learners can come to understand how written language functions and how they can appropriate it to convey their own meanings, agendas and purposes. This background sets the role of talk and its occurrence during the shared reading and shared writing lessons in the Primary Two classrooms. Speech acts that facilitate the occurrence and development of talk during shared literacy lessons will be the focus of this analysis. The details of the lessons and data collection have been presented in Chapter Five(pp.227-295)**



The analysis begins with the presentation of talk that took place during a shared reading session. All the lessons were analyzed and the data chunked on the basis of episodes. An episode is defined by topic change initiated by the teacher or the pupil. In the Shared Book lessons topic changes occurred when the teacher turned over to a new page to talk about the illustration or when the pupils extrapolated from the text to their own experiences. This sometimes resulted in topic shift. In the Class Dictated Story sessions, topic change was signalled by the teacher asking questions or engaging in talk that was aimed at eliciting the next sentence which will continue the story.

Teacher B is of Chinese ethnicity and has been with the class for more than a year. In the transcript below she is sharing a story from the book entitled "Granny". This book was written by a local writer who was part of the team which wrote the PETS teaching materials.

Teacher B:

T: Let's read now.

*"Granny" written by Suchen Christine Lim.  
Illustrated by Roy Foo.*

Let's look at the title page now.

Why is the little girl staring at the photograph? Why do you think the little girl is staring at the photograph?  
Gek Peng?

Gek Peng: She's looking at Granny's photo.

T: Do you think this little baby is her?

Ps (a few): Yes.



**T:** Okay, why? Why do you think she is looking at that?  
Hwee Li?

**Hwee Li:** Because she miss Granny.

**T:** Because she misses Granny. Why should she miss  
Granny? Where is Granny now? Where is Granny  
now?

**Ps:** (a few) Die.

**T:** Alicia.

**Alicia:** Granny is in China.

**T:** Alicia thinks Granny is in China. Granny is in China.  
Wei Meng.

**Wei Meng:** I think Granny has died.

**T:** Granny has passed away?

**Ps:** (a few) Yes.

**T:** Wei Meng thinks Granny has passed away.

**Ps:** (many pupils) Yes)

**Wei Meng:** No)

**T:** Alright, we will read to find out.

**T: (reads)** *"What are you buying Granny?"*  
*"I am buying black dates for a soup".*  
*If I drink the soup, will I be strong like Granny?"*  
*"Yes, you will".*

**T:** What is this place? Cheng Wei, what is this place?

**Cheng Wei:** (No response).

**T:** Have you been to such a place, Cheng Wei?

**Cheng Wei:** (Shakes his head).

**T:** Never? Never? Never?

**Ps:** (Laugh) Got.



**T:** What do you call this place? Yazir.

**Yazir:** Sin-seh.

**T:** Sin-seh. What is the correct word for the place?  
Gek Peng?

**Gek Peng:** Medicine shop.

**T:** That is a Chinese medicine shop. What can you buy from there? What can you buy from the Chinese medicine shop? Shaun?

**Shaun:** Buy Chinese things.

**T:** Like what?

**Shaun:** Chinese medicine.

**T:** Yoga, do you go to such a shop?

**Yoga:** No.

**T:** Why not? Why don't you go to the Chinese medicine shop?

**Yoga:** Because I am not a Chinese.

**T:** Oh, so you don't go at all? Siva? Siva, have you ever been to such a shop?

**Siva:** Yes.

**T:** Why? Why did you go there? Tell us. Who took you there? Shariffudin.

**Shariffudin:** Mother.

**T:** Why did you go there? Did you buy anything from there?

**Shariffudin:** No, just go and look.

**T:** Oh, just went in to have a look. I see. Hwee Li.

**Hwee Li:** Sell some soap.

**T:** Sell what?



**Hwee Li:** Sell soap.

**T:** Sell soap, ah? Oh, nowadays, some of the shops, they do sell those soaps, milk powder, besides Chinese medicine. Chia Hong.

**Chia Hong:** I ever went into Chinese medicine shop once.

**T:** Ya, what did you do there?

**Chia Hong:** I bought some herbs to improve my eyesight.

**T:** Oh, Chia Hong bought some herbs that will improve his eyesight. Did your eyesight improve?

**Chia Hong:** Ya.

**T:** Ya, oh, that's good. Will you continue to drink it?

**Chia Hong:** Ya.

The teacher began the session by reading the title of the book to be shared and the name of the illustrator. She adhered to the procedural development of shared book reading and drew the pupils' attention to the illustration on the cover of the book. This was done through a question which was then repeated. Following a second's pause, she then nominated a pupil to respond. When the pupil responded, the teacher moved on to another question. She then accepted this response and then restated her first question and nominated another pupil to answer. She then used the pupil's answer to frame another question. In framing a new question, she first repeated the pupil's answer to an earlier question. This acted as a confirmation that the answer was right. On two occasions within this short episode, the teacher turned the pupil's response into a question. When the pupils disagreed over an answer, she decided to return to the text to find out.



In the second episode, the teacher asked clarification questions which were aimed at finding out the pupils' understanding of words and content knowledge - "What is the place called?" "What can you buy from there?" The pupils were seen to be talking in these two episodes but the 'talk' was limited to responding or more specifically to answering the teacher's questions. It was not the pupils' knowledge that the teacher was conscripting, nor their comprehension of the story. Rather she was calling for a display of content information that had been triggered off by another pupil's response. Another feature of these excerpts is that the questions were of a closed nature.

This long exchange continued for another ten minutes. During the post-lesson interview, the teacher said that in asking the questions she was "trying to get them to talk". However, because the teacher almost always was the one asking the question and the pupils were responding, there did not arise any opportunity for talk. Because the teacher asked mostly closed questions each time, there was no negotiation of ideas amongst the pupils or with the teacher. In this story, the localized content also necessitated that the teacher use talk for active rehearsal of new concepts. When Yazir, a Malay pupil, used the word 'Sin-seh' in referring to the shop although his information was accurate and reflected the commonly used and known term, the teacher restated this with a question focusing on the "correct word" without engaging the pupils in talk about the term itself. This may have clarified why Yoga (an Indian pupil) felt that only the Chinese would go to a Sin-seh or how non-Chinese could access the health-related information available at these shops.



The class dictated story was a follow-up of the Big Book that was shared in class. It comes under the unit theme of "Happy and Sad". The Teacher's Handbook states that the teacher could "discuss and record pupils' responses on "How we felt when we ..." (1996:87). The teacher titled the writing (CDS) as "The Happiest Day". After writing the title of the story to be jointly constructed on the mahjong paper pinned up on the board, the teacher nominated a pupil, Shanshi, who came and stood in front of the class. The rest of the pupils were seated on the floor. The teacher began the lesson thus:-

**T:** When was the happiest day in your life?

What happened on that day that made you very, very happy? Why was it the happiest day in your life? Why?

**Shanshi:** My father bought me a big bicycle.

**T:** Your father bought you a big bicycle? Right.

(Class exclaims "Wah!")

**T** (Writes sentence on board. To pupil): Describe your bicycle.

**Shanshi:** My bicycle is red in colour.

**T:** (Writes, repeating aloud): "*The bicycle was red*". Right. How many wheels had it?

**Shanshi:** Two wheels.

**T:** (Writes) "*The bicycle had two wheels*". Why did your father buy the bicycle for you? Why did he buy it for you?

**Shanshi:** Because I was good.



- T:** Because you were good (writes). *"His father bought him the bicycle because he was good"*. Did you want the bicycle? Did you want it very much?
- Shanshi:** Yes (nods).
- T:** You wanted the bicycle very much? (writes) *"Shanshi wanted the bicycle very much"*. Where did your father buy the bicycle?
- Shanshi:** (starts answering and teacher says she wants it "in a sentence"). My father bought me the bicycle from Jurong East.
- T:** Tell them.
- Shanshi:** (repeats same sentence).
- T:** Was it a shop?
- Shanshi:** Yes (nods. Teacher writes sentence down)
- T:** Did he bring you along?
- Shanshi:** (nods)
- In the meantime a pupil spots an error in the sentence the teacher has written and several pupils join in. Teacher stops to query. She says "Very good, it should be brought. Who spotted the mistake?" Pupils point to Azhar.
- T:** Very good Azhar. You spotted the mistake. Thank you. Did your father bring you along?
- Shanshi:** (Nods).
- T:** Did Shanshi's father bring him along to buy the bicycle? Juliana, what did Shanshi say?
- Juliana:** (Stands up and waits).
- T:** (to Shanshi) Did your father bring you along?
- Shanshi:** Yes.
- Juliana:** Shanshi's father brought him along.



**T:** His father took him along. OK. (Writes). How did you feel when you were at the bicycle shop, Shanshi?

**Shanshi:** I feel very happy.

The importance of talk in teaching children writing has been discussed in Chapter 2(pp.122-128). Talk is important because it provides a scaffold between their individual linguistic data pool and the explicit demands of the genre and the skill they are engaged in.

In this instance, the teacher had chosen to write about a particular pupil's experience. The teacher began the Class Dictated Story with a question but before the pupil could answer it, she framed another question and then restated this. Four questions thus provided the opening frame of this shared writing session. The pupil's response was then confirmed by the teacher repeating it and then writing it down for the class to see. This was followed by a request to describe the bicycle. The pupil began by stating the colour. The next description was in response to a teacher question. Having elicited the features of a bicycle, the teacher then asked the pupil for a reason. The direct statement was then recast as indirect or reported speech followed by a third person statement "Shanshi wanted the bicycle very much". The shift from direct to reported speech to third person was not explained to the pupils. When asked about this at the interview, the teacher said that "this is the most difficult part of the CDS because I just don't know how to get the pupils to use the language I want". "They use the wrong structure and it is very difficult".



The following is an excerpt from a section of the shared reading of the book "Roti Prata" carried out by Teacher A.

Teacher A

T: (Reads):

*"My Appa is busy, too. He's always frying Roti Prata. But he's not too busy to help".*

T: But when it comes to helping the school, do you think the father is unwilling to help?

Lester: Willing.

T: Willing to help, right?

Han Yao: (Predicts what's going to happen on the next page). Next page, they all learn how to make roti prata.

T: OK, let's read to find out (reads).  
*"Come, Amir! Come and help my Appa and me."*

T: Who asked Amir to come and help?

Ps: Majid.

T: Majid. Because look at Amir (pointing to illustration). He is feeling very sad. He has nothing to do, right? So his friend, Majid, has asked him to come and help him and his father at the stall. Look what happened here? (Reads).

*"Look boys, this is how you pound and knead the dough."*

T: What do you mean by pound? Pounding chilli.

Ps: No.

T: Right, what do you mean by pounding here?

Ps: (Some). Hammer with your hand.



- T:** With your hand. Using your hands to pound and knead the dough.
- T:** Do you think you need a lot of energy here?
- Ps:** (Some). Yes.
- T:** (Reads).  
*"Then you stretch out the dough. Toss it, flip it, and let it open out like a sheet."*
- T:** Can be very tiring too, right?
- Ps:** (Whole class) Yes.
- T:** Ah, this part everybody enjoys doing this right? Only those people who are very experienced in it know how to do it properly. Have you tried?
- Ps:** No.
- T:** Would you like to try?
- Ps:** Yes.
- T:** Okay, maybe you can go home and get your mother's help. Especially those of you whose mothers make roti prata at home.
- T:** They can teach you how to make the dough and you can learn how to make it. Okay?

**Like Teacher B, Teacher A engaged her students in talk by using questions. And because the questions indicated the correct answer as in ---**

- T:** ...do you think the father is unwilling to help?
- Ps:** Willing.

**or -**



**T:           What do you mean by pound? Pounding chilli?**

**Ps:           No.**

**or -**

**T:           Who asked Amir to come and help?**

**Ps:           Majid.**

**--- there was very little talk the pupils initiated.**

**In these lesson excerpts, Teacher A was sharing a story with the pupils. The teacher's talk consisted largely of questions. Their closed nature generated mainly monosyllabic answers from the pupils. It was the teacher's utterances which were the longest. Teacher A's pattern of generating talk did not allow the pupils the opportunity to talk about the characters or the story. Teacher A was testing comprehension. At the post-lesson discussion, Teacher A said that in sharing a story the "aim was to make sure the children understand the story". This understanding was attained by asking questions. This entire forty minute lesson proceeded in the same manner as cited in the above excerpts. Teacher A said that by asking questions she was providing her pupils opportunities to talk. But the talk as exemplified in the above lesson excerpts was limiting because the pupils were focused only on answering the teacher's questions.**

**Another feature of this lesson as represented in the examples cited, is that the discussion was broken up into such minute parts that the overall picture was lost. The teacher shifted from a text comprehension focus to 'talking' about cultural vocabulary to personal experience. But even this shift was not talked through or**



the pupils allowed to chat about their related experiences or knowledge. The fragmentation in the lesson development, given the shifts in focus, did not make transparent the link between language, text and reader's experience - a point emphasized in the REAP Guidelines (1987)

In seeking clarification for the word "pounding", which is culturally loaded and to which she attached a cultural schema by asking children "pounding chilli?", the teacher did not allow pupils to talk about their understanding and knowledge of the word "pounding". Malay pupils and some Indian pupils may be familiar with the specific cooking association, but it would be unfamiliar as a concept to many Chinese pupils. Her following question on the act of pounding needing a lot of energy, might have been better understood if the pupils had been allowed to talk through the concept. Her only clarification for the word was "using your hands to pound and knead the dough". Hence, despite the teacher having asked the questions to seek understanding, by the end of that transaction, the pupils were left with no better understanding. During the interview with the focal pupils, they were asked to say whatever they knew about the two words. Only the Malay pupil could talk about the word "pound" and demonstrate how it is done.

The following is an excerpt from a discussion the teacher carried on with the class on making bread. The Teacher's Handbook 2A advises the following for shared writing.

\*        Ask pupils to talk about the kinds of bread they have eaten.



- \* Get pupils to guess at some of the things they will need to bake bread.
- \* Tack the corresponding word cards on the board.
- \* Ask pupils to guess how bread is made.  
(1996:84).

This was to be followed by viewing the programme "A Bread Tale". Following this, shared writing was to take place, where the pupils were to "compare their ideas of bread making with what they had seen in the programme, record the bread making process and record their responses as the Class Dictated Story (CDS)". (PETS Teacher's Handbook 2A 1996:84). The lesson started as follows:-Teacher A:

- T:** What kind of bread do you normally eat?
- Lester:** White bread.
- Han Yao:** Normal bread.
- Lester:** Wheat bread.
- T:** Wheat bread?
- Han Yao:** Brown.
- T:** Brown bread.
- Han Yao:** Maize.
- T:** Maize, okay. Wholemeal bread.
- Lester:** Teacher, blueberry bread.
- Han Yao:** Rye bread.
- T:** Rye bread. Okay. So bread is made from?
- Lester:** Flour.
- T:** White flour, rye flour, wheat, right? What else?
- Ps:** (a few) Rye, wheat.
- T:** Wheat, yes, what else?



**Lester: Corn.**

**T: Now, bread, you have many types of bread, right? You have the French loaf, then you have the bun. What else?**

**Han Yao: Pau.**

**T: Pau, yes.**

**Lester: Raisin bread.**

**T: Raisin bread, peanut bread, yes. Any other bread?**

**P(not known):Pizza bread.**

**T: Ah, right. Let's listen to the song on bread. Turn to page 78, "The Bread Song". Now this song tells you how bread is made. Okay? Listen to the song and listen carefully. Listen to the words.**

The 'talk' that was generated here was restricted, fragmented and monosyllabic. Although the session was aimed at 'discussing' the different kinds of bread, the teacher, through her questions, appeared to be getting a listing. The pupils were naming the types of bread available. There was no discussion of why one variety is different from another. Generating talk about the different types of bread might have been important for this class of children, many of whom might not have had bread as part of their daily diet menu. When interviewed, the Malay and Indian children said that they often had ethnic food for breakfast. The Chinese children said they had porridge, pau or other forms of Chinese food for breakfast. So, although the pupils responded with wheat bread, maize and rye bread, they might not have possessed any further knowledge of any of these. In some instances, the teacher did not respond to the pupils' input as when the pupil responded with "blueberry bread" and



another with "pizza bread". This opening discussion on bread was not linked to the process of making bread which was the focus for the class dictated story. When the lesson thus proceeded to the second stage of making bread, the 'discussion' in the first part was not used to develop the ideas. The rest of the lesson followed with the teacher 'testing' pupils' knowledge:-

**Teacher A**

- T:** What is yeast? Ye Meng. What is yeast? Can anyone tell me?
- P1:** (another pupil) A type of milk.
- P2:** Like yoghurt.
- P3:** Like cow milk.
- T:** It is made from where?
- P:** Milk, New Zealand.
- T:** How do you know it is made in New Zealand?

The pupils' involvement in the Class Dictated Story was again limited to answering the teacher's questions. The absence of negotiation between teacher and pupils may have limited the pupils' engagement with writing the story and linking language and thought. The questions in the above excerpt were again specific and limited to short utterances.

An interesting feature of Teacher A's lessons was the range of things she covered within a span of forty-five minutes. All this was done through asking mainly closed questions, which moved from word meaning to content knowledge to textual understanding. Teacher A



also tended to move through her lessons fast. She rarely allowed for wait time and the rapid pace was possible to a certain extent because of the specific, closed questioning style she had adopted.

Unlike Teacher B, Teacher A did not demonstrate the writing of a story to the class. She 'discussed' the writing topic with the class (through asking questions) but left the pupils to do their own writing.

### **Teacher C**

Teacher C always appeared relaxed and took her time to get started with her shared reading session. The reading sessions always began with a tuning-in activity which was always a song played on tape. The pupils had the option of joining in. The lesson, the song that was played, the book to which it was related or the purpose of the activity was made known to the class. Following the listening to the song, the teacher placed a big book on the easel for shared reading. The session always commenced with a question pertaining to the illustration on the cover of the book. The following excerpt is from a shared reading session conducted by Teacher C. Because Teacher C was observed on the same day as Teacher A, the book she was sharing with her class was the same as Teacher A's. The theme for the week had been "Baking and Making".

### **Teacher C**

**T:** (reads) *Amir said "My father will help if I ask him. Can your father help, Majid?"*

Now, do you think his father can help?



**Ps:** Yes.

**T:** Yes? (repeats question).

**Ps:** Yes.

**T:** Do you think Majid's father can help?

**Gabriel:** Can't, can't, because this boy think that his father is too busy.

**T:** Which boy? Majid's father is too busy, too busy to help?  
(reads):  
*"My Appa cannot help. He does fry Roti Prata", Majid said.*

**Dat Tai:** He can sell what?

**T:** Yes, he can sell the roti prata but ... how do you think Majid's father can help?

**Dat Tai:** Let the principal eat free.

**Gabriel:** Eat free (laughs).

**T:** Let the principal? Eat for free?

**Ps:** (whole class) Yes.

**T:** Okay, now. Who is Appa?

**Ps:** Majid's father.

**T:** Majid's father, yes. Now Majid calls his father Appa. What do you call your father?

**Gabriel:** Papa (spells it).

**Dat Tai:** Appa.

**T:** Zafra, what do you call your father?

**Zafra:** (Inaudible).

**Gabriel:** Oh, Malay word.

**Dat Tai:** Never mind what?

**T:** Lokman, what do you call your father?

**Lokman:** Pa.

**T:** Pa.



**Ps:** (some) (Laugh).  
**T:** Zulkifli?  
**Zulkifli:** Bapa  
**T:** Ridzwan?  
**Ridzwan:** Ayah.  
**Gabriel:** What's Ayah?  
**T:** Yes, Sharmini.

Teacher C also used questions to get her pupils to talk. Many of the pupils, however, answered in Singlish. This showed not just their desire to talk but also the rapport they had with the teacher:

**Gabriel:** "Can't, can't, because this boy think that his father is too busy".

and -

**Dat Tai:** "He can sell what".

and

**Gabriel:** "Oh, Malay word!"

**Dat Tai:** "Never mind what?"

"What" was used here not as a question marker. Rather its use in Singlish signifies a casual and light-hearted mood aimed at establishing rapport.

There seemed to be a lot more camaraderie between teacher and pupils which might have allowed for these spontaneous responses. The teacher's questions tried to focus the children on the story and its development as well as relate it to their personal experiences. For example, when the teacher invited the pupils to share their forms of



address for their father, the fairly spontaneous participation and supportive comments not only enabled the pupils to know and learn different forms of address in other cultures, but also set the context of the text discourse within their realm of experience and understanding.

Teacher C had started this lesson by initiating pupil talk on school fun fairs and the food item focused in the story namely "roti prata". This not only reduced the cultural load found in the text being read, but also engaged the pupils in voluntary response. This casual use of language between her and the pupils might have created a certain warmth and reduced the distance between the teacher and the pupils thereby encouraging closer interaction. In fact, the use of Singlish has been said to create this effect (see discussion on Singapore English Chapter 1:45-47,49-51 ).

Teacher C

T: First you open it like a big sheet (a pupil spreads out his hands).  
roti prata is not that big, you know.

and -

T: Imagine eating a hard roti prata.

and -

T: Later, after he stretch the dough and oil the dough, then he add the egg.

Teacher C restated what she read aloud:-

T: ...Majid's father is too busy, too busy to help? (reads) ...

*"My Appa cannot help. He does fry Roti Prata", Majid said.*

and -



**T:        Now Majid calls his father Appa. What do you call your father?**

**This restating and referring back to the text and extending it to relate to pupils' experience might have enabled the creation of a link between the text, language and personal experience, which is an important philosophical basis of the shared book sessions. In this twelve episode lesson, Teacher C did this in eight episodes. In addition to providing this clarification and link, Teacher C also confirmed pupils' responses by rephrasing them as questions or repeating them. This also might have helped the pupils talk because they knew if their answers had been accepted or were not what the teacher had expected:-**

**Dat Tai:        He can sell what?**

**T:                Yes, he can sell the roti prata, but ...**

**Dat Tai:        Let the principal eat free.**

**Gabriel:        Eat free (laughs)**

**T:                Let the principal? Eat for free?**

**In this way, Teacher C was talking to her pupils. This might have encouraged them to express their opinions because they became involved in the story.**

**The tentativeness with which pupils in Class C responded, their incomplete utterances and their ungrammatical expressions and use of language are evidence of talk in action. The follow-up to the shared reading was to have been a Class Dictated Story on the process of making bread. Teacher C, however, chose to write on the topic "How**



to Make a ...Sandwich''. The Teacher's Handbook 2B had suggested the topic for group writing. After asking the pupils if they had made sandwiches at home and finding out about the types of sandwiches they had made, the teacher did a CDS for a sandwich recipe:-

- T:** When you write a recipe that means when someone else reads your recipe that someone will be able to make a sandwich. Must be very clear about what he did or what we do when we make a sandwich. Let's number it (writes). *First, I take two slices of bread.*
- T:** Next, what can I do?
- Ps:** (several) Taking out bread.
- Kala:** Break an egg.
- Kai Lin:** Put vegetables.
- T:** Put vegetables, okay. Now, what have I done to the vegetables? (pointing to vegetables in a plate on the table). What vegetable is this? Then we all put in the lettuce.
- Kala:** Lettuce.
- T:** Lettuce, what have I done with the lettuce?
- Kai Lin:** Wash the lettuce first.
- T:** (writes) "*Wash the vegetables*". Wash the lettuce and do what? Gabriel. Wash the lettuce and do what? Cut it up isn't it? (Writes) "*Then cut the lettuce*". Then?
- Ganesh:** Break the egg.
- T:** Alright, look at what I'm going to do to the lettuce? (Places lettuce onto bread). What have I done?
- Lokman:** Put the lettuce on the bread.
- T:** Yes, good. (writes) "*Place the lettuce on the bread*". Then?



**The interaction between pupils and teacher was very restricted in this excerpt and any talk by the pupils was limited to answering the teacher's questions. The limited talk on the part of the pupils could be due to the following four factors:-**

- 1. The pupils might not have seen a lettuce (or have known what it is) because it is not a common vegetable consumed in the homes of many Singaporeans. (All the nine pupils in this study, responded that they did not know how it looked like). Hence, they may not know how it is used. This might explain the lack of response to the teacher's question - "Wash the lettuce and do what?".**
  
- 2 Many pupils might not have had the experience of making a sandwich. When interviewed, parents said that they "expect the children to study and not learn these things at a young age. They do not have to. We are there to do those things for them". Also, as discussed in Chapter 1 (pp.54) many Singaporean homes employ maids and children are therefore not expected to make their own meal, even sandwiches.**



3       The teacher did not discuss the ingredients that were going to be used for making the sandwich or the type of sandwich she wanted the pupils to write about.

4       The pupils were being introduced to the genre of recipe-writing and had not seen one. They were therefore unaware of the format a recipe might take.

The lack of relevant experience with making a sandwich, the new introduction of the vegetable "lettuce", without any discussion about it, and not knowing how to write a recipe were features of this Class Dictated Story. The shared writing task the pupils were engaged in required content knowledge, linguistic knowledge and procedural knowledge of a specific kind. The absence of these might explain why the pupils did not participate in the discussion on sandwich making.

A great deal of teacher talk has been said to centre around questions. The most common teaching exchange cited by researchers is the question-answer -evaluation move (Mehan, 1979; Burton, 1980; Cazden, 1988; Freebody, 1995). Related to this is the notion that teachers routinely ask questions to which they possess the answer and the only response expected is a display one acknowledged in an evaluative fashion. Answers that are divergent, irrelevant or inadequate are not heard by the teacher, discarded or the turn reallocated with the question repeated. This, at least, was the situation in the classrooms at in this study. In deciding on turn-taking patterns, developing topics, asking questions and evaluating



responses, Teachers A, B and C were either directing talk or developing pupil understanding of language and meanings, not through pupil participation but by pupil listening.

In this section, I focus on teacher talk as it pertains to explication, comments and extension of pupils' responses. "Cued-elicitation" (Edward & Mercer, 1987), involving processes such as preformulation, reformulations, prompts and cues, enables teachers and pupils to negotiate meaning-making. This allows for more talk.

The following examples explicate this:-

**T:** Can you tell us what fossils are, do you think?

**P:** Sir, sir, a long time ago, animals - there was animals, and when they died, the rain and wind came over them and then the bodies disappeared and left the shells and that ...

**T:** Good. Why do you think the bodies disappeared and the shells stayed?

**Ps:** Sir, sir, they rotted.

**T:** And what about the shells?

**P:** Sir, they got harder - er, the clay dried - made marks in the clay.

**T:** Right.

**P:** The clay dried hard.

**T:** Right, okay, thank you. Can anybody add anything to that at all? It's a very good description.

(Edwards & Furlong,  
1978:17)

In this example, the teacher repeated the student's response as a question at the next turn or confirmed its acceptability. This invited more participation. The teacher then invited other pupils to contribute to this build-up of information.



**Contrasting this piece of exchange is one in which pupils themselves are involved:-**

- 1 Well, the teacher's bound to notice.**
- 2 Yes, really ... because I mean, I mean, if ...**
- 3 Or she could have gone out because someone had asked for her or something ... she probably felt sorry for him so she just left him ... . The teachers do ...**
- 4 What really sorry for him ... so she'd just left him so they could stick pins in him.**
- 5 Oh, no, she probably ... with the 'whispered' ... said 'whispered ...**
- 6 Yes.**
- 7 Yes, but here it says ... um ... (rustling paper) ... Oh! "Stand away from him, children. Miss Andrews stooped to see".**
- 8 Mmmm.**
- 9 So you'd think that she would do more, really.**
- 10 Yes ... you'd think she'd, um ... probably wake ... if she would really felt sorry for ... sorry for him, she'd ...**
- 11 She'd wake him.**
- 12 Oh no! ...No, she wouldn't send him home alone ... because ... nobody's ...**
- 13 His mother's bad.**
- 14 Yes.**
- 15 His mother would probably go out to work.**
- 16 Yes, he'd get no sleep at home if his mum was there.**



- 17     Might have to ... might have to turn out and work.
- 18     It might be ... his mother's fault that really he's like this.
- 19     Oh, it will be ... It always is.
- 20     Look, here it says, um ... 'His eyes are' ... Where is it? 'His dark eyes cruel and somehow sad'.
- 21     I think that just puts it, doesn't it?
- 22     Yes.
- 23     There's always something like that.
- 24     He's unhappy (whispered).
- (Barnes, 1982:27)

The girls are talking about teachers and then about the mothers of naughty children. As Barnes describes it, "it is not always very explicit ... yet by the end of the sequence, they seemed to have reached the main point of the poem, and appreciated its summing up in the line 'His dark eyes cruel and somehow sad' (1982:27)". The interpretation was collaborative: One pupil's view was taken up by another and modified, supported by yet another and reformulated by others. The hesitations, pauses and half-completed thoughts helped the pupils reshape their thoughts. This groping towards meaning is defined as exploratory talk by Barnes. The many hypothetical expressions "could have", "probably", "might have" made the responses open to modification. In a way these helped to sustain the talk and did not close the options to other participants.

The excerpts which follow show the possibility of pupils' extended talk occurring during shared reading in the Singapore classrooms:-



**Teacher B**

**Sze Lin:** Cannot climb out of the cot.

**T:** Ah, the baby cannot climb out of the cot. See the cot here (pointing to illustration). Right. Why the baby sitter tells the girl to be quiet? Gek Peng.

**Gek Peng:** Because she is already big.

**T:** She is already big. So should she shuddup (shut up)? Must she shuddup?

**Yoga:** Yes.

**T:** Why, Yoga? You mean she ... she cannot make noise? Ah? She cannot scream? She ...

**Yoga:** (shakes head).

**T:** She cannot scream and make noise? Hwee Li.

**Hwee Li:** Because she can go and take herself.

**T:** Ah, she can take the things herself. Wei Chuen.

**Wei Chuen:** If she scream and shout then the baby will wake up.

**T:** Ah, so she cannot scream and shout and disturb the baby? Rafi.

**Rafi:** If she shout, then her mother will beat her.

**T:** Ah, so she cannot shout. Chia Hong.

**Chia Hong:** Because the baby kangaroo is more scared than the big kangaroo. The size is small.

**T:** Ah, so he can scream. Sze Lin.

**Sze Lin:** The baby will disturb the neighbour.

**T:** The baby will disturb the neighbour, disturb the neighbour, so she cannot scream. Do you scream for no reason?

**Ps:** No.



**Teacher C**

- T:** Who knows why you have to stretch out the dough?
- Gabriel:** So you can put the what inside? Egg inside.
- T:** So you can put the egg inside.
- Gabriel:** Onion.
- T:** Okay, that will be later. Yes, Kalavathi.
- Kalavathi:** So that you can spread oil and make it a circle (showing circle with hand).
- T:** So that you can spread the oil and make a circle. Why, why do you need to spread?
- Gabriel:** So he can fold it then they all go and fry it.
- T:** Yes, yes, but you are not answering my questions. Now, you stretch out the dough. First, you open it like a big sheet. A roti prata is not that big you know. What is he trying to do to the dough? Yes, Kalavathi.
- Kalavathi:** When it is made, it will be soft.
- T:** Yes, very good. Did you hear what Kalavathi said. Say it again Kalavathi. So you have a soft roti prata and you can tear. Imagine eating a hard roti prata (reads).
- T:** (reads) "*Pat the dough, oil the dough*".
- Now, why do you oil the dough?
- Gabriel:** Then you colour.
- T:** So that you will get a different colour? Why does he oil the dough? Nobody knows. Remember we did making a cake. You have to grease the tin. Why do you grease the tin?
- Gek Peng:** Make it easy to take out.
- T:** Yes, so that you can get the cake off the tin. Later, after he stretch the dough and oil the dough, then he add the egg. So that you won't get the dough stuck to your hand. Isn't it? You oil it (reads):



*“ Stretch the dough, toss it, flip it. Oh, No!”*

**T:                   What happened?**

If the talk by pupils appeared constrained, it was only because Teacher B routinely restated or reformulated the response and then almost immediately nominated another pupil to respond. Teacher nomination very often appears not to allow pupils to engage in spontaneous talk.

Teacher C, despite using restatements and explications, did not allow for varied responses. Her frustration in not being able to elicit the "right" answer was displayed when she said "Yes, yes, but you are not answering my questions". Her absence of speaker nominations did not generate talk because in the first half of the exchange, the pupils did not understand the question (the contextually inappropriate attempt testifies to this) and in the second, when the response was accurate, she did not allow for its further development.

The limited occurrence of talk in Teacher C's class and its absence in Teacher B's class might have been due to termination of comments and explications with follow-up questions. Teachers A, B and C limited their talk to asking questions, restating and reformulating. To sum up this section on the nature of talk in the shared reading-writing classroom, it may be said that teacher talk in all the three classrooms was characterized by:-

1)       **teachers asking questions.**



- 2) the questions being mainly of a closed nature.
- 3) the questions having been pre-determined (by the teacher).
- 4) the questions being focused on checking understanding of text content or verifying content knowledge.
- 5) restatement/confirmation of pupil responses (less often).
- 6) direct linking of story with pupils experiences (Teacher C).
- 7) extrapolating text to personal experiences/knowledge indirectly (Teachers A and B).
- 8) providing procedural instructions for the writing of stories (Teacher C).

**Pupil talk in the three classrooms was characterized by:**

- 1) teacher nomination of pupils to respond (Class A and B).
- 2) spontaneous response (Class C).
- 3) pupils responding to teacher questions.
- 4) the responses being usually one or two-word utterances.
- 5) the use of Singlish to convey the responses (Teacher C's pupils).
- 6) initiating talk through questioning (Teacher A's pupils).

**Sharing a story very often implies the negotiation of thoughts, ideas, experiences and opinions. In the classroom, the teacher might have a teaching or learning focus for her pupils as well. The objectives of using the shared book approach in the Singapore primary classroom, as discussed earlier on, is to:**

- 1) facilitate children's acquisition of the English language.
- 2) teach them to read.



3) impart the value of enjoyment in reading.

There are many ways to achieve these objectives. A necessary facilitating factor in the Singapore classroom, where for many children exposure and introduction to English begins in the classroom, would be the generation of talk during shared reading and shared writing so that:

- 1) pupils' schema is activated.
- 2) the link is established between text and experiences.
- 3) pupils' frames of reference are extended.
- 4) both teacher and pupils become actively involved in making meaning.

Teacher's engagement in sharing a story might therefore have to progress beyond that of asking questions and eliciting accurate responses aimed at testing comprehension. In the examples cited here, the teachers' talk was limited mainly to questioning. This may impact on the notion of sharing a story. The nature of teacher talk presented here so far, reveals that teachers might have a different agenda in the classroom from that suggested or required by policy makers and curriculum planners. As the three teachers pointed out in their post-lesson interviews, they were focused on "teaching children language" not by sharing but by "telling them what it is" because "that's our job" and "we are teachers and we know what they must know to pass the exams".

### **TEACHER QUESTIONS**

Since questions formed the bulk of the teacher talk that was recorded during shared reading and writing, this section will be devoted to



analyzing the nature of these questions and their role in encouraging talk during shared reading and writing. Numerous research studies have shown the proliferation of teacher questions in classroom talk (Flanders, 1967; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Delamont, 1982; Freebody et al, 1995). Many of these have looked at teaching styles to determine the large number of teacher questions. But the focus has not been on teacher perceptions of task at hand, or of the learners in the given lesson context. Teacher questions have a particularly important role in learning because they can facilitate a learner's participation in the discourse and modify it to ensure more comprehensible output. Teacher-questions can also affect learners' attitude and motivation to what is being learnt and taught. Long and Sato (1983) compared the number of display questions and referential questions in 'naturalistic' and classroom discourse and concluded that in the former, referential questions took centre-stage, while in the latter, IRF (Initiate-Respond-Feedback) dominated. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), Pica and Long (1986) confirmed that regardless of length of teaching experience, display questions dominated the language classroom. Brock (1986), researching the effect on student utterance as a result of teachers increasing the number of referential questions asked, reported greater length of student utterance and greater complexity in the utterances. It also revealed an increased number of clarifying requests and confirmation checks by the teachers. White and Lightbown (1984) reported classrooms where teacher-questions dominated the lessons. More recently, Hasan (1988, 1990) introduced a message semantics framework to identify variations in the semantic patterns of natural parent/child and



teacher/child talk. Spreadbury (1993) investigated adult-child discourses in the two different contexts of home and school and concluded that the interactions taking place in the two contexts were different and that teachers needed to create a discourse level in the classroom which was more supportive and richly interactive.

Teachers' questions thus have dominated a large body of research. As pointed out earlier in this discussion, this analysis of teachers' questions is based on studying their nature and their effect on talk during shared reading and shared writing. The questions analyzed in this part of the study are taken from shared reading and shared writing lessons. The following table shows the use of questions by the three teachers over a number of reading and writing lessons:

**Table 1: Teacher questions during shared reading and shared writing lessons.**

	No of Reading Lessons	No of Writing Lessons	Questions (TOTAL)
TEACHER "A"	5	5	475
TEACHER "B"	5	5	548
TEACHER "C"	5	5	125

The questions included in the analysis were categorized into:

- 1) those that asked for information.
- 2) repeat questions, and
- 3) extended rephrasing of the same questions.

Form questions such as 'Alicia?' were excluded.



Questions that asked for information were categorized as Display Questions while questions that attempted to connect the text to the pupils' schema or personal experiences were referred to as referential questions. Display questions, as the name suggests, call for a demonstration of what is known. In a sense, in using them, teachers are engaging in testing, to find out if learners have understood something. Display questions have their place in teaching, especially when they help provide a teacher with feedback on learner understanding to decide if re-teaching may be necessary or if background information needs to be provided. It has been pointed out in various studies (see Review of literature, Chapter 2:73-83) that teachers' use of display questions may impede student participation. This may be so because of the threatening effect it may have on learners.

Another type of question that teachers are known to use and which is encouraged in shared literacy lessons is the referential question. These questions provide a link between the text/task at hand and the learner's experience. The aim of these questions in shared reading and shared writing is to extend the text to connect with the learner's background knowledge or experience to facilitate understanding. It supports linking the known (personal experience/knowledge) to the unknown (the text) thereby enabling textual comprehension to take place. Because it reaches out to what the learner already knows, it may appear less intimidating to the learner and therefore generate more discussion (Brock, 1986; Long and Sato, 1983). Referential questions are also known to be characteristic of talk that occurs in



naturalistic settings (Long and Sato, 1983; Wells, 1986; Spreadbury, 1993).

The teachers themselves were not conscious of the types of questions they were using during their shared reading and shared writing lessons. When asked during the post-lesson interviews if they classified their questions, Teachers A and B said that they "asked questions to see if the children understood what they were reading", "sometimes to see if they had similar experiences" (Teacher A) or "to see what they think" (Teacher B). The two types of questions - display and referential - will be discussed simultaneously.

Teacher B asked display questions, which required pupils to provide information the teacher already knew. These display questions related to either the illustrations in the book being read or the content of the story. The referential questions (teacher did not know the answer) occurred when the teacher was trying to contextualize the book, (that is, link it to the pupils' prior knowledge or past experience). In one reading lesson (Granny) with twenty-eight episodes, there were nine episodes which had display questions. (The rest of the questions were referential). The display questions occurred at the beginning of the story (two episodes) when the cover and the first two pages were being discussed and towards the end of the story (six episodes):-

#### **Episode One**

**T:** (discussing the book cover) What time of the day is it?  
**Siva.**



**Siva:** At night.

**T:** How do you know it is at night, Siva?

**Siva:** Can see the moon there.

**T:** You can see the moon there, right (pointing to illustration).  
Can you see the moon there?

**Ps:** Yes.

**Rafi:** Can see the star.

**T:** Rafi says there are stars in the sky. What is Granny doing? What is Granny doing, Kim Mee?

**Kim Mee:** She is sewing the blanket.

#### **Episode Five**

**T:** (reads)  
*"What's wrong with you, Granny?"*  
*"I'm going to be alright, my child".*

**T:** Why are they so worried, Andrena? Granny says they are worried. Why? Why should they be worried? Why should they feel worried, Shanshi?

**Shanshi:** Did not want Granny to die.

**T:** They don't want Granny to die. Why they don't want Granny to die? Yes?

**Chia hong:** They like Granny.

**T:** They like Granny very much (reads on).

#### **Episode Six**

**T:** (reads)  
*"Where is Granny going, mummy?"*  
*"She is going to the hospital".*

**T:** Why must Granny go to the hospital, Faizal?



- Faizal:** Sick.
- T:** When I am sick I don't go to the hospital. Why must Granny go to the hospital this time, Wu Han?
- Wu Han:** Serious
- T:** Very serious, yes.
- Yoga:** She's going to die.
- T:** Ah, she's going to die. Chia Siew?
- Chia Siew:** She needs an operation.
- T:** She needs an operation, may be. Yes, Sze Lin.

Episodes one, five and six showed the teacher's use of display questions with reference to information in the text. Even here, in episode one, the questions were purely textual, but episodes five and six started with a display question and moved on to referential questions. In doing so, the teacher said during the post-lesson interview that she was attempting to "relate the pupils' background knowledge to the story". An interesting observation to be made here is that in none of the episodes did the teacher make any attempt to sum up the talk and relate it back to the story being read. She left the discussion to move on to the next part of the text. This happened more frequently when she engaged the pupils in referential questioning.

- T:** (reads)
- "What are you doing, Granny?"*  
*"I'm grinding chillies. When you grow up you will grind chillies".*  
*"But Granny, When I grow up I want to be a pilot".*



**Ps:** Wah!

**T:** Little girl says she doesn't want to grind chillies. Wants to be a pilot. See how Granny is grinding the chillie? (pointing to illustration) Do your mothers still grind chillies like that nowadays?

**Ps:** (chorus) No.

**T:** How many of you eat chillies at home?

**Ps:** (raise hands).

**T:** Alright. How do your mothers grind the chilli? Wei Chuen, how does your mother grind the ... Are you listening?

**Wei Chuen:** Some kind of stone. Kind of bowl made of stone, then they go and use the thing to pound it.

**T:** Oh, the pounder.

**Rafi:** Oh! Ya.

**T:** Oh! The pounder.

**Rafi:** The pounder, I forgot.

**Faizal:** Do like that (demonstrates the pounding action).

**T:** How about your...? How does your mother grind, Hwee Li?

**Hwee Li:** Use a machine.

### **Episode Six**

**T:** Do you sew, children? Girls, do you sew nowadays? Alicia, do you sew? Do you sew?

**Alicia:** No.

**T:** No, why not? Why, nowadays, you need not sew? Andrena, do you sew?



- Andrena:** (Shakes her head).
- T:** You don't. Why? Why don't we need to sew nowadays, Chia Siew?
- Chia Siew:** Machine.
- T:** We have machines. What else? We need not sew. Why, Hwee Li?
- Hwee Li:** Buy clothes.
- T:** Oh, where can you buy clothes, nowadays?
- Yoga:** Shop.
- T:** Ya, you can buy clothes just off the peg. Right or not? Must you sew your own clothes? Yong Peng, do you need to sew your own clothes?
- Yong Peng:** No.
- T:** No! Yes, Sze Lin? (raise hand)
- Sze Lin:** If you want to sew, you can ask the tailor and pay money.
- T:** Ask who?
- Sze Lin:** The tailor.
- T:** Oh! The tailor. Sze Lin goes to the tailor. Hanafi, do you sew?
- Hanafi:** (Shakes head).

This lengthy discussion (six minutes) continued for another two minutes before the teacher moved on to read another page. Teacher B's referential questions did not result in extended, complex or spontaneous utterance from the pupils although they generated a range of responses. This contrasts with Brock's (1986) study which cites increased and complex utterances when teacher engages in



referential questioning. Teacher B's use of referential questions and her not linking the discussion back to the text, may have resulted in the development of a separate text alongside that which was being read. As the lesson transcripts showed, the text and expanded discourse remain separate right to the end.

Teacher B's use of display and referential questions is given in the table below:

**Table 2 :SBR Lessons**

Referential and Display Questions						
Lesson	1	2	3	4	5	6
Display Questions	9 (29)	14 (33)	17 (30)	14 (30)	11 (29)	13 (29)
Referential Questions	15	17	10	11	15	13

The figures in parenthesis represent the total number of episodes per lesson.

In some shared reading lessons the display questions outnumbered the referential questions. The prevalence of either type of questions was dependent on the book being read. With some stories, Teacher B tended to use more referential questions than with others. In the case of the class dictated story, the teacher used more display questions than referential questions because her focus was to elicit sentences that would make up the story she had in mind rather than to involve pupils in a discussion of what to write or how to write it.



Although Teacher B used referential questions in her shared reading sessions, these generated monosyllabic or very short pupil responses. This may be attributed to the closed nature of the referential questions. The predominance of questions was also seen in the writing of the Class Dictated Story:-

Teacher B

T: His father took him along. OK. (Writes "*My father brought me along to select the bicycle*"). How did you feel when you were at the bicycle shop, Shanshi?

Shanshi: I feel very happy.

T: How did you feel? How did (stressing) you feel?

Shanshi: I feel very surprised.

T: You felt very surprised? You didn't know that your father was going to buy it for you?

Shanshi: No.

T: Alright, (writes) "*I felt very surprised*". You didn't expect your father to buy the bicycle for you?

Shanshi: (Shakes his head).

T: Oh, I see! (writes) "*I did not expect my father to buy me a bicycle*". What else? How else did you feel? Besides being surprised.

Shanshi: I was excited.

T: You were excited (writes). Anything else? Where is your bicycle now?

Shanshi: At home.



- T:** What do you do to your bicycle every day? Do you ride on it every day?
- Shanshi:** Yes.
- T:** (writes) *"My bicycle is at home now. I ride on it every day"*. Let's read Shanshi's story. This is Shanshi's story. Let's read together.

Throughout the lesson, in fact, display questions did not feature. In this short exchange, Teacher B has asked nine apprise-precise-specify (how and 'wh') questions. She was engaging the pupil in 'talking about' the happiest day in his life and she did this by asking him questions which she thought was "important for this story". The pupil was 'engaged' in talking about his happiest day by answering the teacher's questions. Seen in this light, and as evidenced from the above transcript, the talk was neither tentative nor characterized by the taking of risks in using language or in expressing personal thought. The interaction does not display any of the pauses or hesitations that mark talk. Hence, although Teacher B had engaged the pupil in talk, it was her agenda she was fulfilling - it was her perception of what the happiest day in a child's life might be and how to describe the purchase of a bicycle that overrode the exchange. The flow of thought and its organization were decided by the teacher and not the pupil or the class.

Another reason for the absence of talk in this lesson was the teacher's controlled questioning. Every sentence proceeded from a question and a response. These questions were predetermined by the teacher so that, although as referential questions they tended to encourage a range of responses, their closed nature constrained the responses the



pupil could generate. It was this restrictive nature of seemingly referential questions that impeded the generation of any talk in this shared writing session. When asked about the types of questions she asked in class, Teacher B said that she probed pupil responses because she "wanted them to think". But the thinking she wanted to generate was not personal or individual thought that reflected personal preferences, likes and dislikes, experiences or prior knowledge. It was thought that she felt was "appropriate and acceptable to seven-year-olds". This pre-conceived expectation of how children should think and even what they may think might have restricted the free flow of spontaneous talk in this class.

Another feature of the shared writing lesson was that it was to have been negotiated between pupils and the teacher. Neither the topic nor the content was shared and therefore no negotiation took place (see Shanshi's CDS, p.349 for example). The whole class was not involved in the shared writing although all the pupils were seated on the floor in front of the blackboard. The teacher selected one pupil for no particular reason (he neither volunteered nor had received a present). The rest of the pupils were passive listeners or onlookers. Teacher A's shared reading session also displayed the abundant use of questions. Her talk centred around asking questions based on the illustrations and the text:-



**Teacher A**

- T:** Can you tell me what is the man doing in the picture?
- Lester:** Making roti prata.
- T:** What is he making?
- Ps:** Roti prata.
- T:** How do you know he is making roti prata?
- Lester:** He is teaching people how to make roti prata.
- T:** Right. Lester says he is teaching people how to make roti prata. What else? How do you know he is making roti prata?
- Lester:** Because the roti prata lady make a big, long ... (pupil pauses for the suitable word).
- T:** What do you call that? What is the word that we use?
- Han Yao:** Dough.
- T:** How do you pronounce it?
- Ps:** (some) Dough, dough.
- T:** Yes, Gerald. how do you pronounce it?
- Gerald:** Dough.
- T:** Okay. What do you call this? (pointing to the illustration on the page).
- Ps:** Dough.
- T:** Alright, how do you know that he is making roti prata? What is he doing with the dough?
- Lester:** Spread out.
- T:** Ah?
- Han Yao:** Spreading here and there.
- T:** Have you seen them making roti prata?



**Ps:** Yes.

By looking at the sheer number of questions the teacher has asked, it may be said that she was engaging the pupils in talk about the text or related to the text. Within this six minutes episode, she asked twelve questions and pupils responded eleven times. Significantly, the lesson started with a question. This was a shared reading session and the teacher was to create a relaxed and non-threatening environment to make reading enjoyable. Part of this involved creating a sense of mystery and suspense. Here, Teacher A began the session with a direct question on the cover illustration. Her two opening questions were pseudo because the pupils knew she already had the answer. Besides, they required the pupils to display their knowledge and therefore were focused on testing. Here again, display questions dominated the talk and perhaps explain the limited pupil responses. Pupil responses were almost always one or two-word utterances. And because the questions were of a closed nature, they did not elicit a complex or lengthier utterance. Teacher A probed every response by way of challenging the basis on which it was made. This, too, restricted a more spontaneous participation by the pupils who said that out of "fear" of being asked to verify their observations, they chose to "remain silent".

**Teacher A**

**T:** How many of you have watched this, the man making roti prata, in the coffee shop? How many of you have watched?

**Ps:** (raise hands).



**T:**       **Alright, do you find it very interesting?**

**Ps:**     **Yes.**

**T:**       **Is it very interesting? Can you tell me what is so interesting about it? I like to watch a man making roti prata. Now, why, why is it very interesting?**

**This challenge sounded almost like a threat. In real life, it is not always the case that we have a reason for finding something interesting. Given the limited language of the pupils and their reticence in using English, a question of this nature might ensure silence during a shared reading session. Besides, the response expected by the teacher was ambiguous, given the broadness of the question. During the interviews, the pupils stated that they would not answer if they were "not sure what the teacher wanted for an answer". One-tenth of Teacher A's display questions in this forty-minute lesson were of this sort. Although in framing such questions, she might have had the intention of facilitating pupils linking of their background knowledge and the text to be read, its intimidating nature might have reduced the amount of pupil talk that might have been generated.**

**Teacher A used a great many referential questions. But the referential questions in many instances occurred only during those episodes when the teacher was engaged in exploring the personal experiences of the pupils. The referential questions did not occur during the shared discussion of the text:**

**Teacher A**



**T:** ...what do you think the man is doing with the dough here?

**Ps:** (some) Pressing the dough.

**T:** Pressing the dough. Alright, here (pointing to illustration), what is he doing with it?

**Lester:** Rolling up the dough.

**T:** Is he rolling here? What is he doing with the dough?

**Han Yao:** Spreading.

**T:** Forming round, round doughs. Can you see?

**Ps:** Yes.

**T:** Here (pointing to illustration), what is he doing with the dough?

**Han Yao:** Flipping.

**T:** Flipping the dough.

and

**T:** Ah, the father was very eager to help right? See he told the son, *"Don't worry, I'll be able to help you. I can show the people how to make roti prata"*. How did Majid feel?

**Lester:** Happy.

**T:** How did he feel when the father said *"Yes, I will be able to help you"*?

**Han Yao:** Not happy.

**T:** Why do you say he was not happy?

**Han Yao:** Because if you read the next one, you know.



**T:** Tell me what is it?

**Han Yao:** Because frying roti prata, it is very hot.

This conversation continued with the teacher but there was no connection made between the pupils' experiences and the character's feelings. The teacher, thus, did not use talk to facilitate learning although in the interviews she acknowledged the role of talking to learning and stated that she used talk to help children learn. The questions asked by the teacher as shown in the various excerpts above did not lead to new knowledge because the focus was on testing what the pupils had derived from the text, rather than helping them link their prior knowledge and experience to facilitate understanding and relating to the text. A majority of the elicitation questions were of an information-seeking nature and, therefore, display questions which did not develop the personal or heuristic aspects of learning.

As a follow-up to the shared reading session, the teacher did a CDS on making bread. The pupils had just listened to a song on bread-making:-

**Teacher A**

**T:** Alright. Now this song is how to prepare bread. They teach you how to make bread. Okay, let's go through the process in making bread. Where is bread normally made?

**Ps:** (a few) Flour.

**T:** Where is it normally made? Where?

**Ps:** (a few) Bakery.



**T:** Bakery. Right. Let's go through the process. Now let's say - imagine that you are at a bakery and you are watching how bread is made. Alright? Now, I want you to give me the step - How bread is made. Right. Okay? What is the first step? Let's say you are in the bakery and the baker ask you to help him make bread. What are you going to do first of all?

**Lester:** Sieve the flour.

**T:** (writes) *"First I must sieve the flour"*. Why must you sieve the flour?

**Han Yao:** In a big roll.

**T:** I know. But why, why do you sieve the flour?

**Lester:** To make smooth)

**Han Yao:** To make smooth)

**T:** What else? Why do you sieve the flour? When you buy the flour, why must you sieve it? Why can't you use it as it comes in the packet? Ah?

**Han Yao:** To make the bread smooth.

**T:** When you sieve the flour, the flour becomes softer, right? Smoother, but what do you get rid of from the flour?

**Han Yao:** Ah?

The teacher asked a question relating to the first step in making bread by creating an imaginative situation. Three questions related to the same matter and were asked consecutively. The length of the teacher's utterance, relative to pupil's utterance, was significant. The teacher expectations in the stages of making bread were very specific. There was no place for any pupil negotiation of the response. The question was a checking of knowledge of the steps involved. But her second question, to which she had a pre-determined answer, was irrelevant to



the story that was being written. The piece of writing being generated was focused on the use of sequence markers and the genre of recipes (teacher-identified objectives). In asking for an explanation for sieving the flour, she had brought in a step which was irrelevant to the genre and the task at hand. While the two pupils' initial responses were correct, they were not what the teacher had in mind. But the fairly long negotiation that took place between the first step and the next, broke up the pupils' flow of thought and focused on the process of making bread. The negotiation that took place over the reason for sieving flour and the subsequent response or learning was not included in the CDS. In asking both the questions, the teacher looked for display of knowledge pertaining to sieving flour. The rest of the discourse followed in the same manner:-

#### **Teacher A**

- T:** After that what do you do?
- Lester:** Add yeast and milk.
- T:** *"...some yeast and milk"* (writes). To where?
- Lester:** To the bowl.
- Han Yao:** To the flour.
- T:** What is yeast? Ye Meng? What is yeast? Can anyone tell me?
- Gerald:** A type of milk.
- Lester:** Like yoghurt.
- Han Yao:** Like cow milk.



- T:** It is made from where?
- T:** Milk, New Zealand. How do you know it is made from New Zealand? Why do we use yeast in bread?
- Lester:** To make sweet.
- T:** Does yeast make the bread sweet?

The entire discussion which followed was a rapid question - answer session with the pupils responding in short phrases. Hence, at every stage of stating the process of making bread, what followed was a 'discussion' of either knowledge or word meaning. The 'discussion' was limited to checking knowledge rather than at expanding information. The checking knowledge approach could lead, in its own way, to expanding information. But because the teacher was focussed on obtaining the 'correct' answer, the approach did not lead to an expansion of information. In writing the CDS, the teacher used questions to generate the sentences that would make up the 'story'. Unlike in the shared reading session, in the CDS, the teacher made use of only display questions. None of the six class-dictated stories observed contained any referential questions. As in the shared reading sessions, the referential questions occurred outside the CDS, usually prior to the writing:-

#### **Teacher A**

- T:** Let's say if your house is on fire, are you going to pack your things and bring them out with you?
- Ps:** (Laugh) No.
- T:** Are you going to do that?



- Lester:** Life is very precious.
- T:** Ya, definitely, your life is precious, not your things. You are not going to pack your things!
- Lester:** If all our things burn down, then?
- T:** Never mind, if you have lost your things, your life is saved, right? You can always start new again. You buy things.
- Lester:** How if we have no money?
- Han Yao:** How, if the money burn?
- T:** Don't worry.
- T:** In Singapore, if your house is burnt down, you can be assured you will be given help. The government will help you and your family. You don't have to worry, "Oh, dear! I got no money".
- Ps:** (Laugh).

This entire discussion occurred before the actual writing commenced. The teacher was relaxed and was discussing a fire drill at school, where pupils have to assemble at a particular venue. A pupil suggested an alternative venue to which the teacher pointed out that "it depends on where the fire is". In this episode, as in several others, the pupils asked the teacher questions or offered her alternative challenges to what she had said:-

- Lester:** "How, if we have no money?"
- Han Yao:** "How, if the money burn?"

Another reason for the lucid flow of talk during such discussions could be the lack of fragmented focus on content. Pupils needed only to attend to the one area of content being explored, which was easier



to follow and contribute to. The teacher herself, during such discussions, was commenting and becoming part of the talk and the topic being explored. She was not testing pupil's knowledge or checking their understanding so there was no threat of giving a wrong answer. Her opening question in the episode was in the nature of a challenge. Similarly, her closing response was not a question or feedback but a reassuring comment. This is collaborative talk because both teacher and pupils are negotiating what they would do in the event of a fire and thinking aloud their inner thoughts and feelings. It was the pupils' varied responses that led to the teacher's long comment at the end.

Like the shared reading sessions, the talk that occurred in the writing of the CDS developed distinctly from the talk that preceded it. There were, in other words, two parallel types of talk going on during the CDS. The one during the CDS was highly focused and involved the teacher asking display questions to generate responses (sentences) she had in mind. It was not pupils' language or ideas that she was interested in but her own set of seven sentences that would make up the CDS. This was evident because, where pupils responded by using structures or language (vocabulary) the teacher had not anticipated, it was replaced or expanded upon by the teacher.

To sum up, Teacher A's use of referential questions to generate exploratory talk occurred outside the story which was being written. It did not occur during the story or as the text was being written. (In the shared reading class, the talk that occurred during the discussion



of each page gave rise to two sets of story-talk being developed simultaneously).

Talking through ideas or the language that may be used to express it, was thus absent during the focused writing of the CDS. A possible explanation for this could be that the teacher perceived the CDS as a teaching session and therefore pupils' input was minimal because the teacher possessed all the information - the final product (CDS) and the process (of writing it). In fact, at the interview, Teacher A said that she found it "very difficult sometimes to get the pupils to use the exact structure or word you want them to use. So finally, you end up saying it yourself".

Teacher A's use of display and referential questions during Shared Book Reading and the Class Dictated Story lessons is given below:

**Table 3: Shared Book Reading**

**Frequency of Display and Referential questions**

<b>Lessons:</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Display Questions</b>	<b>20 (32)</b>	<b>16 (30)</b>	<b>19 (32)</b>	<b>21 (35)</b>	<b>17 (30)</b>	<b>19 (32)</b>
<b>Referential Questions</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>

**\*The figures in parentheses refer to the total number of episodes in each lesson. The definition of 'episodes' is given on pp. 308.**

As the table above shows, the number of episodes with display questions far outweighs the episodes with referential questions. In the discussions with the teacher, she said that this "could be because I



was focused on ensuring the pupils' understanding so maybe I was checking what they know more than referring to their experiences or knowledge". In the talk which preceded the CDS, although referential questions occurred, it was display questions which predominated.

**Table 4: Class Dictated Story**

**Frequency of Display and Referential questions**

CDS Lessons	1	2	3	4	5	6
Display Questions	9 (15)	15 (19)	14 (17)	11 (15)	13 (17)	11 (15)
Referential Questions	4	4	3	3	3	4

\*The figures in parentheses refer to the total number of episodes in each lesson.

**Teacher C**

In all the shared reading sessions observed, the teacher's initiating talk revolved round display questions:-

- T:

Look at the picture here. Look at the cover. What's the man doing? What's he doing?
- Ps:

(respond in chorus) Roti prata.
- T:

Joanne.
- Joanne:

He's making roti prata.
- T:

Right. Where can you find a foodstall like this?



- Ps:** (chorus) Hawker's Centre.
- T:** Yes, Ganesh. Answer in full, Ganesh (repeats question).
- Ganesh:** We find one like this in a Hawker's Centre.
- P3:** Hawker's Centre, not Hokkien Centre.
- T:** He said Hokkien? Hawker's Centre - we can find food like this in the Hawker's Centre. Now, who are these people?
- Ps:** (a few) Buying things.
- Kai Lin:** Customers.
- T:** Yes, they are customers, okay. Have you eaten this before?
- Ps:** Yes.

The display questions used by Teacher C in this episode to discuss the cover, required pupils to state the obvious and what was visibly clear to all of them. (Prior to the commencing of the lesson when the book was placed on the easel, many of the pupils stated the name of the bread in the picture and some said they had eaten it). The teacher knew the pupils knew what was in the picture as much as she also knew that they were aware of its place of purchase. Nevertheless, she asked them the questions very much ritualistically, as a way of inducting them into the lesson. Another lesson-opening reiterated this practice:

#### **Teacher C**

- T:** Now tell me what you can see in the picture. What is the octopus doing?
- Gabriel:** Finding food.



- T:** The octopus is looking for food? Only Gabriel and Kalavathi are responding. What happened to the rest?
- Fauzi:** (raises hand).
- T:** Yes, Fauzi. What is the octopus doing?
- Fauzi:** (no response).
- Lokman:** (raises hand).
- T:** Yes, Louis.
- Lokman:** Looking for food.
- T:** The octopus is looking for food. What kind of food?
- Ps:** (a few) Fishes.

The display questions thus restricted pupils' participation and engaging in talk because they elicited the obvious. In situations such as this, the usual response was silence because either -

- i) the pupils felt the answer was obvious and easy and were therefore not motivated to talk, (Ganesh, Kai Lin and Kala said that sometimes the teacher "asked easy questions - so we don't answer because everyone knows it") or
- ii) they felt the teacher expected a different answer which was not known to them (based on previous experience that the teacher would not ask the obvious or the easily visible answer, there must be a catch somewhere. Kala and Kai Lin said that sometimes they are not sure if their answer is



right because the "question is tricky" and "Ms... get very angry if you answer wrongly".).

Their prior conversational experience and their perception of the teacher as someone who asks questions to test their knowledge might have prevented the pupils from a spontaneous engagement in talk. Because of their conversational predisposition, display questions almost always seemed to generate only one or two-word responses, as seen in the above episodes. The pupils were not stimulated to say anything more.

Beyond the lesson openings, Teacher C tended to use referential questions rather than display questions. When she related the events in the story to the pupils' background knowledge and experiences, what was captured was a spontaneous flow of participation, which was open and in rapid succession. Unlike display questions, referential questions used by Teacher C generated non-nominated response (without teacher nomination):

Teacher C

**T:** Who has eaten this before?

**Ps:** (many raise their hands).

**T:** Now, who hasn't?  
(hardly any pupil's hand is up).

**Yen Tze:** I like egg one. Got curry also, I like the curry one. Inside the curry got food.



**T:** Okay, okay. Yen Tze likes the curry. Okay? Can eat the roti prata with the curry. What else can we eat the roti prata with?

**Ps:** (a few) Sugar.

**T:** Can eat with sugar?

**Yen Tze:** Sugar too sweet.

**Darrell:** Can eat with chillie sauce.

**T:** Has anyone eaten with chillie sauce?

**Ps:** (a few) Yes. (Pupils get excited and start talking all at once).

**T:** I said raise your hand if you want to answer.  
(Yen Tze raises his hand).

**T:** Yes, Yen Tze.

**Yen Tze:** Sugar.

**T:** Dat Tai.

**Dat Tai:** Onions.

**T:** Onions.

**Lokman:** (Disputes this, response inaudible).

**Yen Tze:** Roti prata got onions, what.

**Ganesh:** Ya, I ate roti prata, got eggs, got onions.

**Dat Tai:** Teacher, I eat Chinese roti prata. Very nice.

**T:** This is interesting, mention about Chinese roti prata. What is Chinese roti prata, Dat Tai?

**Dat Tai:** "Pau" one, don't know what lah (shrugs shoulders).

**T:** What is Chinese roti prata?



**Ps:** (a few) Popia.

(Pupils try to explain what a popia is to the teacher. Teacher listens and as the noise gets louder, she stops the pupils' talk).

**T:** Okay, Dat Tai, one day you bring and show me the Chinese roti prata, okay?

(Meanwhile a few pupils are still engaged in talk about the Chinese roti prata. The teacher, however, continues with her reading aloud of the text).

In this episode, the teacher's one question generated a lot of talk of an exploratory nature not just with the pupils, who were directly responding to the teacher, but the other pupils who were eagerly discussing or describing how they consumed roti prata. The flow of talk here was very rapid, turns taken on without a pause. The nature of the question asked tended to open the floor to the pupils. The pupils were not constrained by their non-standard language, neither did the teacher rephrase or correct the linguistic encoding of the responses. All these may explain the high level of voluntary and uninhibited participation by the pupils. The teacher's interest in engaging her pupils in talk was evident in her comments and her genuine desire to know, for example, what a "Chinese roti prata is" and "You bring and show me the Chinese roti prata, okay?" (The amount of talk - attempts at describing this to the teacher - which occurred in this short episode showed that, for interaction to take place during whole-class teaching, the teacher may sometime have to assume the part of a learner as opposed to a knower. The pupils were encouraged to talk a great deal more as this episode shows,



because the teacher had become a learner - they could now tell her something she did not know).

Teacher C generated talk during shared reading and writing through her use of referential questions. These questions occurred outside her talk about the text and therefore developed parallel to but not within the story-talk:-

Teacher C

**T:** (reads) *"Can your parents help at the school fun fair?" Miss Wong asked. "Yes", the children replied.*

**Dat Tai:** We read already.

**T:** I know you've read the book, okay? Now, what are they going to have?

**Ps:** (chorus) School fun fair.

This display question, based on what she had just read, brought forth a chorus answer. It was a question aimed at testing comprehension. What followed after this is an interesting contrast of pupil and teacher talk about fun fairs.

Teacher C

**T:** Have we had a school fun fair before?

**Ps:** (chorus) No.

**Yen Tze:** We only had a school concert. Don't have school fun fair.

**T:** Okay, where is this place, Ridzwan?

**Ridzwan:** At the classroom.



- T:** At the classroom. Yes, very good. Now, do you like fun fairs?
- Ps:** Yes.
- Dat Tai:** I like to sit the roller coaster.
- T:** Who has never been to a fun fair?  
(Pupil raises hand).
- T:** Yes, Kalavathi.
- Kala:** There is a fun fair at IMM.
- T:** There is a fun fair where? At IMM? Okay.
- Kai Lin:** Oh, ya! I know where already.
- T:** Now for those of you who like to go to fun fair, what about the fun fair that you like?
- Dat Tai:** The roller coaster, very nice.  
(Pupils start talking all at once).
- T:** Yes, Ganesh, like to play?
- Ganesh:** I like to play Top Gun.

This excerpt, once again, shows that where Teacher C talked about the text, it centred around the use of display questions and consequently limited response and short utterances from pupils. The instant she related to their experience or personal knowledge, where the answers were not pre-determined but personal, the pupils could not wait to observe rules of raising their hands before being given the floor or being nominated by the teacher. Referential questions, it can therefore be seen, induce talk because they create the opportunity for sharing and remove the fear of giving the wrong answer. It is referential questions that provoke talk because they personalize the topic of talk and the language of engagement. Whenever the pupils



in Teacher C's class were responding to such questions, they almost always slipped into non-standard, spoken or ungrammatical language, as the excerpts cited show. The focus then becomes the personal content rather than the language or the accuracy.

Teacher C did not use referential questions for talking about the text (story). Instead, she used display questions. The majority of these, however, required the pupils to explain. The how and what questions which had definite answers did not generate as much pupil talk.

Teacher C

T: (reads) *"Amir said, 'My father will help if I ask him' 'Can your father help, Majid?'"*

Now, do you think his father can help?

Ps: (chorus) Yes.

T: Yes? (repeats question).

Ps: (Chorus) Yes.

T: Do you think Majid's father can help?

Dat Tai: Can't, can't, because this boy think that his father is too busy.

This display question was followed by another display question which required the pupils to explain how Majid's father could help.

T: (reads) *"My Appa cannot help. He fries roti prata", Majid said"*



**Yen Tze:** He can sell what.

**T:** Yes, he can sell the roti prata but how do you think Majid's father can help?

**Yen Tze:** Let the principal eat free.

**T:** Let the principal eat for free?

**Ps** (a few) Yes.

(Other pupils start talking).

**Lokman:** Where can?

**Kai Lin:** Ya, not fair.

In the earlier episode, pupils' lack of immediate response could be due to the ambiguity in the question (is it Majid's or Amir's father) or the fact that it is a display question which must have a right answer, although the section of the text that was read did not seem to possess it. Also, the display question "Do you think..?" appears to be open, although implicitly it can only have a 'yes', 'no' or 'maybe' response.

The display question which called for an explanation above, generated a great deal more talk because the answer as to how 'Majid's father can help' was not in the story and, in fact, called for suggestions which were therefore of a personal nature. The pupils thus engaged in talk within their own frame of reference which was nevertheless revealing. In the forty-minute lesson, the display questions requiring specific answers numbered eight, while the



display questions requiring an explanation (not in the text) numbered twelve.

Thus, during the shared reading sessions, the teacher used display questions to obtain pupil response to the story. Alongside this, she also used referential questions during talk that arose out of the text, but was not directly related to an understanding of the story. The referential talk occurred throughout the session but was kept fairly short, usually by the teacher putting an abrupt end to pupil talk. Hence, as seen here, it was referential questions and display questions requiring explanations and which did not have fixed or "one right" answer, which created the environment for talk to flourish during shared reading and writing sessions. Also it was during this talk that the teacher appeared to be listening to the pupils.

Teacher C's shared writing lessons were different from those of the other two teachers, because her demonstration of CDS was very limited. She did not model the process or content of writing for her pupils. While the other two teachers modelled writing through the CDS, before setting pupils group writing, Teacher C assigned group writing straightaway. Her talk was restricted to telling pupils how to approach their writing.

**Teacher C**

**T:** How are you going to start? Two-finger spacing, okay?

**Kala:** Cut the paper.



- T:** Use two big pieces. I said you write in paragraphs. First paragraph will be on your ...?
- Ps:** (chorus) Introduction.
- T:** Next?
- Ps:** (chorus) Body.
- T:** Lastly?
- Ps:** (chorus) Conclusion.
- T:** Yes, okay. Now, when you write down the steps, use the words you used for your recipe: - First, after that, then ... .
- Kala:** Just like writing a recipe.
- T:** Yes. But you are not supposed to number. Don't number. I don't want numbering.
- Yen Tze:** Then can write A, B, C, or not?
- T:** No, no, no! When you write, you have to tell me the steps. Tell me how you made the helicopter. First, after that, next, finally.

Teacher C, despite not modelling the actual writing of the story, drew the pupils' attention to the language structures she wanted them to focus. She also related this to a previous task they had done. The talk that arose was, therefore, focused on the instructions and the expectations of the finished product. However, prior to setting the children on the writing task, Teacher C carried out an 'experience' with the class where she demonstrated an activity like "making a sandwich" or a "helicopter". In the talk during the demonstration, the teacher did not ask any questions or engage pupils in talk of any



kind, but pupils commented at different stages of the demonstration, albeit in a limited way, to some of which the teacher responded:

**Teacher C**

**T:** This is the outline of the helicopter (showing diagram).  
You cut along the lines.

**Yen Tze:** The dotted lines.

**T:** The bold lines (demonstrates).

**Darrell:** Looks like cut already.

**Kai Lin:** Teacher, every group have one or two paper?

**T:** What should you do when you wait for me?

**Ps:** Fold our arms.

**T:** Fold your arms.

**Kala:** Never cut the black line in the middle. (Didn't, forgot to).

**T:** Yes, there's another bold line right at the centre, which you must cut, okay?

**T:** What to do to these two parts (holding up the paper)?

**Ps:** (chorus) Fold.

**T:** Yes, you fold.

This short excerpt of a language experience lesson shows that the teacher would accept talk that was relevant to what was going on but denounced talk (questions) that was not directly related to the lesson at hand ("What must you do when you wait for me?") She allowed pupils to talk either by completing sentences for her or commenting on what needed to be done:-



## **Teacher C**

**P:** This is like the wing you know.

**T:** This is the blade of the helicopter. To make it fly this is what you do (demonstrates). Pull it up and let it ...?

**Ps:** (chorus) Go.

**T:** Yes, good.

**P1:** Wah! Them easy to make one.

The pupils were very relaxed and talked during the lesson. Unlike the reading sessions, these showed the teacher not asking questions where pupils had to display their knowledge. In fact, during the LEA, the pupils asked questions - though they related to the presentation of the writing rather than the content or language.

At the beginning of every LEA lesson, the teacher involved the pupils with what she was about to do by referring to earlier lessons in the week. She did this after explaining the purpose and procedure of the lesson for the day:-

## **Teacher C**

**T:** We are going to make a sandwich today. We will make an egg and cheese sandwich and then I will show you how to write a recipe. And then you work in your group and make whatever sandwich you want to make, and then you write a recipe for the sandwich you make.



or --

**T:** Remember, yesterday we talked about making things, right? From paper plates, from bottles, right? Today, you are going to make your own helicopter.

She generated talk during these sessions by asking pupils about their experiences:-

**Teacher C**

**T:** Who has made sandwich before at home? What kind of sandwich have you made? Yes, Gerald.

**Gerald:** Tuna.

**T:** Tuna sandwich. Ganesh, how about you?

**Ganesh:** Egg sandwich.

**T:** Egg sandwich. Who else, raise up your hand?

This talk, as evidenced above, was limited and while it was not display questions the teacher was asking, the questions did not lend themselves to generating talk about making a sandwich. In this sense, the talk did not add much to the lesson or the pupils' experience. It was rather a routine the teacher observed as an ice-breaker to the lesson demonstration. All the writing lessons followed this format. Hence, although the pupils were relaxed and talked when they had to, language and talk was not used to explore thoughts of the pupils. It was task talk (instructions) that was generated, not expressive talk as in the shared reading sessions. She decided what the task was going to be and the stages of its development were fixed.



**The absence of a challenge in the task might have been another reason for the lack of talk. The fact that in all the writing sessions, the teacher specified the genre and the main language structures to be used might also have allowed little room for any talk by pupils about the language they could use.**

**Teacher C's writing lessons, therefore, although clear in their instructions and language focus, lacked the opportunities for pupils to engage in talk about what they were writing and how they were going to approach the writing. The absence of referential questions might have meant an absence of opportunity for responding and sharing on the part of the pupils.**

**To sum up this discussion on the type of questions used during shared reading and writing, it can be said that -**

- i) all three teachers used display questions to initiate talk with the pupils. It was the most common form of teacher-pupil communication observed in the three classrooms.**
- ii) display questions dominated the discussion of each page of the story (text) and were the main form of teacher talk during shared writing**
- iii) all three teachers used referential questions to explore pupils' background experiences and link them to the stories being read.**
- iv) the referential questions created a parallel story that remained separated from the text story. In some cases (Teachers A and B), the numerous questions fragmented the reading and perhaps the understanding. In short, all three teachers had some of their pupils talking but this to a great extent was limited to answering teacher-posed**



questions. There was little pupil-initiated discussion of the story.

### **QUESTIONS AND STORY FRAGMENTATION**

In asking questions to simplify the text and facilitate comprehension, Teacher A tended to fragment the text into finer parts, which might have hindered understanding. As the excerpts cited earlier show, she chose to focus on aspects of responses that did not relate immediately to the understanding of the story being read. For example, focusing on the pronunciation of the word "dough". The accurate pronunciation was not relevant to the discussion at hand, although, as a vocabulary item, it was. Part of this focus could have been due to the teacher's perception of the shared reading session. In fact, Teacher A saw the shared reading session not as an enjoyable sharing session but as "a means of teaching English". Although officially it is meant to generate enjoyment in reading (see discussion on SBR Chapter 4:209-214), from her point of view, it was a teaching session and therefore every detail needed attention. Such instances abounded throughout several reading sessions:

**T:**           Why do you say he wrap? How does he wrap?

**Lester:**    He wrap the roti prata.

**T:**           What do you call that? What do you call that?

**Ps**           (a few) Flip.

**T:**           Flip. Okay. Do you like watching that?



Teacher A did not consolidate for the pupils, the different lines of discussion that were triggered off within a reading. This was especially important because the pupils were young learners who might not have been able to assimilate several different pieces of indirectly related information within a time span of forty minutes. The fragmentation also made the story that was being read a jig-saw that had to be pieced together - a feat young learners might not always achieve. In fact, when asked at the post-reading interviews what they learnt at the shared reading sessions, all the twelve pupils said "nothing". The range of things covered in a single reading session might have been overwhelming for many children. Nine out of twenty-two episodes within this one lesson were a digression from the story:

Teacher A

**T:** When you go to the hawker's centre to buy... If you make the ready-made one, what do you eat it with?

**Ps:** Curry.

**T:** You all like to eat curry?

**Ps:** Yes.

**T:** Is it very hot?

**Ps:** (some) No.  
(some) Yes.

**T:** Not really very hot, right?

**Han Yao:** My mother make very hot.

**T:** With a lot of chilli?

**Ashwin:** My grandmother is very good in making curry.



**Lester:**      **Teacher, if the person doesn't eat chilli...(incomplete).**

**T:**              **Ashwin, does your mother make curry at home?**

**Ashwin:**      **My grandmother.**

**T:**              **Your father's mother or mother's mother?**

**The questions in the excerpt above, add neither to the content nor the form of the story, but break up the flow of the story. Hence, while the questions obtained answers from the pupils, they did not generate talk about or around the story.**

**In many of Teacher A's shared reading sessions, pupils responded spontaneously when she engaged in referential questioning that was related to their own experiences. This was also due to the fact that the teacher herself engaged in giving comments and accepting the children's input when she was talking about out-of-text matters.**

**T:**              **Why do you say it is not oily?**

**Han Yao:**      **Some say it is not oily because some they every time eat roti prata and then they are used to it. They say it is not oily.**

**T:**              **..... (inaudible)**

**Han Yao:**      **Like the NS men.**

**T:**              **How do you know they eat a lot of roti prata?**

**Han Yao:**      **Because my father eat at home.**

**T:**              **Han Yao, your father likes to eat roti prata?**

**Han Yao:**      **I, my sister. But my father don't like to eat roti prata. Sometimes in the forest they got no fork so they eat roti prata.**

**T:**              **But who makes for them there?**



**Han Yao:** They got cook there. Cook in the lorry.

**T:** Is it?

**Han Yao:** Yes.

In dealing with the text and personal experiences, the teacher asked probing questions. Where the probing questions related to the text, it fragmented the development of the story by giving rise to side talk (away from text) and inhibiting pupils from participating voluntarily. Where they referred to personal experiences, because the teacher genuinely did not have the information, pupils expanded their contributions more willingly. In the discussion of personal experiences, the referential questions necessitated negotiation between the teacher and pupils and therefore resulted in more talk and more pupils getting involved in the talk. But the use of largely display questions to talk about the text resulted in less talk (monosyllabic responses) and fewer (usually one or two) pupils engaged in the talk.

It can therefore be said that Teacher A generated talk during her shared reading session when she was discussing off-text information with her pupils. In these situations, the pupils' responses were tentative, natural and contained all the syntactic and grammatical features which Barnes (1976), observed in such talk. They also displayed more pupil involvement and greater length of pupil input. But the closed nature of the questions and their display nature and pseudo quality during 'discussion' of the text, resulted in an absence



**of talk. The predominance of display questions during shared reading and writing may be explained thus:-**

- i) Display questions because of their call for knowledge display and the implication of requiring and expecting one correct answer led to less talk from and by pupils. The elicited response tended to be shorter and less complex and very often monosyllabic. Part of this might have been due to the 'teacher knows answer' effect, so there was no challenge in participating.**
- ii) Display questions also required the teachers to nominate the pupils to respond because they were all keeping silent. Pupils did not respond to such 'obvious questions' either because they said (during the interview) that they thought the teachers were expecting a "different" answer or it was "too easy" and therefore "let someone else" do the answering. Of the three teachers, Teacher B used the greatest number of display questions per reading and writing session. Teacher C used the least number and none at all during the shared writing sessions. Teachers A and B, on the other hand, used only display questions during the shared writing sessions.**



- iii) Display questions also ensured that the teachers were in control of the lessons as well as the direction they took. Pupils were 'confined' to answering questions which had just one correct answer or which required short one or two-word responses.

Referential questions featured in the shared reading as opposed to the shared writing sessions of all the three teachers. This might have been because the shared reading sessions allowed for talk about and around the story, while in the shared writing the teachers were focused on the language structure (a point they mentioned in their interviews).

Teacher B's referential questions, while attempting to link the story to the pupils' experiences, were constrained and therefore did not stimulate as much pupil talk. Teacher C's use of referential questions, on the other hand, encouraged a great deal of spontaneous pupil participation and lengthier utterances. Teacher A's referential questions outnumbered the other two teachers in terms of the duration. She also engaged in stimulating pupil talk this way at the beginning and end of her shared reading and writing sessions. Very little of such talk happened when the story was being discussed. Teacher B, on the other hand, interspersed every episode or page discussion with referential questions that related to pupils' background experience. These talks were fairly long and developed distinctly.



The talk that was taking place in the shared reading-writing lessons in the three classrooms can be said to be of two different kinds. One level of talk centred around the story, was of a shorter duration, and involved limited pupil response and more teacher display questions. The other type of talk arose out of referential questions, was more spontaneous and involved greater pupil participation. Teacher C's parallel talk is the shortest in terms of duration but succeeded in involving more pupils in the discussion. Hence, while display questions restricted the amount of pupil talk in terms of duration, complexity and length of utterances, referential questions despite their limited use, seemed to have the potential of generating a range of varied and, at times, lengthier responses (Teacher A's and C's classes) and more spontaneous pupil participation. This might have been because pupils were aware that the teacher did not have a particular answer in mind. Thus, because the answers were less predictable, there was more scope for negotiation of meaning. This was not possible with the display questions based on the text, which had a single, pre-determined and known answer. As revealed on pages 343-357, the referential questions asked by Teacher A generated a range of responses because they allowed for pupils' interpretation of the teacher's intentions/meanings. Sinclair and Brazil (1982), Stubbs (1975), and Brown and Edmonson (1984) support this approach to a lesson as an event with its own sociolinguistic norm.



**A possible reason for the limited talk as evidenced in this discussion of the shared reading and shared writing sessions, may be the reluctance of teachers to allow pupils to talk freely and the failure to link other stories, read earlier, to the stories being read. In the case of Teachers A and B, while the pupils were responding they were not enjoying the shared reading or shared writing sessions as stated by the focal pupils, in the interviews. Teacher C's pupils, on the other hand, were not only enjoying the 'lessons' but also used Singlish.**

**Teachers A and B stimulated less talk in their shared sessions, mainly because they perceived them as teaching sessions as mentioned in their interview, and were dominating the interaction. Teacher C, on the other hand, was more relaxed and less focused on the teaching and engaged in as much commenting as questioning.**

**This discussion on the types of questions used during the shared literacy lessons, shows clearly that the conditions that may favour the occurrence of the shared, collaborative talk are reduced teacher domination, informal use of language, open-ended referential questions and a non-threatening environment. These factors may stimulate pupils to talk without having to focus on accuracy of language or expected answer - in such instances the pupils' only interest and focus is to convey their meanings and their feelings in language they had appropriated as theirs.**



**Having looked at the nature of teacher talk and the main types of questions that characterized the talk, it may be appropriate to look at the manner in which pupils responded to the teachers' questions.**

### **PUPILS' ROLE IN SHARED TALK**

**In any shared literacy lesson, the pupils can play a very important role in the development of the lesson. Shared Book discussions and Class Dictated stories depend on pupils' participation and willingness to share experiences. The extent of participation depends on the pupils' prior experience of talk with an adult, the types of motivation present for engaging in talk, the perception of the role of talk and the purposes set by the teacher for talking. For all these reasons, pupils' participation in constructing the discourse will vary. And teachers are going to attend to those pupils who actively participate in sustaining the discourse (Wilkes, 1981:74). In this part of the analysis, the focus is on the type of pupil talk that occurred during shared reading and shared writing in the three classes.**

**One way in which pupils, like teachers, may participate in dialogue is by asking questions. Although the percentage of teacher talk in any classroom is said to be very high, children are, by nature, inquisitive and use questions as the main form of coming to terms with their environment. And this is their major form of communication engagement with adults before they start school (Wells, 1987):-**

**(Mark is having lunch with his mother and sister. Mark has just taken a piece of cheese from the refrigerator so that he can have some).**



**Mark:** Oh, I wan - I want to do this (ie, cut the cheese).  
Oh, cheese.

**Mother:** That's right. Sit up, then!

**Mark:** Look, I'm doing it (cutting the cheese). Can I do it? Can I do it?

**Mother:** Be careful, the knife is sharp! No (that's not right). Cut it straight, not an angle. All right (can you manage)? There you are.

**Mark:** Shall I cut another one? I want some meat.

**Mother:** All right. Eat your cheese, first.

**Mark:** Can I have other piece of meat, Mummy?

**Mother:** Yes.

(A little while later, Mark is looking out of the window. He can see traffic going up the hill in the distance. Mother is in another room and cannot see).

**Mark:** Why going r-round that bend, Mummy?

**Mother:** Pardon?

**Mark:** Why going round that bend?

**Mother:** Round what bend?

**Mark:** That bend?

**Mother:** What's going round the bend?

**Mark:** Bus.

**Mother:** Oh, you can see a bus down on the hill?

**Mark:** Yes. You go down left - you turn left and go that r --- that road and go see traffic lights, see?

**Mother:** Oh, it goes to the traffic lights, does it?

**Mark:** Yes. It goes down there? (looking for a pen to draw with). Where's the pen what Papa - um - gave me? Mummy?



**Mother:** Pardon?

**Mark:** Where's Papa's pen. Draw on there?

**Mother:** You left it at Clifton, didn't you?

Wells (1987:28-29)

This short excerpt shows how, in some cultures, prior to beginning school, children may engage in a great deal of talk with adults and most of this discourse is initiated and sustained by their questions. The questions centre around what they want to know and want to share. And through their questions, children explore new ideas and experiences. As Mark does in this excerpt, when he clarifies why the bus goes round the bend or when he expresses his desire to be involved in the process of cutting cheese. The mother understands his needs and requests not always immediately. Both mother and son engage in groping towards an understanding - this tentativeness and exploration of the intended meaning is facilitated through the questions.

Hence, if talk is to occur in shared literacy lessons, then the responsibility is as much the pupils' as the teachers'. With the teachers, they collaborate and explore the world of the text and ideas generated by it. In wanting to learn and find out, like Mark, the pupils may have to ask questions:-

**Teacher A**

**T:** Let's say, I'm holding it and I drop it and it breaks. What is it made of?

**Ps:** (chorus) Glass.



**T:** We call this a glass tube .

**Lester:** Teacher, if the bottle is very hot, how can the scientist hold the bottle?

**T:** I don't think it is very hot. Otherwise, he will not be holding it in his hand, right?

**Han Yao:** He wear a glove.

**T:** It is wearing a glove?

**Ps:** (chorus) No.

**Lester:** It is very white.

**T:** It is white colour.

**Han Yao:** It is transparent.

**And:**

**T:** Let's say if your house is on fire, are you going to pack your things and bring them out with you?

**Ps:** (Laugh) NO.

**T:** Are you going to do that?

**Han Yao:** Life is very precious.

**T:** Ya, definitely, your life is precious, not your things. You are not going to pack your things.

**Lester:** If all our things burn down, then?

**T:** Never mind, if you have lost your things, your life is saved, right? You can always start new again. You buy things.

**Lester:** How, if we have no money?

**Han Yao:** How, if the money burn?

**T:** Don't worry.

**Aparna:** You can earn money again.



and

**Lester:** Teacher, if there is a fire then, we must pack our bag or not?

**T:** No! Let's say ....

**Lester:** Then what about our bag?

**T:** doesn't matter.

**Han Yao:** Teacher, we must take away our water bottle so we can put out the fire.

**T:** You think your water bottle has enough of water?

**Ps:** No )  
Yes.)

**Lester:** Got little bit only.

In Teacher A's class, the pupils asked questions to clarify their understanding of what the teacher had said or to challenge her observation of the text being read. Lester had inferred from the context (illustration) that the bottle (test-tube) held by the scientist is hot and queried the scientist's ability to hold it. This generated opinions from other pupils and added on to the discourse. Han Yao drew attention to an aspect of the illustration that Lester and the others had missed out. Had it not been for the question, this understanding would not have been possible. Similarly, the question by Lester -

"If all our things burn down, then?"

- not only challenged the teacher's presumed statement, very logically conveyed (but not quite logical for a child) but also created the opportunity for other pupils to become involved in the discourse and for the teacher to explicate the importance of abandoning all



belongings, however precious, and saving oneself in a fire. A similar question in the third excerpt showed the concerns of the pupils as opposed to the teacher. The teacher had her own agenda (Freebody, 1993) and set of questions she had planned for the lessons. In Episode One, she was focused on the material that the test-tube was made of. In the second and third excerpts, she was concerned with talking through things the pupils had done during the school fire drill. Following the discussion, they were to write a CDS. The breakdown of pupils' questions in Teacher A's lesson is as follows:-

Table 5 : Pupil Questions During Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story

LESSON	1	2	3	4	5	6
SBR:	10	8	12	10	11	10
CDS	2	5	6	3	5	3

The Table above shows the number of questions pupils asked during the shared reading and shared writing lessons. Pupils asked more questions during the shared reading lessons than during the CDS. This is because the CDS allowed little scope for pupil participation, voluntarily and the teacher tended to ask closed questions continuously. When the teacher engaged in explanations during the discussion that preceded the CDS, pupils asked questions. There is no evidence of pupils' questions in the lessons of Teachers B and C. Where pupils asked questions, as in Teacher A's lessons, the structure of the discourse moved from the standard I-R-F sequence to P1 (pupil-initiation) - TR (teacher response) and PSR (other



pupils' reaction). This broke the monotony of the lessons and steered it at times along the pupils' agenda and interest. The bulk of the questions asked in Teacher A's class came from two boys. Three other boys participated by responding to the two boys' questions but did not initiate the questioning. As the excerpts revealed the boys were engaged in the talk.

### **PUPILS' UNSOLICITED RESPONSES**

Unsolicited responses are comments or expansions by pupils that refer to a previous response by the teacher or another pupil (Jane Torr, 1993:46), or a yet-to-be made response. The response is unsolicited because the teacher has not called for it and, therefore, is independent:-

**Teacher A**

**T:**               Where do you usually find this type of stall? Where?

**Lester:**       In the Hawker's centre.

**Han Yao:**     Indian coffee shop.

**T:**               Indian coffee shop. Yes. Very good. Where else?

**Aparna:**       Market.

**Lester:**       Pasar malam

**T:**               Do you see it in pasar malam?

**Ps:**            No  
                    Yes.

**T:**               Foodstalls, right?



**Lester:** Teacher, I wanted to make gingerbread man. But I add so much water. Then, it don't want to rise. So I go and change over to the milo tin.

**and**

**T:** Does it taste nice?

**Ps:** Yes.

**Lester:** Peanut butter.

**T:** Have you eaten it with peanut butter?

**Lester:** Yes.

**Ashwin:** Curry.

**Han Yao:** That's not curry, that's ginger sauce.

**Teacher C**

**T:** Who has eaten this before? Now, who hasn't?

**Ps:** (raise hands).

**Dat Tai:** I like egg one. Got curry also. I like the curry one. Inside the curry got food.

Teacher A was talking to the class about the places where roti prata (an Indian-Muslim pancake) is sold. Lester interjected this, as the teacher concluded the discussion with a consolidating clarifying/confirming statement - "Food stalls, right?"

He related the talk about roti prata to his experience of making a gingerbread man (they had tried this in class a few days before). The teacher continued this unsolicited response or sharing by talking to Lester about what he did while other pupils listened. This paired exchange lasted three minutes before the teacher turned to the class to find out how many pupils had gone home to try making a gingerbread man.



In Teacher C's class, Dat Tai expressed a personal preference when the teacher's question was focused on finding out how many of the pupils had eaten roti prata. But Dat Tai's unsolicited response led to the teacher repeating it and eliciting response from other pupils, who participated readily.

In both instances, pupils' unsolicited responses - comment or observation - led to more pupils becoming engaged in the talk. The table below, shows the occurrence of unsolicited responses by pupils in the three classes over six lessons.

Table 6: Pupils’ Unsolicited Responses

CLASS	CLASS A	CLASS B	CLASS C
SBR	61	4	32
CDS	17	2	6

There is an important difference in the occurrence of unsolicited responses in the three classrooms; the difference is more acute in occurrence of such independent responses between SBR and CDS. The fact that pupils talked less during the CDS and the teachers controlled the writing through their focused questions may explain the low incidence of such talk during the shared writing sessions. Pupils in Classrooms A and C contributed to the dialogue during shared reading to a greater extent than pupils in Classroom B and



therefore appeared more involved in the learning environment that was being created through collaborative talk. In Classrooms A and C, the teachers and pupils were negotiating and collaborating in deriving meaning from texts and in bridging the gap between experiential knowledge and textual knowledge. Although the pupil talk was limited, the agenda shifted between the pupils and the teachers as they engaged in this talk and shared their worlds.

### **PUPILS' SOLICITED RESPONSES**

In almost all the lessons analyzed, pupils-solicited responses were in the form of answers to teachers' questions. These answers were sometimes evaluated and at other times ignored by the teacher. They were ignored by the teachers when they were accurate or the expected answer but the pupils failed to observe turn-taking rules, where teacher-nomination was the norm. This happened most often in Teacher B's class, who nominated pupils to answer each question:-

**Teacher B**

**T:** Will Ningko tell Conga the reason?

**Ps:** (chorus) Yes.

**T:** Will Ningko tell Conga the reason, Chia Hong?

**Chia Hong:** Yes.

**T:** How did flea go into cow's ear?

**Rafi:** Jumps.

**T:** (repeats question) Chia hong?



**Chia Hong: He climb the tail.**

**Teacher C**

**T: When you are used to making this roti prata, you only need one hand to crack the egg. Who knows how to crack an egg with one hand?**

**Ganesh: (raises hand)**

**T: Sure? How to crack it open with one hand? Look, look, look at Majid's father (pointing to illustration). Does he use one hand?**

**Lokman: My mother uses one hand.**

**Ganesh: My mother uses two hands.**

**T: You need skill, okay? Because you do not want the egg shell to end up here. Do all the roti pratas come with egg?**

**Ps: (chorus) No.**

**T: Are they all the same?**

**Teacher B ignored the chorus response in excerpt one because the pupils spoke out of turn and, in excerpt two, Rafi's answer was not what she wanted. Teacher C ignored the responses by Ganesh and Lokman because she was focused on emphasizing the difficulty of breaking the egg without the shell falling into the pancake, rather than the skill of doing it with one hand. So she chose to ignore them and consolidated the expected response in her feedback. Teacher A, on the other hand, accepted every response to her question (although unsolicited). But in all the three classrooms, pupils' solicited responses were short. Very often this bordered on one-word responses or Yes-No responses:-**



**Teacher B**

**T:** Oh, the lizard will step on the beetle and then what will happen to the beetle?

**Sze Lin:** Die.

**T:** Flatten and die.  
(Rafi raises hand).

**Teacher C**

**T:** Majid's father or Amir's father? No, Amir's father is just too busy. How about Majid's father? He is willing to help, isn't it? Yes, he's willing to help? Okay. Now Majid is thinking, right? How do you think he is feeling now?

**Lokman:** Happy.

**T:** Happy.

**Khairul:** Glad.

**Dat Tai:** All easy words, ah?

**T:** Why glad, Khairul? Come on. Why should he be glad? Yes, Darrell?

**Darrell:** He is smiling.

**T:** He is smiling here. Joanne.

**Joanne:** Because his father is not too busy to help.

**Teacher A**

**Lester:** After he smell the gas.

**Ashwin:** After he sneeze.



- T:** Okay, Ashwin says after he sneezed then he realised that the kitchen is on fire. Let's read to find out (reads). What happened? Did he use a cup of coffee?
- Ps:** No.
- T:** Did he?
- Ps:** No.
- T:** Did he try to stop the fire?
- Ps:** No.
- T:** The fire was too big. So what happened? Now he called for the ...?
- Ps:** Fire engine.
- T:** The fire engine. Yes. Okay? The fire was very, very big. Alright? So the fire engine had to come.
- Lester:** Spray water.
- T:** Now, what car is this?
- Lester:** Police.
- T:** Why do you think the police came?
- Lester:** The police want to put it on the news.
- T:** Ah? They came to investigate, right? What happen. Whose fault it was?

Because the lessons seemed to be aimed at obtaining/transmitting information, the responses might have been short. Pupils' responses appeared relatively longer when reader response seemed to be the focus of the elicitation.

#### **Teacher B**

- T:** It's on top of the mountain. How do you know it's a mountain? Si How, how do you know it's a mountain?



**Si How:** The title.

**T:** Oh, the title. Alright. Gather from the title. Now, what's the insect doing on top of the mountain? Ek Peng?

**Ek Peng:** Maybe he is shouting to other people who don't know.

**T:** What shouting? Shouting that he's the King of the Mountain. Alright. How does he feel being up there? How does he feel? Faizal?

**Faizal:** He feel happy.

**T:** Alright, he's very happy .

When the response from the pupils was a question of opinion or personal feelings, the pupils tended to give relatively longer responses (more than two word utterances) that were tentative in nature. These helped develop the talk to negotiate meaning and understanding. However, it was Teacher B who asked more reader response questions than the other two teachers, although the response elicited was not in relation to the story being read, but in response to the parallel out-of-text talk that was being developed. Teacher C did not employ any reader-response questions so the engagement in talk, where pupils groped towards an understanding of the text and linked it to their experiences, did not seem to prevail. On the whole, solicited pupil responses were always shorter than unsolicited pupil observations.

To sum up, pupil talk occurred in classrooms A, B and C, when:-

- i) teachers solicited a response by asking a question.
- ii) teachers nominated a pupil to respond (Teacher B and, at times, Teacher C).



- iii) pupils were asked for an opinion or their feelings.
- iv) pupils initiated the asking of questions (Classroom A).

Pupil engagement in talk through asking questions or making comments occurred relatively more frequently during the shared writing lessons in Teacher A's class. The talk occurred mainly during the pre-writing sessions when Teacher A talked about the writing topic. It was during these sessions that the pupils (Lester, Han Yao and a few other pupils) initiated the questioning or challenged the teacher's assuring statement/comment. The pupils' engagement in talk, however, was controlled by the teacher (A) who enforced her agenda by insisting on a final, concluding comment. In Teacher B's and Teacher C's class, pupil talk during shared writing was limited to answering teacher questions. Teacher C's class featured relatively less pupil talk during the shared writing sessions because:-

- i) there was no pre-writing talk about the content.
- ii) the teacher talk was limited to giving procedural instructions.
- iii) the sessions lasted less than ten minutes.

### **TEACHER RESPONSE/FEEDBACK**

If teachers' questions necessitate pupils' response, then pupils' responses imply a feedback from teachers. Teacher feedback generally performs an evaluative function by providing both comment on the pupil's response, as well as whether it is acceptable to the teacher in terms of what she had expected. Feedback is also



necessary in the classroom because pupils may often be unsure of the accuracy or acceptability of their responses. Feedback thus contributes to learning by formalizing it. Teacher feedback determines to a certain extent the type and complexity of talk that may be generated during shared reading and shared writing.

Feedback takes many forms. As discussed in this section, teachers can provide feedback by -

- i) repeating students' responses.
- ii) reformulating the response.
- iii) extending students' responses.
- iv) affirming and probing responses.
- v) commenting on the response.
- vi) encouraging by using positive markers.
- vii) evaluating pupils' responses.

The use of feedback in the lessons of the three teachers will be discussed in this section.

The following is an excerpt from a shared reading lesson:-

**Teacher A**

**T:** Do you think it's a ghost?

**Ps:** (chorus) No.

**T:** Is it a ghost?

**Ps:** (chorus) No.

**T:** What is this? (pointing to illustration)

**Lester:** Fire.



The teacher was doing a cover discussion of the book, "Sizzle, Izzle, Crackle Pot", on which was an illustration of a flame. The pupils' negative answer was predetermined and concurred with the teacher's expected response, but because of its negative feature, carried with it an obligatory feedback - "then, what is this?" Instead of providing that feedback as a declarative, the teacher re-framed the question which elicited the response that provided feedback on the negative concurrence. Where the pupil response was a positive concurrence it did not bring forth an obligatory feedback either:-

#### **Teacher A**

**T:** Waste paper, right? And then his little teddy is also there. You think the teddy would have caught fire?

**Ps:** (chorus) Yes.

**T:** Okay, now look at the imps, all smiling their happy smile. Look at the boy.

The pupils' concurring response ("Yes") with the teacher's expectations, enabled her to move on to another item of discussion. The absence of direct feedback here did not allow the talk to go on to why the pupils thought it was not a ghost or why they felt the teddy would have caught fire. They answered the teacher's question but she did not provide them with any direct feedback. Her moving on to another point of discussion might be taken as an acceptance of the pupils' answer. In contrast, where feedback was provided, pupils were stimulated to talk:-

#### **Teacher B**



**T:** Why are they so worried? Andrena? Granny says they are worried. Why? Why should they be worried? Why should they feel worried, Shanshi?

**Shanshi:** Did not want Granny to die.

**T:** They don't want Granny to die. Why they don't want Granny to die? (Pupil raises hand). Yes.

**Sze Lin:** They like Granny.

**T:** They like Granny very much.

In repeating the pupil's response, Teacher B confirmed the accuracy of the answer and by framing another new question, she also signalled that that was the only answer. Below is another example which shows the important role of feedback in helping pupils to learn if they have understood the teacher's question and given her the correct or expected answer.

#### **Teacher C**

**T:** Who knows why you have to stretch out the dough?

**Dat Tai:** So you can put the what inside, egg inside.

**T:** So you can put the egg inside.

**Dat Tai:** Onion.

**T:** Okay, that will be later (pupil raises hand). Yes, Kalavathi?

**Kala:** So that you can spread the oil and make it a circle (demonstrates with hand).



**T:** So that you can spread the oil and make a circle. Why, why do you need to spread?

**Dat Tai:** So he can fold it, then all go and fry it.

**T:** Yes, yes, but you are not answering my questions. Now, you stretch out the dough. First, you open it like a sheet. A roti prata is not that big, you know. What is he trying to do to the dough? (pupil raises hand). Yes, Kalavathi?

**Kala:** When it is made, it will be soft.

**T:** Yes, very good. Did you hear what Kalavathi said. Say it again, Kalavathi. So you have a soft roti prata and you can tear. Imagine, eating a hard roti prata!

This exchange in Teacher C's class shows the extent to which pupils' participation became spontaneous when the teacher provided feedback to their responses. Teacher C, by repeating pupils' responses and not evaluating them, allowed the exploration to continue till she reached a point in the interaction where she stepped in to focus them on her question. By repeating the responses, but without the affirmative "yes", she was not confirming their accuracy or acceptability, which indicated to the pupils that the 'correct' answer had not been provided yet. This encouraged them to explore further and thus contributed to the extended talk.

### **REPETITION**

A common observation is that the teachers sometimes repeated student responses. This is quite a common practice, as observed by Brazil and Coulthard (1982:93):-

**T:** How do you use your muscles?

**P:** By working.



**T: By working. Yes.**

**In this, as in other examples cited, the teacher repeats the student's response and then completes it with an affirmative "yes!". This, in a way, serves as feedback for the students. The following excerpts from the three classrooms in this study show the teachers' use of repetition:-**

**Teacher B**

**Rafi: Why kangaroo has a tie?**

**T: Ah! Why kangaroo has a tie? This a story, alright? In the zoo, you don't find kangaroo with tie.**

**Sze Lin: This one is the father.**

**T: Ah! This is the father. To show this is the father. Yes. How come this one has a necklace?**

**Wei Meng: Mother.**

**T: Yes, Wei Meng?**

**Wei Meng: To show it is the mother.**

**T: Oh! To show that it is the mother.**

**Teacher A**

**T: Did he try to stop the fire?**

**Ps: No.**

**T: The fire was too big. So what happened. Now he called for the....?**

**Ps: Fire engine.**



**T:** The fire engine. Yes. Okay? The fire was very, very big. Alright? So the fire engine had to come.

**Lester:** Spray water.

**T:** Now, what car is this?

**Ps:** Police.

**T:** Why do you think the police came?

**Lester** The police want to put it on the news.

**T:** They came to investigate, right? What happen, whose fault it was.

**Teacher C**

**T:** Why not? Why does Majid think that way? Yes, Kalavathi.

**Kala:** He's not like a businessman.

**T:** He's not like a businessman? You mean Majid is not proud of his father? Not proud of his father. He'll be more proud of his father, if his father is a businessman. Okay, should he feel that way?

**T:** ...How do you think he is feeling now?

**Kai Lin:** Happy.

**T:** Happy.

**Khairul:** Glad.

**T:** Why glad, Khairul? Come on. Why should he be glad? Yes, Darrell?

**Darrell:** He is smiling.



- T:** He is smiling, here. Joanne?
- Joanne:** Because his father is not too busy to help.
- T:** Yes, he is glad because his father is not too busy to help. His father can make some time to help the school.

As the lesson excerpts above show, Teachers A and C repeat pupils' responses. Teacher B repeated the entire pupil's response and confirmed it further with a "yes". Teacher C repeated the pupil's response and affirmed it with a positive "yes" at times. Teacher A, however, did not repeat the pupils' responses but moved on to the next question. In the episode cited above, Teacher A repeated the pupil's response only once and affirmed it with a "yes!". In the rest of the exchange, Teacher A either restated the response or asked another question. The affirmative "yes" with the repetition of the pupil's answer implies not a mere accuracy of response but also informs the pupils of the teacher's expectation and closes the exploration of thought. The table below summarizes the use of teacher repetitions of pupils' answers (responses) in the reading-writing classrooms of the three teachers. For each of the shared reading and shared writing lessons the frequency of teacher repetition of pupil answers over the number of episodes is given. (The definition of 'episodes' is given on pp. 309).



Table 7a:TEACHER REPETITION OF PUPIL ANSWERS				
TEACHER B:				
	READING		WRITING	
Lesson	Frequency	Episodes	Frequency	Episodes
1	24	27	10	12
2	24	27	9	14
3	22	30	9	12
4	23	27	12	13
5	20	30	10	12
6	20	26	10	12

Table 7b:TEACHER REPETITION OF PUPIL ANSWERS				
TEACHER A:				
	READING		WRITING	
Lesson	Frequency	Episodes	Frequency	Episodes
1	5	25	3	16
2	4	27	4	16
3	5	26	4	17
4	6	26	4	16
5	5	25	5	16
6	7	26	4	16

Table 7c:TEACHER REPETITION OF PUPIL ANSWERS				
TEACHER C:				
	READING		WRITING	
Lesson	Frequency	Episodes	Frequency	Episodes
1	13	9	3	5
2	15	9	3	4
3	15	9	3	4
4	13	10	5	5
5	15	10	4	5
6	16	10	3	4



**Teacher repetition of pupils' responses in Teacher B's and Teacher C's classrooms was higher during shared reading lessons. The decrease in repetitions during writing may be explained by the (comparatively) shorter duration of the writing lessons and the teacher's perception of the writing lesson as a session for them to "tell pupils what to write and how to go about doing it" because "they don't know how to write". Despite this, Teacher B's repetition was very high during the writing lessons because she repeated every final sentence before writing it on the board. Teacher C, on the other hand, had fewer repetitions because she did not engage in modelling writing (the writing lessons involved mainly the giving of procedural instructions).**

**In discussing the favourable conditions which allow for talk to flourish, it was stated that the teacher must create a non-threatening situation (REAP Guidelines, 1987). Teacher C, above, in not evaluating a response as inaccurate, allowed pupil talk to continue. Another way in which feedback creates a non-threatening, conducive environment for talk to occur in the classroom is through encouraging affirmative comments, which contributes to the positive self-esteem of the pupils:-**

**Teacher C**

**Lokman: Ya, but squid is bigger than the octopus.**

**T: What? The squid is bigger than the octopus?**

**Lokman: As long as the squid.**

**T: Really?**



**Lokman:** Ya, one of my encyclopedia say that?

**T:** Oh! You read it up in your encyclopedia. That's good.  
Okay. But, in this case, it isn't longer than the octopus.

In the shared reading and shared writing sessions observed of the three teachers, Teacher C used positive self-esteem markers when giving feedback to students responses - fifty-two in twelve lessons. Teacher B used none, while Teacher A used fifteen in the twelve lessons.

Unlike Teacher A, who was very much task-focused, Teacher C used a great deal of encouraging positive markers.

**Teacher C**

**T:** What did the peacocks do just now?

**Yen Tze:** show they're proud.

**T:** They tried...?

**Kai Lin:** To sing.

**Lokman:** They try to sing.

**T:** They tried to sing. Okay? Now, good. What did the merbok do?

**Ganesh:** The merbok sang.

**T:** They sang. Very good. Now, which kind of bird did the children prefer to listen to?

**Ps:** (some) Merbok, merbok.

Teacher C on the other hand, tended very often to allow the pupils to complete the answer by beginning it for them, used positive,



encouraging markers "good" and also restated pupil response. This is like Teachers A and B followed by a further question.

In this twenty-minute shared reading lesson, Teacher C used the encouraging response "very good" eleven times. This occurred on an average of once every two exchanges (I-R-F). Although Teacher C's positive reply was also followed by elicitation type questions, they seemed to be intended at moving the pupils on to the next level of meaning or to achieve clarification.

#### **Teacher C**

**T:** Are you sure it's a snail?

**Lokman:** No.

**Darrell:** Teacher, then, why it got two cover? Snail got only one.

**T:** It looks like a snail.

**Darrell:** No.

**Dat Tai:** Then he go under water, ah?

**Kai Lin:** (inaudible).

**T:** Okay, let's see. Now what do you think is the crayfish's - crayfish's reason? Same reason?

**Darrell:** They want to fight.

**Dat Tai:** Of course they doh' want.

**Gabriel:** What if the crayfish is scared of the octopus?

**T:** Yes, that is my question also, Gabriel. Why is he so afraid of the octopus?

**Gabriel:** Because he has sharp teeth.



**T:** Because the octopus has sharp teeth?

**Ps:** (some) No, they don't have.

**Dat Tai:** Sharp claws.

**T:** Gabriel thinks why should the crayfish be afraid of the octopus when he can harm the octopus, is it? Is that what you were saying?

Teacher C, unlike Teachers A and B, seemed to make herself part of the inquiry and the learning process. Her comments and her equally puzzled query "That is my question also, Gabriel" seemed like she was discovering the story and the meaning together with the pupils. This created an affinity and rapport between teacher and pupils and allowed them to be engaged in the talk. In doing so, she showed that not only did she not have the answers but she was with them and they were engaging in the meaning-making process together.

### **CLARIFICATIONS**

Like restatements and reformulations, clarification is aimed at facilitating comprehension. In shared reading and shared writing, both teacher and pupils are oriented towards shared meanings and upon their negotiation of a shared framework that links the story context to their experiences and background knowledge schema. A successful understanding of the story being shared and the teaching points focused therein, as well as retrieving relevant information, organizing it and using it cohesively and coherently to convey a personal message (LEA), requires that the partners in conversations are oriented towards cooperation. But when an adult and forty



different pupils are engaged in this process of shared literacy, differences may arise. The teacher may not be able to comprehend the entire range and variety of pupil responses. Neither are all the pupils going to meet the teacher's expectations (in terms of response, understanding and participation) all the time. For these reasons, clarifications are an important aspect of talk in the classroom. Clarifications also provide conversational participants the opportunity to extrapolate and explore ideas further and engage in active use of language. In seeking and making clarification, both teachers and pupils are attending to what is said and what to do with what is said. This identification of strategies is important in aiding young children's comprehension.

In pre-school adult-child talk, the adult frequently provides additional relevant information to help the child understand the task at hand. This additional information usually follows a request (Wells, 1987). Clarification during shared reading and writing may be used for:-

- i) checking interpretation of a response
- ii) confirming understanding of a response, or
- iii) expanding a response.

The major feature of clarification sequences is the use of "clues". These clues can occur as extensions after a request, can occur before a request by providing the background setting or occur in the course of responding to the request. In mother-child talk, for example, it has been noted that mothers prompt their children spontaneously the



moment failure to comprehend the request is evident. Explicit solicitation is not expected. During shared reading and shared writing lessons, the following categories of clues may be possible:-

- i) backward referencing (to an earlier illustration, text, story).
- ii) connecting experience.
- iii) associative referencing.

In clarifying by providing clues that refer to an illustration, text or story, read or written about earlier in the lesson/week, the teacher is providing clues that are known to all present. This is an exercise in memory or recall connection. In connecting experience to the text being read, the teacher may refer to common knowledge that she already possesses of the types of pupils' experiences or she may access this through talk. In associative referencing, the teacher or pupils may link features that are culturally or linguistically personal to connect with the task at hand. Teacher or pupils may use any of these clues to prompt and extend talk and understanding:-

**Teacher C**

**T:** Where have you seen the octopus, Kalavathi?

**Kala:** When I went to Malaysia.

**T:** You went to Malaysia? Which part of Malaysia?

**Kala:** (shakes head).

**T:** You don't know which part. But you have seen an octopus before?

**Kala:** (nods).

**T:** Tell me more about the octopus.



**Teacher A**

**T:** Do you think he manages to put out the fire?

**Ps:** (some) No.  
(some) Yes.

**T:** What did he do?

**Lester:** He use a cup of tea.

**T:** Did he use a cup of tea? The imps did climb over a pole right. So it's still very hot and very dangerous right? I'm sure there will be an explosion, right? Let's see whether the fish got burnt .

**T:** See, he's not bothered about the fish on fire. Very interested in reading his book. Look (pointing to illustration) at this little fire imp. Ah, they are also very happy because he is concentrating on his book. Look here (pointing to illustration). What did they say?

**Teacher B**

**T:** How did he let them know? Look at that (pointing to illustration). How did he let them know that it wasn't fair? Wei Chuen. How did he let them know? See, what is he doing here? Joshua.

**Joshua:** He's jumping and crying.

**T:** He's jumping and crying. Crying. Look at his mouth (pointing to illustration). Why is his mouth so big and wide open? Why is his mouth wide open like that? What does it show, Wu Han?

Teachers A, B and C all used clarifications in the above excerpts to facilitate comprehension of the texts being read. Teacher C clarified by connecting pupil experience to the text. Teacher A reframed the



pupil's response into a question and then drew on other evidence in the text to clarify for the pupils the sequence of events. She also used a pre-sequence directive "Let's see whether the fish got burnt", to focus them, read the relevant part of the text and then made the inference for them. Teacher B, on the other hand, framed the request and then directed pupils to the clues in the illustration. She then repeated the question and extended it and ended it with another clue from the text. Teacher B used clues such as these occasionally to clarify the reading of the text. She used them more frequently in talk outside the text. Teacher A's use of clarification clues occurred more in connection with text comprehension. Where her clarification clues outside the texts occurred, they were usually limited to the pre-reading talk. Teacher C's use of clarification clues was evident in talk about the text as well as personal experiences of the pupils. The following tables capture the distribution of clarification clues used by the three teachers during shared reading and shared writing:-

**Frequency of Clarification Clues Used by Teachers During SBR & CDS**

TABLE 8 : CLARIFICATION CLUES				
SBR (6 Lessons)			LEA (6 Lessons)	
	No.	Episodes	No.	Episodes
Teacher A	60	155	20	97
Teacher B	40	167	11	63
Teacher C	35	57	5	18

All three teachers used fewer clarification clues during shared writing. This is mainly because the teachers were focused on writing



their pre-planned sentences and did not generate independent pupil sentences. Teacher C's use of clarification clues during shared writing was insignificant, because she did not model an entire CDS. Her clarification clues were also focused on the mechanics of the writing task rather than on the pupils' use of language, development of content or acquiring the skills of writing. Her clarifications, therefore, focused on the size of the margin, the identification of the sentences, numerically or alphabetically, and spacing between words. Except for Teacher A, who used cultural knowledge twice during her shared reading and writing lessons to clarify pupils' understanding of the text being read, the other two teachers did not display such information. Although Teacher B engaged in expanding on cultural information relevant to her ethnic background (bound feet among old Chinese women - "Granny" by Christine Lim), she did not use this specifically to bridge the text-experience gap of the pupils.

### **QUESTION FRAMING**

For feedback to occur, the framing of the questions is also important. Closed questions do not generate a range of responses or long response. So, teachers may feel no obligation to provide feedback to confirm or refute the answers. Similarly, questions which have a narrow and limited focus may also not culminate in teacher feedback because of their small parts-build up-whole picture effect. The following example displays this pattern:-

**Teacher A**

**T: ....Do you think the girl will listen to the mother?**



**Ps:** (chorus) No.

**T:** How do you know?

**Ps:** Because the imps told her.

**T:** What did the imp tell her?

and --

#### **Teacher B**

**T:** Next, whom will dog meet? Ai Hua, whom will dog meet? Hwee Li?

**Hwee Li:** Dog will meet a cow.

**T:** Dog will meet a cow, Faizal.

**Faizal:** (inaudible).

**T:** In a sentence.

**Faizal:** The dog will meet a tiger.

**T:** Yazir, what's your guess?

**Yazir:** The dog will meet a crocodile.

**T:** The dog will meet a crocodile. Will the dog meet a cat?

**Ps:** (chorus) No.

**T:** Will the dog meet an ant?

**Ps:** (chorus) No.

**T:** Chia Hong, will the dog meet an ant?

**Chia Hong:** No.

**T:** Why not?

**Chia Hong:** The ant is a small animal.

**In the excerpt above, Teacher A broke up the questions into smaller frames to facilitate comprehension. Each question, answered**



correctly, thus led on to the next. In the post-lesson interview, the teacher said that she built up her lessons this way, because of the focus on pupils' comprehension of the story. Because there was no direct feedback, the pupils had to infer from the next question which followed that their responses were correct. The teacher felt no obligation to provide direct feedback to the pupils because she had reduced the questions to smaller units (shorter chunks). She said in the post-lesson interview that because the questions she had asked were shorter and "helped the pupils to understand the story, there was no need to tell them if their answers were right. They will know it anyway".

Teacher B's lack of feedback, on the other hand, may be due to the introduction of the prediction element into the question - "whom will dog meet?" (the answer is not on the page that the teacher had read), for which the pupils could suggest any answer. This continued till the teacher decided to read the text (on the next page) and the pupils learnt that the next animal to be met by the dog was a cow. Despite the wrong predictions, the teacher did not provide feedback. Teacher B explained it thus: "I just wanted them to guess. Even if they get the wrong answer, they will know when they read the next page".

**Teacher B**

**T:**                Why was the kangaroo feeling it was not fair? Why did he say "it wasn't fair" Gek Peng?

**Gek Peng:** Because ... fuss over the baby kangaroo.



**T:** Why should he say "it wasn't fair?" Siva? Why should it make this remark "it wasn't fair?" Why should the kangaroo say "it wasn't fair?" Yes, Siva.

**Siva:** Because it's a baby brother.

**T:** So, why? Why should the kangaroo say it wasn't fair? Yoga?

**Yoga:** Because everyone see the baby brother. Don't want to let the boy see him.

**T:** So the kangaroo say "it wasn't fair"?

In the post-lesson interview, Teacher B said that she was trying to get the students to be precise in their response and, in expecting that, she did not tell them why their responses were inadequate. Although all three pupils had given the correct response, their phrasing of the responses was different from the teacher's expectation. So that, at the end of the three turns, she concluded the discussion by turning her question into an interrogative declaration. The teacher said she wanted the pupils to say "It wasn't fair because the baby kangaroo was getting all the attention". At the end of this exchange, it was not clear if the students had understood the teacher's question/expectation but the teacher moved on to the next topic.

Very often the confirmation of a response was followed by one or more questions.

**Teacher B**

**T:** Why should he say it wasn't fair? (repeats) Siva. Why should it make this remark it wasn't fair? Why wasn't fair? Why should the kangaroo say it wasn't fair? Yes, Yoga. Yes, Siva.

**Siva:** Because it's a baby brother.



**T:** Ya, so, why, why should the kangaroo say it wasn't fair?

**Yoga:** Because everyone sees the baby brother. Don't want to let the boy see him.

**T:** Ah, forgot about this kangaroo? Forgot about ....

**Yoga:** Ya.

**T:** ...this kangaroo. So the kangaroo say it wasn't fair. Yes?

**Hwee Li:** Why kangaroo has a tie?

**T:** Ah, why kangaroo has a tie. This is the story alright? In the zoo, you don't find kangaroo with tie.

**Rafi:** This one is the father.

**T:** Ah, this is the father. To show that this is father. Yes. How come this one has a necklace?

**Wei Meng:** Mother.

**T:** Yes, Wei Meng.

**Wei Meng:** To show it is the mother.

**T:** Oh, to show that it is the mother. Then where's the baby?

**Ps:** (pointing to illustration) There.

**T:** Where's the baby? Hanafi, come and find. Cannot see the baby. Where's the baby? What is this?

**Rafi:** Baby.

**T:** Where's the baby? How come can put inside?

**Rafi:** (points to pouch)

(Several pupils respond but teacher picks on Si How).

**T:** Si How.

**Si How:** The baby inside the mother pocket.



**T:** Inside the mother's pocket. Yes, Sara.

Teacher B, in this excerpt repeats the pupil's answer by reformulating it or restating it and then follows it with another question. In this way she adds on to the pupils' information and leads them on to further talk. Here, Teacher B repeats the pupil's responses and then moves on to frame another question.

Teacher A's response to students' answers always used a further probing question. Her response was, therefore, always another question elicitation. The examples below display this:-

**Teacher A**

**T:** Who is this man?

**Ps:** Doctor, scientist.

**T:** Who says it is a doctor?

**Ps:** Rafi.

**T:** Why do you say he's a doctor:

**Ps:** Because he is doing an experiment.

**T:** How do you know he is a scientist?

**Ps:** Because he is doing something? Title.

**T:** What is that something? Right, doing the experiment.  
How do you know he is doing the experiment?

**Lester:** Because he is pouring for ...

**T:** Alright. What are these? What are these?

**Han Yao:** Water, experiment water.

**T:** What do you call that? All this equipment.



**Han Yao:** Experiment water.

**T:** Inside there is water right (pointing)? But all this equipment. What is it? What do you call this bottle? This bottle.

**Lester:** Funnel.

**T:** This is a funnel, yes. This is a funnel. How about this big, big bottle. What do you call them?

**Han Yao:** Water bottle.

**T:** Not water bottle. Not the water bottle that you carry to school.

**Ashwin:** Milk bottle.

**T:** Not milk bottle. Does it look like milk bottle?

**Ashwin:** Yes. (pupils laugh).

Teacher A, in this excerpt, engaged in probing the pupils' responses and thereby ensured clarification or understanding of the text by the pupils. She said pupil understanding was her main objective so she wanted "to make sure they knew what they were reading" (post-lesson interview). As the excerpt revealed, she also used the confirmation marker "yes" as well as reformulated the pupil's one, two word utterances into a complete sentence. This way the pupils were introduced to the language structure.

### **CHALLENGING MOVES**

In addition to clarification clues, challenging moves may also generate talk during shared literacy lessons. Burton (1982:71) defines challenging moves in discourse as functioning to "hold up the



**progress of that topic or topic-introduction in some way". Just as:**

**supporting moves function to facilitate the topic presented in a previous utterance, or to facilitate the contribution of a topic implied in a previous utterance, challenging moves help to sustain talk. (Burton, 1982 :71)**

**Challenging moves can be made by withholding an expected or suitable reciprocal act, where such an act was expected by an earlier initiatory move. Where a teacher does not reply or respond to a student comment or response, then the options for pupil talk are open (Sacks, 1972: Turner, 1970; on justifiable absences):-**

**Teacher C**

**T: Before we go on, I just want to know why do you think the black shark said "yes"?**

**Yen Tze: Because shark like baby.**

**Lokman: It like the octopus.**

**Kai Lin: Maybe the black shark will harm him.**

**(Several other pupils talk but it is inaudible).**

**In this short exchange, the teacher did not confirm or respond to the first pupil's response. She did not give any comment and therefore other pupils ventured to give reasons and participate in the talk.**

**Teacher A**

**T: Alright, now he is shouting for his mother. Do you think the mother will come?**

**Ps: (chorus) Yes.**



**T:** What will the mother do?

**Lester:** Call the fire engine.

**Han Yao:** Take a pail of water and splash.

**Lester:** Waste time.

**Han Yao:** No, call a fire hydrant.

**Han Yao:** Not hydrant, fire engine.

**T:** Would she call a fire engine?

**Ps:** (chorus) Yes.

**Han Yao:** Then no time already, lah.

The question "what will the mother do" elicited a response to which a teacher feedback in terms of acceptance, acknowledgment or affirmation was expected. But Teacher A did not respond and so the pupils continued till the teacher chose to reply by a question. Short as these exchanges were, they pointed to the important role challenging moves play in engaging pupils in talk. In this study, only Teachers A and C engaged in these moves, few though they were in the lessons that were recorded. Teacher C's shared reading lessons consisted of five such moves while Teacher A's lesson had only three. Teachers can also make a challenging move by supplying an unexpected or inappropriate act such as asking a question when an evaluation was expected. As the examples below show, these may generate pupil talk:-



**Teacher C**

**P:** Maybe it's a baby squid.

**T:** Maybe it's a baby squid? Maybe. Okay. Now why do you think the squid will not play with the octopus?

**Darrell:** He hasn't got weapon.

**Gabriel:** Maybe ah, ah ... this squid is a boy one and he is taking a flower to his girlfriend.

**Kala:** (raising voice) Where got flower under water?

**T:** I don't get you, Gabriel?

**Gabriel:** He is taking a flower to the ...

**Yen Tze:** That's not a flower.

**and**

**T:** Now, what do you think is the crayfish's reason? Same reason.

**Yen Tze:** They want to fight.

**Darrell:** Of course, they doh want.

**Gabriel:** What if the crayfish is scared of the octopus?

**T:** Yes, that is my question also, Gabriel ....

**Kala:** Because he has sharp teeth.

**Yen Tze:** (and a few others). No, they don't have.

**Lokman:** Sharp claws.

**The teacher, instead of confirming or replying to Gabriel's comment, reciprocated with a question that placed her on the same plane as the pupils. This might have engaged other pupils in the talk. As these**



exchanges show, the moment the teacher reciprocated with the expected act, the pupils discontinued their talk.

### **REFORMULATIONS**

Reformulation is a form of feedback that teachers engage in and usually takes the form of a contextually meaningful paraphrase followed by extension of content. It is common for teachers to reformulate a part or the whole of a pupil's response:-

**T:     Why do you put petrol in?**

**P:     To keep it going.**

**T:     To keep it going. So that it will go on the road.**

**(Brazil & Coulthard, 1982:93)**

Reformulations are important for young learners because in doing so the teacher models both language (form) and content. In English as second language environments, this can contribute significantly to learning the language. In this study, the data revealed that Teachers A and C, who repeated pupils' responses, used reformulations sparingly. They occurred intermittently during the shared reading lessons and were not quantitatively significant. Teacher A, on the other hand, used reformulations to a greater extent. The excerpt cited below displays this:-

**Teacher A**

**T:           Let's say you were going for camping to the forest. And then suddenly, you realize you are lost. What is the first thing you should do?**



- Ps:** Make a fire.
- T:** Yes, try to get some wood and light up a fire.
- Lester:** After that use a cloth to blow the fire away so that when people see smoke they think that somebody is in danger so they wanted to find out what is happening. So the person there are safe.
- T:** Yes, supposing a person, let's say a rescue team, alright, a helicopter - should the pilot see the fire coming to rescue you, the pilot sees the people, what does he see? The smoke, fire, right? So he knows that somebody is there, alright? So he send some signals. Okay?
- T:** ...How about the forgetful?
- Lester:** The mother tell them of the fire and then maybe they forget.
- T:** Or maybe they are frying an egg, then what happens?
- Lester:** Then someone call.
- T:** They go and answer the phone call. They forget that the fire was on. They forgot to turn it off, right? They are busy talking to their friend on the phone. Then, what happen?
- Lester:** Explosion.
- T:** There's an explosion, right? There will be fire. Okay. Then what happened? Where do you think they would have gone after that?

In reformulating pupils' responses, Teacher A not only encased them in accurate linguistic structure but also extended the information provided by the students and added to it. All of Teacher A's reformulations contained additional information and culminated



with checking understanding either by clarification or by posing another question. This was confirmed by her interview where she stated that she tries to "make sure that they understand" and also "sometimes their grammar and sentence is horrible, so I have to make sure I teach the accurate structure". Teachers B and C used reformulations sparingly:-

#### **Teacher B**

**T:** But now this one is present day. How come Granny still uses this to grind chillies? (pointing to illustration). This one is present day. See, this one is so modern. Okay? Why Granny still uses this? Why can't she use the machine? Wu Han.

**Wu Han:** Maybe granny don't know how to use the machine.

**T:** Sze Lin.

**Sze Lin:** Maybe she is not use to it.

**T:** Ya, maybe Granny is not used to the machine. See, old people sometimes they are used to doing things this way, alright, they, ... then they will stick to the way they are used to. Hwee Li.

**Hwee Li:** Maybe she don't know how to use it.

**T:** Ya, maybe she doesn't know how to operate the machine. Alright? Granny is afraid to use the machine.

#### **Teacher C**

**T:** Now, tell me what you can see in the picture. What is the octopus doing?

**Kai Lin:** Finding food.

**T:** The octopus is looking for food?



**T:** Yes, Fauzi, what is the octopus doing?

**Fauzi:** Looking for food.

**T:** The octopus is looking for food. What kind of food.

As the lesson excerpts above show, Teachers B and C used fewer reformulations in their follow-up to pupils' responses. In fact, Teacher B's reformulation followed along the lines of repetition of pupil response by clarifying it.

**T:** Ya, maybe Granny is not used to the machine.

The remaining follow-up was an extension but it was extension that was coloured by the teacher's own background knowledge and experience which did not synchronize with the pupil's world view. In the post-lesson interview, the pupil explained that her response of 'not use to it' referred to the newness of the gadget and its complex operation mode. When clarification was sought from the teacher at the post-lesson interview, she explained that she had interpreted the pupil's response to mean 'old habits die hard'. She also said that the pupil was "too small to use such a proverb". Within this lesson, Teacher B made six such reformulations. Teacher C's reformulations were the least and may have been due, in part, to the less complex questions she asked. The reformulations did not extend her pupils' knowledge of language or content.

This moves us to the issue of polarity. In engaging in reformulations of pupils' responses, teachers are focused on accuracy and modelling of content and form knowledge. If the purpose of reformulation is to



inform and extend existing information, as well as to show what the teacher's understanding of the response is, it may have to possess polarity because the teacher's purpose in reformulating is to convey acceptance or understanding of the content conveyed by the pupil (see Teacher A's excerpt). Teacher B, by giving additional, new information might be confusing the pupil and therefore needs to offer clarification because her interpretation did not synchronize with her pupil's statement and world-view as expressed therein. Because of the confusion it causes, the absence of polarity may terminate further exploration of the idea by the pupil/s. This closes the talk, while the teacher embarks on another question. Reformulations that extend information provided by the pupils, create opportunities for the development of talk during shared reading and shared writing.

Challenging moves facilitating talk can only occur if pupils feel that they are in a position to inform the teacher (because the teacher genuinely does not know the answer), they know the teacher in asking a question instead of replying (as seen in the earlier examples), is interested in the information and that the teacher will not be offended or insulted by the information to be extended. In the excerpt below, talking about a scientist who has become invisible (in the shared story), the class had moved on to talk about ghosts and the teacher commented on the pupils' various responses:-

**Teacher A**



**T:** When you grow up and you go to the army and you go to the jungle, you see a ghost, then you come back and tell me.

**Lester:** Teacher, that time you have already pass away.

**T:** Are you sure I am going to pass away that fast?

**Han Yao:** You will be old.

**T:** Yes, maybe that time I will come too old, but you can still come and tell me. Right?

**Han Yao:** But we don't know where you live, what?

**Lester:** I know where you live .....

Although this talk was not directly linked to the talk about the text, the teacher took on the pupil's challenge and responded to what another adult may have considered an affront (by the pupil).

Thus, in conclusion, Teacher C provided feedback of a more direct and positive nature to her pupils than Teachers A and B. Teachers A and B were so focused on checking pupils' understanding at each turn that the exchange was dominated more by elicitations than indirect feedback. For talk to occur, elicitations may have to be open-ended and probe pupils' thinking. For this, feedback on pupils' attempts at responding may be crucial. Positive, encouraging, affirmative feedback may encourage pupils to talk spontaneously as well as stimulate more pupils to participate in the talk. In fact, except for Teacher C, who commented on pupils' contributions by extending them and sharing with them her own experiences, Teachers A and B responded to pupils' answers by framing follow-up questions. Thus, Teachers A and B's shared literacy lessons did not conform to Coulthard and Brazil's IRE format, typical of



classroom talk. A typical exchange in Classrooms A and B would be Initiation (Elicitation)-Response structure. This may explain the limited occurrence of shared talk in these classrooms.

To sum up, it can be said that the exchanges did not follow Brazil and Coulthard's observed pattern of initiation (elicitation) in response-feedback. In fact, it can be said that in the lessons of Teachers A and B, feedback was very often not direct but implied. Teacher C tended to use direct feedback and this was confined mainly to the use of affirmative and positive esteem markers like "very good". All three teachers used the following forms of feedback (in order of frequency, beginning with the most frequent):

- 5) reformulating pupil responses (Teachers A and B)
- 4) probing responses by further elicitation questions (Teachers A,B)
- 3) clarifications
- 2) affirming pupil responses directly (TeacherC, Teacher A)
- 1) pupil responses (Teacher A, B and C).

The formulations and probing questions featured more frequently in the lessons of Teachers A and B because their lessons were of a longer duration and as they pointed out they wanted to "make sure the children understood the story". It is significant to point out that feedback during the class-dictated stories was only in the form of



reformulations and follow-up questions. This might have been so, because both Teachers A and B were not talking through the close dictated stories they were modelling for the pupils. Rather they appeared to be asking questions, restating and reformulating pupils' responses and writing them down on the mahjong paper pinned up on the blackboard (see CDS lesson excerpts cited earlier in the section discussing teacher questions, 338-372). Teacher C did the same thing, though to a much lesser extent. Implied feedback thus featured most during the shared reading lessons of the three teachers and this may explain the lesser pupil-initiated talk. What may perhaps be concluded from this analysis of some of the types of feedback which occurred in the classrooms which were observed, is that for pupils to sustain talk, some form of teacher feedback such as clarification, repetition, reformulation or challenging moves may be necessary because they provide direction to children's previous and later responses. However, once the feedback becomes evaluative, it seems to signal the end of pupil talk.

### **PRE-SEQUENCES**

In this section of the analysis, the focus will be on aspects of the shared reading and shared writing lessons that may have an impact on the type of talk that occurs in a primary classroom in Singapore. Another feature of classroom talk is the prefacing of requests by pre-sequences. This is a common occurrence in conversational exchanges that are elaborate and the talk that arises during shared reading and shared writing is fairly elaborate in terms of duration



and coverage. While clarifications function to sustain talk, pre-sequences establish the focus for the talk prior to the request. This enables participants in a talk to be aware of what is expected and to respond accordingly. Pre-sequences are also essential in talk that explores both cognitive and linguistic understanding such as shared book reading and the Class Dictated Story because the request for action is ongoing and because the topic of the talk is constantly changing and evolving. Garvey (1975) defined pre-sequences as the preparation of propositional content. A typical pre-sequence routine may involve a teacher statement or elicitation followed by a response and a teacher evaluation.

In this study, the lesson transcripts of the three teachers were analyzed for the occurrence of pre-sequences first in lesson openings and subsequently in the course of the shared reading and shared writing lessons. Teachers A and B used pre-sequencing only once throughout their twelve lessons. Teacher C used it four times as lesson openings and six times thereafter in her Class Dictated Story sessions:-

#### **Teacher C**

**T:** We are going to make a sandwich. We will make an egg and cheese sandwich and then I will show you how to write a recipe. And then you work in your group and make whatever sandwich you want to make. And then you write a recipe for the sandwich you make.



- T:     Who has made a sandwich before at home? What kind of sandwich have you made?**
- T:     ...Now, before we begin, what do you think we must do? First what do I do?**
- T:     Remember, yesterday we talked about making things. Right? From paper plates, from bottles, right? Today, you are going to make your own helicopter.**

Both these lesson excerpts show Teacher C making explicit the topic or task for the day in her lesson-opening. This pre-sequence is followed by a statement of the response /action required of pupils. In Excerpt Two, the teacher's pre-sequence related back to the topic of the talk that occurred the previous day and its link with the task at hand. Both the pre-sequences were statements and focused the children on the topic of the lesson for the day. The pre-sequences were, however, missing in the shared reading lessons of all three teachers. Teachers A and B did not use pre-sequencing at any point of their shared literacy lessons. The pupils were thus left to infer the purpose of the lesson as well as its focus. The lack of pre-sequences may also explain the distinct development of two different types of talk in the reading sessions of Teachers A and B.

### **TURN-TAKING**

The three main interactional features of classroom teaching are teacher eliciting exchanges, teacher feedback, which includes responses, and turn-taking. All three reflect the teacher's management of talk and the first two have been dealt with earlier. In



a class of forty pupils, the conduct of any talk must be based on some etiquette. The teacher maintains this in two very common ways:-

- i) by nominating a pupil, or
- ii) by requiring pupils to bid by raising their hand.

This way the teacher decides who may talk. In order that every pupil who wishes to express an idea or thought is heard, the rules of turn-taking may need to be observed. This is a characteristic feature of whole class talk. One child speaks when another has finished:-

**Teacher C**

**T:** Who do you think these people are?

**Gabriel:** The visitor.

**T:** Yes, the visitors.

**Kala:** The pupils' parents.

**T:** The pupils' parents and some outsiders.

**Lokman:** No.

**Yen Tze:** Because they all need something to go in what. My sister like that what. Must give a card then can go in one.

**Teacher A**

**T:** Alright, this little girl's mother has told her not to play with the ....?

**Ps:** Fire.

**T:** Candle, okay? Candle which is on the table. Do you think the girl will listen to the mother?

**Ps:** No.

**T:** How do you know?



**Ps:** The imps told her.

**T:** What did the imp tell her? What do you think the imp told her to do?

**Lester:** Play)

**Ps:** Fire.)

To take the floor to speak, pupils must know when the teacher has finished talking. In the two excerpts above, Teachers C and A did not nominate the pupils, but pupils assumed the floor smoothly and responded appropriately. This resulted in a rapid flow of talk where the development of thought was not interrupted or diverted (the pupils spoke when they felt they had something to share). This is conducive to the development of talk because pupils can respond spontaneously and do not have to wait to be nominated. Teacher nomination slows down the co-construction of talk and affects its flow, because only nominated pupils speak and if this is the routine in class, the pupils may soon become adept at responding only when required to.

#### **Teacher B**

**T:** Alright. Let's look at the title page. What's the insect doing now, Tong Peng? What's the insect doing?

**Tong Peng:** Jumping up the mountain.

**T:** Yes, it's jumping up the mountain. Yoga, where do you think it is going?

**Yoga:** The insect is going back to his castle.

**T:** Going back to the castle. Wei Chuen?



**Wei Chuen:   Going to the city.**

**The difference between Teacher A and C and Teacher B was that the latter nominated the pupil who should speak next. This slowed down the interaction. More significantly, it prevented pupils from being spontaneous. Many of the pupils stated at the interviews that they waited for the teacher to nominate and if the teacher did not nominate, they did not share their ideas. Divergent or differing views were thus not heard. Waiting for teacher nomination can also result in pupils having the answers but failing to participate ( Pupil Profiles-pp.490-530). In the classrooms of Teachers A and C, relatively more pupils were involved in responding to their teachers. In Teacher B's class, however, only the one pupil nominated responded, and while others may have had their respective answers, they said during the interview that they would not step forward to express their views until and unless the teacher called upon them (Pupil Profiles – pp.490-530).**

**In all the lessons observed, the greatest amount of spontaneous pupil talk occurred in Teacher C's class, followed by Teacher A. The talk that occurred in Teacher B's class was restricted by teacher nomination. The less the restriction on teacher-nominated turn-taking, the greater the opportunity for divergent pupil responses. This can be seen in Teacher A's and C's classes. Teacher B did not allow for divergent thinking and pupils said during their interviews**



**that they were afraid of providing inaccurate answers and would choose not to respond even if they knew the answers :-**

**Teacher A:**

**T:            Now, look at the fire hydrant here. Does it look friendly?**

**Ps:           Yes.**

**T:            Why do you say it looks friendly?**

**Lester:     One of his eyes, his mouth is smiling at us.**

**T:            What do you think he is trying to tell us?**

**Han Yao:   He is trying to tell us that he is very proud of his job.**

**Ps:           Fire is dangerous.**

**Teacher C**

**T:            Do you think the octopus looks friendly?**

**Ps:           No.**

**T:            Why not? What makes you think he doesn't look friendly?**

**Ps:           (a few) The eyes so fierce.**

**Gabriel:    Ya.**

**T:            Something about the eyes. What about the eyes?**

**Gabriel:    He so fierce.**

**Yen Tze:    I think the eyes very fierce.**

**Lokman:    The eyes look like a monster.**



## **Teacher C**

**T:            When did it happen? You tell me.**

**Gabriel:    Tea break.**

**Kala:        Evening.**

**Lokman:    Snack.**

**Kai Lin:     Morning.**

**T:            When do you have tea? What time.**

**Yen Tze:    Six o'clock.**

**T:            Six o'clock in the evening?**

**Ps:          No, No.**

**Gabriel:    One o'clock.**

**T:            One o'clock in the afternoon? At one o'clock I take my lunch.**

**Lokman:    At three o'clock.**

**Kala:        At four o'clock.**

**T:            At about three or four o'clock. Okay? Afternoon.**

**Teacher B, however, adhered to strict nomination for speaking. Pupils who spoke out of turn were ignored, even if their responses were accurate.**

## **Teacher B**

**T:            Who will sing now?**

**Ps:          (two) Roosters, rooster.**

**T:            Who will sing now, Seng Hong.**



**Seng Hong: Lizard.**

**T: Lizard will sing now! Who will sing now? Sze Lin.**

**Sze Lin: Rooster.**

**T: You think the rooster will sing now?**

**Ps: Yes.**

**T: The rooster will sing now? What will he sing? What will rooster sing?**

**Wu Han: "I am the King of the Mountain".**

**T: Siva, what will rooster sing? Can you sing? Alright, pretend you are rooster, Siva, sing.**

**Siva: "I am the King of the mountain".**

In this excerpt, Teacher A had ignored a voluntary response twice, although it was accurate. This signalled to pupils that they should not speak out of turn.

Turn-taking through nomination and bidding might thus have reduced pupil talk and limited talk to teacher questions and fewer pupils participating. Each time the pupils talked, it was only in response to teacher questions and not to express their personal feelings or views on the point of discussion. Strict adherence to turn-taking rules, in particular waiting for teacher nomination, implies not being able to speak out-of-turn. This means that different and divergent views may not be heard because the teacher may not have the time, in a shared reading lesson, to call out different responses.



## **TOPIC MAINTENANCE**

The data on turn-taking raises the issue of topic maintenance. Classroom discourse transactions are defined as units whose boundaries are typically marked by frame and focus. In a long lesson, like the shared reading and shared writing lessons being analyzed in this study, the teacher prospectively structures and retrospectively summarizes the lessons. This provides pupils with a focus in the learning that is intended. The teacher provides the focus in the lesson usually at the beginning.

In classrooms where turn allocation through elicitation questions is controlled by the teacher, topic maintenance remains in the teacher's hands. However, in classrooms where pupils are free to speak and share their ideas, topic shifts will occur and very often such shifts are pupil-initiated.

**Teacher C:** Today, we are going to make a sandwich. We will make an egg and cheese sandwich and then I will show you how to write a recipe.

**Teacher A:** Now, today we are going to read a very interesting story. I am sure you are going to enjoy it.

Teacher C used this focused beginning in her CDS lessons while Teacher A used it in her shared reading lessons twice. Teacher B did not use it in any of her lessons.

When Teacher C used it, her lessons ran smoothly and pupils stayed on topic (they wrote a recipe for making sandwiches). Teachers B



and A did not use such focusing so during their shared reading lessons their questions tended to lead to the development of a parallel story outside the text. This, therefore, resulted in two sets of parallel talk occurring simultaneously. (See discussion on Teacher Questions pp.334-372).

Both in discussing the story and in developing a parallel out-of-text discussion, Teacher B held the reins for topic maintenance. In Teacher A's and Teacher C's class, although the teachers very often dominated topic shift and change, there were a few instances when pupils initiated both the maintenance and shift of topic (see discussion on pupil response, pp. 393-401). In contrast, during the writing lessons, topic maintenance was absolutely with the teachers.

Framing is an aspect of interaction that is crucial to talk in the classroom, because it not only keeps pupils on course but provides them feedback on the success of their input. As Sacks and Schegloff (1973) have pointed out "frames" help mark boundaries explicitly. In the classroom, frames are realized by markers such as "well, right, OK, good, alright". These mark boundaries in discourse and signal to pupils when a frame of discussion is to be concluded or when it can be continued. They also function as supports in a conversation.

In the data studied, Teacher B used the greatest number of frame markers, followed by Teacher A. Teacher C used significantly fewer. Both Teachers A and B used frame marking to confirm pupil response and conclude a transaction. The greater the use of such frames the more limited the talk that may be generated because it signals the end of the focus of that bit of discussion:-



**Teacher A**

- T:** Now, what is this (pointing to illustration).
- Lester:** Fire hydrant.
- T:** Fire hydrant, okay. What is it used for?
- Han Yao:** Spray water on the fire.
- T:** Okay. Now where can you find this fire hydrant?
- P(not known):** Pavement, tree.
- Lester:** House.
- T:** Alright, along the pavement. Now why are these fire hydrants there?
- Han Yao:** Fireman put a hose there.
- T:** Okay, there's a hose.
- Lester:** The fireman will connect a hose.
- T:** Alright, okay, the fireman will use this fire hydrant to connect his long hose to provide water.

**Teacher B**

- T:** How many of you have heard of China?
- Ps:** (raise hands).
- T:** Alright. Who lives there? Who lives in China, Azhar?
- Ps:** The Chinese.
- T:** The Chinese. Alright. Basically, the Chinese live in China, okay? ....



In the examples above, both teachers A and B used the frame markers to affirm pupil response and to close the transaction. The greater the number of such markers the fewer might be the opportunities for talk because they do not allow talk to continue.

**Table 9: Frame Markers (SBR)**

**Teachers' Use of Frame Markers over Six Shared Book Reading Lessons**

Lesson	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Teacher A	15	12	17	16	17	17
Teacher B	16	15	19	15	16	17
Teacher C	5	5	4	5	4	5

All reading and writing lessons began with teacher questions and were sustained by teacher questions. The questions decided what the pupils could respond to. The closed nature of the questions and the inclination towards testing comprehension and background knowledge did not allow for topic shifts or frame changes by the pupils:

**Teacher B**

**T:** Let's look at the title page now. Why is the little girl staring at the photograph? Why do you think the little girl is staring at the photograph, Gek Peng?

**Gek Peng:** She's looking at Granny's photo.

**T:** Do you think this little baby (pointing to illustration) is her?

**Ps:** (some) Yes.



**T:** Okay, why? Why do you think she is looking at that, Hwee Li?

**Hwee Li:** Because she miss Granny.

**T:** Because she misses Granny. Why should she miss Granny? Where is Granny now? Where is Granny now, Alicia?

It is not only when talking about the text that the teacher steered the direction and development of talk. Even digressions arose out of the teacher's questions.

**Teacher B**

**T:** How many of you have heard of China?

**Ps:** (some) (raise hands).

**T:** Alright. Who lives there? Who lives in China? Azhar?

**Azhar:** The Chinese.

**T:** The Chinese, alright. Basically, the Chinese live in China, okay? So, Grandma was born in China. That's why her feet were bound like that. Do you think the girl's feet are bound?

**Ps:** (some) No.

**T:** Are they bound, Joshua?

**Joshua:** No.

**T:** No. Will Grandma bind her feet? Do you think Grandma will bind her feet?

**Ps:** (some) No.

**T:** Sze Lin?

**Sze Lin:** No.

**T:** Why not?



The convergent pupil responses not only enabled Teacher B to move on to the next question but also showed that the pupils were attuned to responding only to questions. This meant any move towards a change in the topic of talk could and would possibly be effected only by the teacher.

In another writing lesson, the teacher had asked the pupils to close their eyes and listen to some music. Listening to the music, they were supposed to imagine they were going on an adventure. After five minutes, the teacher stopped the music and the class discussed where they 'had been'. Following this brief discussion, the teacher started writing the story (CDS) on the board.

**Teacher B**

**T:** Oh, the music sounded Indian. Right, Wei Chuen and Shaun think that we were in India. Right, shall we write the place ? (Writes) "*We were in India*". Jia Hong, what did you say just now?

**Jia Hong:** River of Joy.

**T:** (writes, saying it aloud) "*We were at the River of Joy*" It is a capital letter. Alright, what were we doing there? What were we doing there, Yoga?

**Yoga:** We were splashing at each other.

**T:** Where?

**Yoga:** In the River of Joy.

**T:** (writes) "*We were splashing at one another. There were so many of us*". We were splashing at one another. Alright, each other is only two. What else were we



doing? Kim Mee, what else were we doing? Sarah,  
what were you doing?

**Sarah:** We were swimming.

**T:** We were swimming, we were splashing. Anything  
else? Jia Hong.

**Jia Hong:** We were rowing the boats.

**T:** We were rowing the boats, alright. Who were rowing  
boats?

**Ps:** (put up their hands).

**T:** Alright (writes, while repeating aloud) "*Faisal, Alvin  
and Jeremy were rowing the boats*". Were you enjoying  
yourself? Jeremy? Faisal?

**Jeremy:** Yes)

**Faisal:** Yes)

**T:** What were the three of you doing in the boat? How  
did you feel in the boat? Faisal?

**Faisal:** Very excited.

**T:** You were very excited? (writes) "*They were very  
excited*".

**T:** Jeremy, was it the first time you were rowing a boat?  
Jeremy, stand up. Tell us.

**Jeremy:** Yes.

**T:** It was

**Jeremy:** It was

**T:** my first

**Jeremy:** my first

**T:** experience

**Jeremy:** experience

**T:** in a boat.



**Jeremy: In a boat.**

What this excerpt, like the earlier one, shows is the teacher's control of the shared writing. The topic, the description of the experience were all the teacher's. The teacher did not invite the pupils to describe their experience - doing so might have generated talk and a range of varying responses and language use. But throughout this forty minute lesson, the interaction continued in this manner. On many occasions in the lesson, the teacher changed pupil's responses by expanding the content or replacing the linguistic expression. For example, when Yoga said "we were splashing at each other, the teacher expanded this by adding - "There were so many of us". Similarly, sometimes she asked a question but did not include the pupil response in the writing, eg:

**Yoga: We were splashing at each other?**

**T: Where?**

**Yoga: In the River of Joy?**

**T: (writes) "We were splashing at one another. There were so many of us".**

She did not talk through the expansions or the changes she made in the CDS with the pupils. When she attempted to focus on explanation of form, the teacher did this in passing:

**T: "We were at the River of Joy". It is a capital letter.**

**and again -**

**T: "We were splashing at one another ..." Alright? Each other is only two.**



For many children in Singapore, the classroom is the main place for learning English. Because English is not the first language, these teaching points may be missed if no direct attention is called to them. The teacher literally inserted her words or description of an experience making the pupil repeat, word by word, a sentence the teacher finally wrote down as the pupil's and that of the class. This example, like the numerous others observed in the classrooms, showed the absence of pupils' ownership of writing and perhaps consequently the appropriation of language to express their own felt meanings.

The situation was a little different in Teacher A's class. Because Teacher A did not nominate pupils to respond, some pupils assumed speaking turns more often and because of this self-selection, topic drift seemed to occur as in normal conversation. In all the shared reading lessons, although Teacher A introduced the lesson and directed its development, inevitably some pupils broke this rhythm by initiating an interpersonal move which functioned as a topic-carrying act:-

**Teacher A**

**T:**           Where do you usually find this type of stall? Where?

**Lester:**    In the Hawker's Centre.

**Han Yao:** Indian coffee shop.

**T:**           Indian coffee shop, yes. Very good. Where else?

**Lester:**    Market.



**Pupil:** Pasar Malam.

**T:** Do you see it in pasar malam?

**Ps:** (some) No  
(some) Yes.

**T:** Food stalls, right?

**Lester:** Teacher, I wanted to make gingerbread man. But I add so much water. Then it don't want to rise. So I go and change over to the milo tin.

**T:** Did you put it in the oven?

**Lester:** Yes.

**T:** How did it turn out?

**Lester:** The first time I made myself.

**T:** Did you follow a recipe.

**Lester:** No.

**T:** How do you know whether the cake is cooked?

**Lester:** The cake goes flat, immediately I close the oven.

**T:** Did your mother allow you to use the oven?

**Lester:** Yes.

**T:** Did she help you to take it out?

**Lester:** No.

**T:** Then? How many of you went home to try? To make gingerbread?

In this excerpt, Teacher A was sharing a Big Book entitled "Roti Prata" and she had asked the pupils where a stall selling roti prata could be found. Although Lester responded to her question initially, he diverted the topic of talk from the place where the food item was made to his own making of a gingerbread man. He did this after the



teacher had signalled the end of that topic discussion: "Food stalls, right?". The teacher, on the other hand, sustained the discussion with Lester although the topic had been changed. In Teacher A's lesson, some pupils very often introduced a new topic into the shared book talk. The shift in the talk was often unrelated to the topic that was currently being discussed but the teacher maintained the shift:-

#### **Teacher A**

**T:** After that, what does he do with it?

**Han Yao:** Small one first, then big one

**T:** After that, what does he do with it?

**Lester:** Break an egg on it.

**T:** Alright, break an egg on it. And - then?

**Lester:** And then fry it.

**Han Yao:** Double up and fry it.

**T:** Fold it, right? and then put it on the ...?

**Han Yao:** Pan.

**Lester:** He give curry sauce or sugar.

**T:** Lester says that he eats it with curry or sugar. Have you eaten it with sugar?

**Ps:** (some) Yes.

**T:** Does it taste nice?

**Ps:** (some) Yes.

**Jerome:** Peanut butter.

**T:** Have you eaten it with peanut butter?



**Lester:** Yes.

**Lester:** Curry.

**Han Yao:** That's not curry, that's ginger sauce.

**T:** Ginger sauce, is it ginger sauce?

From a discussion on the stages of making roti prata, the talk had moved on to what the bread is eaten with. The topic shift was smooth and unchallenged and blended naturally into the talk (though not with the lesson). Of the ten episodes that developed outside this shared story session, five were pupil initiated.

In Teacher C's lesson, topic changes were not initiated by pupils. However, a divergent response from a pupil to an ongoing discussion triggered the topic shift. The example below shows that the pupils were responding to a teacher question about what roti prata could be eaten with. A pupil's unexpected response triggered off a new teacher inquiry:-

#### **Teacher C**

**T:** What else can we eat the roti prata with?

**Ps:** (some) Sugar.

**T:** Can eat with sugar.

**Gabriel:** Sugar too sweet.

**Yen Tze:** Can eat with chillie sauce.



**T:** Has anyone eaten with chillie sauce?

**Ps:** (some) Yes.

**T:** I said raise your hand if you want to answer. Yes, Yen Tze.

**Yen Tze:** Sugar.

**T:** Dat Tai.

**Dat Tai:** Onions.

**T:** Onions?

**Dat Tai:** Roti prata got onions, what!

**Ps:** (a few) Ya.

**Gabriel:** Ya, I ate roti prata, got eggs, got onions.

**Dat Tai:** Chinese one.

**T:** This is interesting, mention about Chinese roti prata. What is Chinese roti prata, Dat Tai?

**Dat Tai:** Pau, one. Don't know what, lah! (gives up).

**T:** What is Chinese roti prata?

The teacher's question "What is Chinese roti prata" was triggered off by a pupil's response. Of the five out of book talk episodes in this lesson, three were generated by pupils' divergent responses, which the teacher used for further talk.

Hence, where turn-taking and topic maintenance is tightly controlled by the teacher (Teacher B), any topic shift is also initiated by her. In classrooms where pupils self-select, topic shifts occur naturally, as in conversations, and the topic shifts are initiated by the pupils and sustained by the teacher through questions (Teachers A and C).



## **TOPIC DEVELOPMENT AND TALK CONTENT**

The topic of talk in the classrooms decides both the participation of pupils and its development. In the classroom, the power set-up is very clear. The teacher, by virtue of knowing what to teach (content) and how to teach (approach) controls the agenda. She therefore controls the content of the talk and the rate and manner in which a topic is developed. In the shared reading session, the content involves the information in the text and the information the learners have, as a result of their background experience. The teacher's task is to connect the two so that the text read is understood and the skill of using prior knowledge or schema to derive textual meaning is demonstrated and acquired. Topic development in these lessons, therefore, takes place within this boundary. Teacher A, in the excerpts cited below, allowed the pupils to explore the topic being dealt with. She in fact provided many opportunities for pupils to talk around the topic before she moved them on to the writing task.

**Teacher A**

**T:**           **How is fire useful to us?**

**Han Yao:**   **Roast chicken. Can also roast many things for us?**

**T:**           **Roast chicken. Yes.**

**Lester:**     **Can make light, when there is a blackout in our house.**

**T:**           **Can give us what?**

**Lester:**     **Light.**



- T:** Yes. When there is a blackout you can light a candle.
- Ashwin:** Fire can give us smoke signal.
- T:** Very good. Ashwin says fire can give us smoke signals. How does fire give us smoke signals?
- Lester:** You use a towel, then you....
- T:** How does it give us signal?
- Lester:** Tie a cloth.
- T:** Ya, where? Let's say you are going for camping in a forest. And then suddenly you realize you were lost. What is the first thing you should do?
- Ps:** (some) Make a fire.
- T:** Yes, try to get some wood and light up a fire.
- Lester:** After that use a cloth to blow the fire so that when people see smoke they think that somebody is in danger so they would find out what is happening. So the person there are safe.
- T:** Yes, supposing a person, let's say, a rescue team, alright, a helicopter is coming to rescue you. What does he see? The smoke, fire right? So he knows that somebody is there, alright? So he send some signals, okay?

**Teacher A**

- T:** Alright, look at the man here. Is he happy here?
- Ps:** Yes.
- T:** He's a scientist, right? What is he wearing?
- Ps:** A coat.
- T:** Alright, what has he got on his coat here?
- P:** Green badge, a card.
- T:** Ah! A card. Why must he wear a card?



- Lester:** To let people know he's a scientist.
- T:** Okay, when he wants to go in ... these scientists, when they want to go into their lab, to a certain building, they have to put on their pass. Then they go to their lab because it is a restricted area. Okay? Only those working in that building are allowed in.
- Lester:** Teacher, how about the scientist in the Science Centre, the cleaner?
- T:** Science Centre is open to everyone, right? The cleaner who wants to go in, they too have a special pass. They have to show their pass before they go in. Just like those whose father work in MINDEF. Whose father works in the army? Does your father have a pass?
- Ps:** Yes.
- T:** Yes, they carry a pass.
- Lester:** Yes, put it on. Before they go to work, they have to put it on and when they arrive at work they have to show the pass before they go in.
- Han Yao:** Teacher, my father's one is special. Go to work, then wear.

In both these excerpts, it can be clearly seen how Teacher A extended the topic by scaffolding textual meaning with background knowledge and experience. Although she did this largely through questions, she created the opportunities for the pupils to extrapolate from the text and link it to their personal experiences. This way she provided them with content - knowing what to talk about - and extended the topic at the same time.

Teacher C, on the other hand, while providing opportunities for pupils to talk, did not extend it sufficiently to provide the necessary



scaffolding. The topic of talk was not developed adequately, because the questions were superficial and narrow:-

**Teacher C**

**T:** Tell me more about the octopus, Gabriel.

**Gabriel:** No mouth.

**T:** (interrupts) It has no mouth? How do you know?

**Ps:** (some) Have got teeth.

**T:** What else do you know?

**Gabriel:** It has no hair.

**Ps:** (some) Got!

**T:** How come he has no hair? How come he is not hairy?

**Kala:** The head is bald.

**T:** The head is bald.

**Yen Tze:** Can cook (meaning can be cooked/eaten).

**T:** It can cook! (surprised tone). Where can you find the octopus?

**Ps:** (chorus) Sea.

**T:** Does Singapore have octopus?

**Yen Tze:** (Nods).

**and**

**T:** What did the merbok wish for?

**Fauzi:** The merbok ...

**T:** Speak louder, Fauzi.



- Fauzi:** The merbok wish for colourful feathers.
- T:** Very good. The merbok wished for colourful feathers too. Right? Why? Why do you think he wished for colourful feathers? Why did the merbok wish for colourful feathers like the peacock? If you were the merbok, why would you want colourful feathers?
- Darren:** (raises hand).
- T:** Yes, Darren.
- Darren:** (inaudible).
- T:** Okay. Because the peacock has colourful feathers. Yes, but why does he want colourful feathers?
- Ganesh:** Because he wants to stay with the peacock.

Teacher C's questions were testing or challenging moves. There was an absence of scaffolding so vital to deriving meaning from text. The attempts at drawing out pupils' experiences were superficial and therefore did not lead to topic development beyond the content that was obviously textual.

Teacher B engaged in a great deal of talk with her pupils. Through probing questions, she developed each topic fairly thoroughly. She did this initially before reading the text, where she found out about pupils' feelings and experiences. Then, after reading the text, she extended the textual content. What was interesting with Teacher B's approach to content and topic development was that the scaffolding outside the text was extensive and remained unconnected to the text. The development of the text talk was confined to checking pupils' inferential skills. The two levels of content, topic development and talk thus remained distinct. The episodes below attest to this. The first shows topic development and opportunities for talk outside the



text (but triggered by what's to come) and the second excerpt shows attempts at ensuring understanding of text. The two worlds remained apart because the structured closing connecting the two was absent:-

**Teacher B**  
**Episode 1**

**T:** Today's story is "*It's not Fair*" (reads title, author and illustrator. Some pupils join in, in the reading). Now what do you mean by not fair? Have you used these words before? Not fair. Sze Lin. What do you mean by not fair?

**Sze Lin:** Somebody gives the person a sweet and you don't get one, then it's not fair.

**T:** Alright. Sze Lin says that somebody gives the person a sweet and then you do not get one, then it is not fair, not fair. Chia Hong.

**Chia Hong:** If people give someone a sweet and then you are getting better and better then it is not fair.

**T:** Oh, that's right. You behave better but then you do not get the sweet. The teacher gave it to another person who did not behave as well as you. Alright.

**Episode 2**

**T:** We shall read why it's not fair. Look at this page. What do you think these two kangaroos are doing? Look at their expression (pointing to illustration) Why? How do they feel with each other? Gek Ping.

**Gek Peng:** They feel ....

**T:** Why like that? (pointing to illustration) Why back to back?

**Gek Peng:** Maybe they are angry with each other.

**T:** They are angry with each other. Rafi.



**Rafi:** Maybe, ah ... maybe they are shy. They don't want to look at each other.

**T:** Oh, they are shy, shy. Rafi say they are shy. That's why they doh want to look at each other. Wei Chuen.

**Wei Chuen:** Maybe they don't like each other.

**T:** Don't like each other. Have you done this to your friends? Don't look at your friend's face?

**Ps:** No.

### Episode 3

**T:** Right, let's read. (Reads title, illustrator, author)

*“When they brought my baby brother home, everyone fussed over him”.*

**T:** Why must they fuss over the baby brother? Why fuss? Sze Lin.

**Sze Lin:** Because the baby brother is small.

**T:** So?

**Sze Lin:** So he is new in the family.

**T:** Oh, new to the family so everybody fuss. What do you mean by fuss over him? Yes, Gek Ping.

**Gek Peng:** Say good things.

**T:** Said good things about him. What else? Look at the picture. Yes?

**Sze Lin:** Maybe, when the baby cry, they rush to the baby.

### Episode 4



**T:** Yes. How many of you have baby brothers and sister?  
Do you fuss over your baby brothers and sister?

**Ps:** Yes.

**T:** Chia Siew, do you have a baby at home?

**Chia Siew:** (nods).

**T:** Sister or brother?

**Chia Siew:** Sister.

**T:** Do you fuss over your sister?

**Chia Siew:** (nods).

**T:** What do you do? How do you fuss over her?

**Chia Siew:** When she cries, I run to her.

**T:** I ran to her.

**T:** You run to her whenever she cries for you. Alright.  
What else? Seng Hong, do you have a baby sister?

**Seng Hong:** Yes.

**T:** What do you do?

**Seng Hong:** She wants a sweet, I give her.

**T:** Ah? When she wants a sweet, what do you do?

**Seng Hong:** Give her.

**T:** You give her. That's good. Alright. You will give her  
whatever she wants? Yes, Rafi.

**Rafi:** I have a baby sister.

**T:** Ya, do you fuss over her? Rafi has a baby sister, too.  
Do you fuss over her?

**Rafi:** (Nods).

**T:** How?

**P4:** (inaudible)



**Si How:** Brother.

**Ps:** Brother and sister.

**T:** He has baby brother and sister.

**Si How:** Brother.

**T:** I see, he has both.

**Rafi:** Everyday go home and give her sweet.

**T:** Yes, Yoga.

**Yoga:** I got two.

The story's focus on unequal treatment had given way to talk about pupils' fussing over their younger siblings. Although this generated responses, it was tightly controlled by the teacher and because of its duration, remained unlinked to the central focus of the story.

Of the three teachers, Teacher C allowed for the least amount of topic development. Talk that occurred during the shared reading and shared writing lessons was highly focused to keep within textual meaning, without any extrapolation. Teacher A used more scaffolding and prefacing in her shared writing lessons and a limited but adequate amount of talk during shared reading lessons. Where the topic being discussed strayed beyond the text, this was almost always the result of pupil question or information input. Otherwise, teacher talk spanned two levels: one text-focused and the other pupil experience-based.

Teacher B, on the other hand, used extensive topic development and restricted story content discussion to comprehension. The extrapolation began with pupils' personal experiences but was not



linked with the text. The talk about the text stayed on its own. Because the topic development was extensive and at the same time controlled and directed by the teacher, pupils became restless and lost track of the lesson as a whole. This was also due, in part, to the absence of retrospective summarizing moves by Teacher B in uniting the two types of talk into a coherent whole to establish the link between the story world and the pupils' worlds.

To sum up, topic development was mainly in the hands of the teachers in all the three classrooms. This was because:-

- i) Teachers (Teachers A (to a lesser extent) and B controlled the allocation of turns (see discussion on turn-taking pp.437 - 443).
- ii) Teachers controlled the duration of pupil talk, and
- iii) Teachers controlled the agenda during the shared reading and shared writing lessons.

This control was achieved through:-

- i) pupil nomination to speak.
- ii) framing elicitation questions that signalled the end of the discussion on a topic and the move towards another.
- iii) framing closed questions.



In the absence of pupil nomination or allocation of turn by the teacher, topic development was initiated by the pupils (Classroom A and classroom C). But as the excerpts cited show, the extent of this pupil initiated topic development was always in the hands of the teacher. In Teacher B's class topic development seemed to be entirely directed by the teacher who initiated, maintained and ended it. Pupil's role in this involved answering the questions posed. Teacher A and C allowed for some pupil-initiated topic development to occur during their shared reading and writing lessons by not allocating turns for speaking.

### **PLANE OF TALK**

Besides topic development and content, Sinclair's (1966) idea of "plane change" can also affect the development of talk in the shared literacy classroom. "Plane" change refers to points in the interaction when speakers or interlocutors change direction and focus on aspects of the language or structure of the interaction instead of maintaining the flow. Where the plane changes involve the teacher summarizing the talk that has gone on, or pre-structuring what is to follow, it serves to consolidate and direct the talk and the learning that is to ensue from it. However, when plane changes interrupt the talk and the topic being discussed, it can hamper the development of talk as well as learning. From the preceding discussion on topic development and talk content, it was seen that Teacher C engaged the least in scaffolding or extrapolating from text or pupils' experiences. Plane



changes, therefore, did not feature in Teacher C's lessons. Teacher A allowed for a great deal of pupil-initiated talk during shared reading and prior to shared writing. This could have been because, as she stated in her post-lesson interview, she was "concerned with pupil comprehension of text", which resulted in frequent plane changes. In the example below, the teacher started off with the question "How do you know he is making roti prata?" When the pupil attempted to explain and was unable to find the appropriate word to complete his meaning/sentence, the teacher moved on to another plane of talk - pronunciation and vocabulary:

**Teacher A**

**T:** Can you tell me what is the man doing in this picture?

**Lester:** Making roti prata.

**T:** What is he making?

**Ps:** Roti prata.

**T:** How do you know he is making roti prata?

**Lester:** He is teaching people how to make roti prata.

**T:** Right. Lester says he is teaching people how to make roti prata. What else? How do you know he is making roti prata?

**Lester:** Because the roti prata lady make a big, long ...

**T:** What do you call that? What is the word that we use?

**Han Yao:** Dough.

**T:** How do you pronounce it?

**Ps:** Dough, dough.



**T:** Yes, Gerald, how do you pronounce it?

**Gerald:** Dough.

**T:** Okay. What do you call this? (pointing to picture).

**Ps:** Dough.

**T:** Alright how do you know that he is making roti prata?  
What is he doing with the dough?

**Lester:** Spread out.

**T:** Ah?

**Lester:** Spreading here and there.

**T:** Have you seen them making roti prata?

**Ps:** Yes.

**T:** How many of you have watched this, the man making  
roti prata? In the coffee shop. How many of you have  
watched?

**Ps:** (raise hands).

**T:** Alright, do you find it very interesting?

**Ps:** Yes.

**T:** Is it very interesting? Can you tell me what is so  
interesting about it? I like to watch a man making roti  
prata. Now why? Why is it very interesting?

**Han Yao:** Because when he wrap the roti prata, it is very nice.

**T:** Why do you say he wrap? How does he wrap it?

**Han Yao:** He wrap the roti prata.

**T:** What do you call that? What do you call that?

**Ps:** Flip.

**T:** Flip. Okay. Do you like watching that?

**Ps:** Yes.



- T:** Yes, when he is flipping the dough, right? Do you see a small flip or a big flip?
- Ps:** Big flip.
- T:** After that what does he do with it?
- Lester:** Small one first then big one.
- T:** After that what does he do with it?

In this example, the teacher attempted to relate pupil experience to the text but the plane changed when another pupil assumed the turn and directed the talk towards 'ready-made' roti prata, which led the teacher to talk about texture of the dough and to pupil-initiated talk about the manner in which the bread is made.

**Teacher A**

- T:** Have you eaten? Bavani? Do you see your mother making roti prata at home? Has she made it before? What do you eat it with?
- Bavani:** Curry.
- T:** How about Aparna? Does your mother make this at home?
- Aparna:** No.
- T:** Your mother doesn't make this at home? Haridas is not here today. His mother makes roti prata and ...
- Han Yao:** My mother also make roti prata.
- Ashwin:** Ya, my mother also.
- T:** Really?
- Ps:** Yes.
- Han Yao:** Buy a box.
- T:** Oh, the ready-made one right?



**Ps:** Yes.

**Han Yao:** Then you fry it.

**T:** How does it taste?

**Ps:** Nice. Very nice.

**T:** How many of you have eaten ready-made roti prata.

**Han Yao:** Eat that last time.

**T:** Is it soft or hard?

**Ps:** Hard/Soft.

**Ps:** Soft also, hard also.

**T:** Is it very nice?

**Ps:** Yes.

**T:** What do you eat with?

**Han Yao:** I eat it with, sometimes with curry or sometimes with sugar.

**T:** Does your mother cook the curry for you?

**Han Yao:** No. They give us in the Hawkers' Centre.

**Lester:** Ya.

In all these examples, plane changes were triggered off by pupils. The teacher did not indicate the plane changes nor did she return to the point of the talk where the departure took place. Interestingly though, Teacher A indicated plane changes when these were the result of her own intended moves. This usually happened when a fairly long talk reached its end and she wished to move on to another level or component of the talk. She indicated these changes by using markers such as "Alright, okay, now" or referring to past lessons:-



**Teacher A**

**Lester:** Keep us warm.

**T:** Keep us warm. How does it keep you warm? In cold countries what do the people do?

**Han Yao:** They were fireplace.

**Lester:** They have a fireplace or heater.

**T:** They have a fireplace or heater. Yes. In what way is fire an enemy (emphasizing) to us?

**Lester:** Sometime small children play the fire they will make a big fire in house. That is a very dangerous thing.

**T:** Yes, that is a very dangerous thing. The house can catch a fire. Then what happen?

**Lester:** Immediately we must run out of our flat. Then if a very small fire you can use a piece of cloth to blow it out.

**T:** Blow it out. Yes. Is it good to play with fire?

**Ps:** No.

**T:** Ah, alright. Now, we had a fire drill the other day. Now, what did you hear first?

**Han Yao:** I hear a....

**T:** Wait, let's say okay there's a fire. That day we had a fire drill in the printing room. What happen?

**Lester:** Tr...really a fire?

**T:** No, I told you it is a rehearsal only. So what happen?

**In this talk about the usefulness of fire, the teacher changed the plane of discussion when she decided to move on to the focus of the lesson - writing about the fire drill: "Ah, alright. Now we had a fire**



drill the other day. Now, what did you hear first?" This not only signalled the end of the first part of the talk, but also set the frame (fire drill the other day) and the beginnings of the writing (what did you hear first?).

Although the transition was not explicit, particularly for young children, it was a transparent move, that indicated the plane of talk has moved to something new and different. In this one lesson, the teacher changed planes eleven times - only four of them made explicit to the pupils, the other seven deliberately made by the teacher, but not transparent to the pupils. She said that she had to do this because she "had already planned the lesson that way and had specific things to cover".

Teacher B's plane shifts were content-centred. The shift occurred always from the text to the level of personal experience. Although the shifts were aimed at extrapolating from personal experience to the text, the moves and links were not made explicit to the pupils.

**Teacher B**

**T:** (reads)

*"What about me? You're a big girl now....."*

**T:** The kangaroo is a girl. Alright, it's a girl (reads).

*".....my mother said. I'm not that big".*

**Ps:** (laugh).



- T:** Okay. Why does she say "I'm not that big"? Why? Why must she make such a remark? Gek Peng.
- Gek Peng:** Because she also want to fuss.
- T:** Ah, she also want to fuss. Alright. What else? Sze Lin.
- Sze Lin:** Because she wants to be small like the baby brother so that people will fuss over.
- T:** Oh, she wants to be small like the baby so that people will give her attention, to fuss over her. Would you behave like that? Sze Lin, did you behave like that when your baby sister was born?
- Sze Lin:** (shakes head).
- T:** What feeling is this? (repeats). Chia Siew.
- Chia Siew:** Feel jealous.
- T:** Jealousy, yes. Jealous. He was feeling jealous. How many of you behave like that? Chia Siew, did you behave like that?
- Chia Siew:** No.
- T:** Why not? Won't you jealous?
- Chia Siew:** (shakes head).
- T:** Why not:
- Chia Siew:** I am already big.
- T:** Oh, you are a big girl now. I see. Anybody else? How many of you have got babies. Salwani. Do you behave like this girl?
- Salwani:** (shakes head).

The kangaroo's feeling of jealousy and the consequent remark were not linked to pupils' own feelings for/against their siblings in similar situations. It may be argued that pupils will infer the intended link, but the inference may be difficult for pupils who are not proficient in



the language or who are unable to see the point of the teacher's questions and comments. Beyond the content level, Teacher B did not shift planes.

Except for Teacher A, who pre-structured her CDS by generating talk on the topic and allowed for more voluntary pupil input, however divergent this was, both Teachers B and C made plane shifts during the shared writing lessons. The main reason for this was their focus on generating just the responses they wanted as sentences for their CDS - they achieved this by making the questions as close and structured as possible.

Thus, it can be said that plane changes may be used by the teacher during shared reading and shared writing lessons to:-

- i) clarify or extend pupil understanding of the ongoing talk or textual reference.
- ii) allow pupils to participate by sharing their experiences.

Although allowing for plane changes during shared reading and shared writing lessons may accommodate more pupil participation and the sharing of divergent ideas and experiences, it places a heavy demand on the teacher who may have been willing to accommodate the shifts in her pre-determined agenda (both content and time). The literature on hegemony (Gee, 1994) in the classroom shows that this may not always be possible. Hence, a relatively greater number of plane shifts initiated by pupils occurred in Teacher A's class,



followed by Teacher C. In Teacher B's class, plane shifts were almost always teacher initiated and maintained. The lesser the teacher control over plane shifts during shared reading and writing sessions, the greater the opportunity for spontaneous pupil talk (Teachers A, C).

### **ROLE OF TEACHERS**

**Mark:** (looking out of the window at the birds in the garden).

Look at that. Birds, Mummy.

**Mother:** Mm.

**Mark:** Jubs (birds).

**Mother:** (inviting Mark to extend his own meaning) What are they doing?

**Mark:** Jubs bread (birds eating bread(?)).

**Mother:** (extending Mark's meaning). Oh, look! They're eating the berries, aren't they?

**Mark:** Yeh.

**Mother:** (extending and paraphrasing). That's their food. They have berries for dinner.

**Mark:** Oh.

(Wells, 1987:48)

This conversation between a mother and her child shows how adults can contribute to children's language development. The topic of discussion is the child's and it is initiated by him. The mother takes this and interacts with him by extending what he says, displaying both knowledge that he does not as yet possess as well as language.



The mother, by collaborating with him, builds the child's model of the world further. Her language is adjusted to his level. This example shows that , in some cultures, adults merely have to be responsive to the cues provided by children - because as Wells (1987) puts it, the cues tell adults what is within children's level of understanding.

Teachers, in the Singapore classroom therefore, like the mother in this example, may need to become interested conversational partners. Their roles are therefore numerous. In the next section, we look at the different ways a teacher may most effectively engage children in collaborative learning through talk. The teacher's role is important in pupil talk because she is perceived (see Chapter 3 :161-162,164-168,170-174; Chapter 6: 495-535,) as the one in the classroom who can provide the pupils relevant evidence of how the language functions, help them evaluate the adequacy and appropriateness of their responses and current hypotheses about language and the way the world works, motivate them to want to learn and make them feel that the talk is worthwhile and enjoyable. This is despite the research evidence that shows that children learn from each other and regardless of what the teacher does in the classroom, there is a hidden curriculum which impacts on children's learning. As was revealed in the parent, pupil and teacher interviews, the perception of the teachers by their pupils and their parents and the teachers themselves, as the major and important source of learning and guidance may necessitate, therefore, a great deal of supportive work by the teacher.



One of the ways of sustaining this may be to assume a less hegemonic position by allowing for more pupil talk through pupil-initiated questioning, topic development and meaning generation. Teacher C, in this study, did this fairly naturally but to a limited extent:-

#### Teacher C

**T:** (reads) *"Along came a crayfish, a bright, red crayfish".*

**Yen Tze:** What's a crayfish.

**Gabriel:** That means .....

**Lokman:** It is bigger than, bigger than ...

**Gabriel:** Lobster.

**T:** It is bigger than a lobster. That's right, Gabriel. Very good.

**Lokman:** Can he fight with a lobster?

**Ps:** (inaudible).

**T:** Okay. (reads)

*"Ho! Ho!" said the octopus. "Come and play with me".*

*"Oh, no!" cried the crayfish. "You will eat me for your tea".*

**Yen Tze:** After, a blue whale.

**Ganesh:** A small lizard's tail.

**Kala:** A snail is hiding in the shell.

(Pupils talk about what the next creature could be. Many children talk at the same time, trying to predict what it is).

**T:** Are you sure it's a snail?



**Lokman:** No.

**Gabriel:** Teacher, then why it got two cover? Snail got only one.

**T:** It looks like a snail.

**Gabriel:** No.

The agenda for talk here was the pupils', although it was one pupil who initiated this with a question. The teacher, however, did not take over the lesson or the talk. Instead, she allowed other pupils to respond before consolidating and reformulating the response. Without the teacher's direction, the pupils engaged in the prediction task, exploring both language, and the world of the story and simultaneously engaging their experience/knowledge to derive meaning from the text. Teacher C's lack of directives and elicitation questions thus generated a free flow of talk by several pupils. The pupils' topic was appropriated by the teacher but the perspective was the pupils. She did not impose her perspective. When a teacher imposes her perspective as the basis for her questions - (to which she already possesses an answer) - pupils' participation in the talk is reduced to monosyllabic responses which are simple in complexity and level of information:-

**Teacher B**

**T:** (reads) *"If he makes a mess, it's alright. If I make a mess, I get into trouble"* .

Why the difference in treatment? Why difference in treatment? Why? If he makes a mess, it's alright? Why I make a mess, I get into trouble? Why? Why, Joshua?

**Joshua:** Because the baby is small.



**T:** So? Baby is small, so?

**Joshua:** And he is big.

**T:** Why? She is big, so? Chia Siew.

**Chia Siew:** Because the baby is small and doesn't know anything.

**T:** Ah, baby doesn't know, he says. So an excuse the baby? Yoga.

**Yoga:** Yes.

**T:** You think you can excuse the baby.

**Yoga:** Yes.

**T:** Would you?

**Yoga:** Yes.

**T:** Yoga, you would?

**Yoga:** (nods head).

**T:** If your baby mess up your bed, would you go and cane the baby?

**Ps:** (laugh).

**Yoga:** No.

**T:** Kim Mee, would you?

**Kim Mee:** (shakes head).

**T:** You just had a baby sister, right? Your mother told me. So do you fuss over your baby sister?

**Kim Mee:** (nods).

**T:** So, you wouldn't beat your baby sister, Kim Mee? Why?

The pupils' responses in the lesson cited above were reduced to labelling and, head-nodding, because they were responding to a question on a topic initiated by the teacher. The teacher was getting



across her perspective of differential treatment rather than obtaining it from the pupils and seeing it from their point of view. Her persistent questioning till she elicited an expected response reflects the imposition and explains the short, simple responses. As Wells points out, the teacher tries so hard to extend the children's knowledge that:

"they never really discover what it is about the child's experience that he or she finds sufficiently interesting to want to share in the first place" (1987:89)

Teacher B had forgotten that her model of the world was different from the child's. And the persistent questioning was aimed at making the pupils see the world from her mature perspective. She failed to understand the lack of reciprocity between the two worlds. During the interview on this lesson, the teacher read through the transcript and agreed that she was trying to "tell the children what they shouldn't do" rather than let them "talk about their own feelings and ideas on the topic". She also added that "as the teacher, it is my duty to teach them the correct thing. They are children so they don't know".

**Teacher A**

**T:** This scientist (pointing to illustration). His name is Roland. He is very famous for his inventions. He has done quite a lot of experiments. Right. Look at the next page (pointing). Look at this! Very happy there. So many tubes and plants. So many. Can you see?

**Lester:** Teacher, there are some mushrooms in the jar there.



- T:** Right. These are mushrooms.
- Han Yao:** Spider.
- T:** Right, spider is watching the scientist. What is he doing? This one (pointing) looks like a milk bottle, right?
- P3:** It is not a milk bottle.
- Lester:** Teacher, there's a fire thing there (pointing).
- T:** Where? This one (pointing) is a burner. Bunsen burner. It has a tube which has acid in it.
- (Reads).
- "Let me put this on the fire".*
- T:** What happened?
- Ps:** Explosion.
- T:** How did the explosion happen? He must have added in the wrong liquid, right? he must have mixed them together. What do you call this word (pointing)?
- Lester:** Explosion.
- T:** What is explosion? When do you normally see an explosion?
- Han Yao:** A bomb, fire burn.
- T:** Okay, that's an explosion. What do you think happened after the explosion? Did he become invisible?
- Ps:** Yes.
- T:** How did he feel when he becomes invisible?
- Ps:** Sad.

In these two excerpts, Teacher A's and the pupils' 'focus' in the lesson were different. She stated at the interview that she wanted them "to look at the happy scientist with all the tools of his trade".



But they caught sight of the mushrooms and the spiders. She had "an explosion in a laboratory in mind" while they referred to a bomb explosion. The worlds of the pupils and their teacher were different, their perspectives were different because their experiences differed. The pupils did not know the teacher's agenda. There was disparity between their mental model as well as their linguistic resources. The teacher, however, was content with conveying her perspective. She neither extended the pupils' perspective, nor helped them integrate their personal experiences and knowledge with the textual information. Hence, although shared reading is aimed at creating opportunities for shared experiences and extending children's thinking and developing their ability to express their thoughts and feelings linguistically, the teacher's experience and perspective dominated, reducing the pupils' participation to confirming the teacher's perspectives and a passive interaction.

Sometimes, instead of listening to pupils' responses and supporting their reasons, the teachers chose to ignore them, especially if they were not what they had anticipated (refer also to discussion on turn-taking, plane changes and topic development, pp.437-475).

#### **Teacher B**

**T:** The monkeys are all laughing at him. Alright? I think they will call him silly. Right? I think the monkeys will call him silly. Do you think the monkeys are right if they call him silly? Would you have done such a thing, keeping the red rambutans for your mother?



**Would you have done the same thing as Ningko has done? Would you, Joshua?**

**Joshua: Yes.**

**T: Why? Would you keep the good ones for your mother? Why? Shaun, would you have done the same thing.**

**Shaun: Maybe haven't ripe, got stomach pain.**

**T: But would you have kept the good ones for your mother?**

**Shaun: Yes.**

**T: Why? How many of you will keep the good things for your mother? Why? Can you tell me why? Can anyone tell me why? Wei Chuen, would you keep the good things for your mother?**

**Wei Chuen: (nods).**

**T: Why? Why? Wu Han.**

**Wu Han: My mother will get it.**

**T: Have you ever kept things for your mother before?**

**Wu Han: Yes.**

**T: Why? Let's say you have some food. You don't eat the You kept the delicious food for your mother? Why? Or the chicken, chicken, you keep the good part for your mother. Why? Sarah.**

**Sarah: Because she love her mummy.**

**T: Because you love your mother, Ya. Hwee Li. Have you every kept anything for your mother? Why?**

**This exchange continued for a good eight minutes in the lesson with the teacher trying very hard to make the pupils understand the need to sacrifice their own needs/desires for someone they love - in this story, the mother. The pupils were, however, unable to connect the**



two. It is only when she finally arrived close to an expected answer that the teacher summed up the exchange:-

**T: Oh, your mother has kept good things for you. So, Gek Peng will keep good things for her mother. Her mother has done good things for her. Right? Would you have laughed at Ningko like the other monkeys?**

In summing up the long exchange and asking the above question, Teacher B was trying to connect Ningko's (the monkey) sacrifice of not eating the ripened rambutans with the love he had for his mother. In the course of trying to reach that point of understanding, the teacher overlooked some of the answers the pupils proffered - when Shaun responded that he would keep the good rambutans for his mother (not because he loved her ) because the "unripe green ones would cause stomach pain" - the teacher failed to recognize this contribution. Given the point that the teacher wanted to make, it may have been irrelevant or wrong, but the pupil believed it and decided to convey it. Teacher B overlooked the pupils' sense of making meaning of what she was requesting in terms of response as well as the pupils' perception of the course of action to be selected under the circumstances - the teacher's sense of love and sacrifice as an adult and as a mother may not be symmetrical to the pupils'. Neither could the pupils encode it linguistically in the manner the teacher could. Thus, in not allowing the pupils to develop and express their personal feelings about the characters' action and reasoning their own thoughts on it, the teacher had failed to help the pupils approach her understanding of the matter. The discussion



**thus remained one-sided despite the laborious probing and elicitation by the teacher.**

**In the following excerpts, Teacher A was talking to the pupils about a fire drill they had had in school. The talk pre-structured the Class Dictated Story''-**

**Teacher A**

**T: Let's say if your house is on fire, are you going to pack your things and bring them out with you?**

**Ps: (laugh) No.**

**T: Are you going to do that?**

**Lester: Life is very precious.**

**T: Ya, definitely, your life is precious, not your things. You are not going to pack your things.**

**Han Yao: If all your things burn down, then?**

**T: Never mind. If you have lost your things, your life is saved, right? You can always start new again. You buy things.**

**Lester: Teacher, how, if we have no money?**

**Han Yao: How, if the money burn?**

**T: Don't worry. You can earn money again. In Singapore, if your house is burnt down, you can be assured you will be given help. The government will help you and your family. You don't have to worry: "Oh, Dear! I got no money".**

**Teacher A developed the pupils' concern and reassured them. Although her concern was with making pupils understand that in a**



fire their priority would be to save themselves and not their belongings, when pupils expressed concern over losing their possessions, she listened to it and dealt with it.

This supporting move was necessary not just to establish rapport and create affinity but also to facilitate collaboration through a display of understanding of the child's world. By listening and then responding appropriately, Teacher A ensured the talk continued. The pupils' contributions in this and other lessons sprung from their desire and attempts to understand and show the teacher the manner in which they were connecting their current model/perception of the world and the information that was being generated via shared exploratory talk:-

**Teacher C**

**T:** Now. What are they going to have?

**Ps:** School fun fair.

**T:** Have we had a school fun fair before?

**Ps:** No. We only had school concert. Don't have school fun fair.

**T:** Okay, where is this place? Ridzwan.

**Ridzwan:** At the classroom.

**T:** At the classroom. Yes, very good. Now do you like fun fair?

**Ps:** Yes.

**T:** Who doesn't like fun fair?

**P1:** I like to sit the roller coaster.



- T:** Who has never been to a fun fair?
- Kala:** There is a fun fair at IMM.
- T:** There is a fun fair. Where? At IMM? Okay.
- Ps:** Oh ya, I know where already.
- T:** Now, for those of you who like to go to fun fair, what about the fun fair that you like?
- P1:** The roller coaster very nice (many pupils talk).
- T:** Yes, Ganesh you like to play?
- Ganesh:** I like to play Top Gun.

In this excerpt, Teacher C not only tried to relate the story to the pupils' experience but started the discussion at their level of interest - "Do you like fun fair?" The response thus generated increased pupil participation. In the examples we have seen in this section, Teachers A and C took the lead from the pupils' questions or their responses and maintained the supporting stance by discussing the topic initiated and extending it, and by providing opportunities for pupils to express their personal thoughts. Teacher B, however, maintained her own framework and initiated the exchanges. The pupils in classrooms A and C, therefore, initiated a lot more talk and created new frameworks while in classroom B, it was the teacher who initiated the talk while the pupils listened and supplied the expected response and confirmed the teacher's perspective and model of the world.

Teachers A and Teacher C (to a lesser extent) thus assumed a listening and guiding role and thereby played a collaborative role in



pupils' meaning construction, allowing for negotiation both of views expressed as well as points in the lessons when they could be expressed. It is this facilitating role that generates and sustains talk during shared literacy lessons. In the examples cited above, Teachers A and C, by assuming a listening stance, showed that the pupils had expertise that was of value, and their questions aimed at gathering further information, not always at checking the convergence or accuracy of the knowledge expressed. By allowing other pupils to comment, dispute and question both the peer response and theirs, although in a limited way, the teachers built pupils' confidence in what they knew and their right to convey that. The relaxed, non-threatening and collaborative opportunities for talk elicited voluntary response in both these classes. In Classroom B however, because the teacher dominated the exchange and controlled its development, by talking at length and more often than the pupils, the collaboration and negotiation was absent. The pupils seemed confined to providing conforming responses. Many of Teacher B's lessons seemed to consist of exchanges where pupil responses were elliptical sentence fragments or incomplete clauses. The constraining effect of the teacher's questions on the pupils' responses may have arisen out of the mismatch between pupils' and teacher's understanding of the purpose of the questions.

To conclude this discussion, the teacher's role in generating and sustaining talk during shared reading and shared writing is crucial. By being an interested listener, by allowing for negotiation of meaning, by not imposing a personal perspective or world model, by



providing pupils with as many opportunities as possible to engage in talk at any point in the lesson and by demonstrating that meaning is collaboratively created, the literacy teacher may be able to motivate more pupils to talk and share their experiences and knowledge in class. She has several roles rolled into one! -- She provides the framework but develops pupils' frameworks when they arise, she accepts and extends their information, she provides direction and knowledge, she listens, learns and transforms her own world perspective as well as guides pupils to form theirs. She attempts to do this by talking, listening to pupils' talk and motivating them to want to talk.

For talk to be generated during shared reading and shared writing sessions, the lower primary teachers are told during their training that they must try to create a stress-free, relaxed environment and allow pupils to talk voluntarily - even if their talk is not always directly relevant. In the case of Teachers A and B, their closed-framed questions and their focus on testing comprehension resulted in the creation of fragmented teaching and the development of a story world based on the text being read and another based on the pupils' experiences. Neither of the two appeared to be linked and existed as separate worlds for the pupils. In the case of Teacher C, her relaxed demeanour and rapport with pupils, together with her willingness to allow her pupils to use Singlish may have created a more viable environment for pupils to engage in talk, take risks in using language and link their background schema to the story. This may have



ensured a link between the world of the story and the world of their culturally different experiences.

## **SUMMARY**

The last section looked at the nature of talk during shared reading and shared writing. In a non-threatening, relaxed environment where the teacher engaged in using informal language, pupils tended to talk more and the talk was spontaneous. In classes, where the teachers were focused on comprehension and therefore tested pupils' knowledge more frequently, pupil talk was limited to responding to the teacher, very often in monosyllables. It was the former type of class that generated talk, because pupils were willing to take risks and were prepared to respond to each other's contribution.

The Class Dictated Story is aimed at modelling writing for the pupils by demonstrating the use of language, development of thought and organization of ideas. Language, content and technique of writing are to be taught in this manner. It is one occasion when teacher and pupils negotiate what is to be written and how it is to be written. The choice of ideas and language are to be by the pupils. In a class of forty there may be a wide range of ideas, language abilities and preferences and the teacher acts as a facilitator by guiding these differences and variety into a coherent, cohesive piece of writing. She naturally would do this through questioning and commenting and giving feedback on what is possible and leading the pupils to



understand why one syntactic expression may be more appropriate or effective than another or why a suggested idea may not fit into the frame of thought that has been developed. To conduct a shared writing lesson in this manner, a teacher will have to engage in talk with her pupils.

In writing the CDS, the teacher is expected (Teacher's Handbook, 2A, 1996) to negotiate the content and flow of the story by talking through it with the pupils. As the lesson excerpts of Teachers A, B and C show, there seemed to be little pupil negotiation here, only responses to the teacher's questions, who had decided on the aspects to be focused on. Hence, what turned out ultimately as a class dictated story appeared to be a series of sentences arising out of the teacher's questions. The question of ownership of writing and negotiation of content and the language used to express that content was not that of the pupils'. It was writing as perceived by the teachers and it was their ideas that had been conveyed. Neither was the technique of writing a narrative explored with the pupils. In controlling the CDS through pre-determined questions, Teachers A, B and C had removed the opportunity for scaffolding and engaging in talk with the pupils.

As pointed out in Chapter 2:122-126), talk during shared writing is essential for pupils to link the ideational, personal, informative and interactional functions of language. This may be more significant in multi-cultural classrooms, where these functions may be expressed differently in other cultures and languages. Chinese, Tamil and Malay children whose home language is not English may think in



their ethnic languages during English writing lessons. Using talk may make them aware of the differences and the 'correct' approach to expressing themselves in English.

This section of the data analysis looked at the type of talk that was occurring in the three classrooms during shared reading and shared writing. It analyzed the nature of teacher talk and then identified features that had an effect on generating talk in these classrooms. Teacher talk was characterized mainly by questions, while pupil talk was most often that of responding to teacher questions. Features of talk such as turn-taking, feedback, plane shifts, content and topic development that occurred in these classrooms in different ways, showed that they impacted on joint meaning-making and contributed to or limited talk between teachers and pupils. The greater the control entrusted to pupils in terms of turn-taking, plane shifts and content and topic development, the greater the pupil participation in talk during shared reading and writing. Similarly, evaluative feedback ends pupil talk while feedback in the form of repetition, reformulation, clarification, challenging moves and positive markers generates greater pupil participation. The form the feedback takes and the extent of pupil control over turn-taking, plane shifts and content and topic development, would depend very much on the pupils' and teachers' perceptions of their roles, the others' role and the role of talk in learning. This, in turn, is a function of culture.



## **PART TWO- PUPIL PROFILES**

This second section looks at the role of culture in talking to learn by describing practices and patterns of talk at home. The pupils' willingness to participate in class during shared reading and shared writing depends to a great extent on their experiences of talk, reading and writing at home. The teachers' perception of children, their role in learning and the place of talk is also often determined by their respective cultural experience.

The analysis presents the profiles of the focal pupils and the patterns of interaction with regards to the use of talk and parental perception of talk in learning. This may help elucidate the nature of talk observed in the classrooms.

### **Yoga**

Yoga is an Indian boy and an only child. He lives in a four-room flat. Two of the rooms are rented out to two foreigners for extra income. When I interviewed him, he said that his father ran a tuition agency and his mother was a cashier at Esso. But at the home interview, the mother said that she was widowed when Yoga was about two years old and a few years later she had remarried. However, this marriage did not work out and they have separated. She works on shifts at a nearby petrol pump station. Prior to this, she was a factory worker. Three times a week, she works the night shift. During these days, she



is asleep in the day till about 3-4pm. She checks her son's work "regularly, whenever she has the time". She said because "he is a very good boy and independent, she has no problem". He has done consistently well in school and the teachers have no complaint.

Being an only child, Yoga very often returns to an empty home after school. He lets himself in, prepares his lunch, does his homework and catches a quick nap. At four, in the evening, he goes to the playground below his flat to play and cycle. Closer to the times of the school examination, his mother sets him work from the assessment books for him to do. Weekends are spent at his grandfather's house. Everyone is grown-up there but he gets the opportunity to play remote-control car games with them.

His mother said that she had explained to Yoga the need to do well so that he can "have a better life later". As long as he is ranked among the first five in class examinations, she is happy. However, she tells him to strive to become second or third, which she feels he can if he is careful with his work.

To ensure financial stability, Yoga's mother said that she had leased out two rooms in her apartment to two working adults. She felt their being male "may help Yoga" so that he has "someone to talk to". The tenants, she said, were quiet and "rarely came out of their rooms". Yoga does not have any toys. During my four visits, I observed that he was alone, watching television or doing his homework. Yoga's mother "loves him very much" and said she was trying to "do the best" she could.



Yoga said that his father talks to him most of the time, asking him what he did in school. This usually happens when his father takes time off work. Father talks to him only in English and Yoga likes talking to his father best. He likes talking about books because he likes reading. Now he visits his baby-sitter and occasionally talks to her grown-up children. Because Yoga's mother works the afternoon and night shift, she is either at work or asleep when Yoga returns from school. This gives her very little time to talk to him, she said. She also said that Yoga "is a very quiet boy".

When he was in kindergarten, he would take a storybook home, and his mother would read to him at night. He has a small collection of Science Encyclopædias at home. Other books include fairy tales and Bookworm magazines (a locally-written children's magazine) bought usually by his mother. He also has a few books of Tamil stories written in English. His mother takes him to the library during school holidays. Yoga's mother said that Yoga does not read in Tamil. The Straits Times, the local newspaper is bought sometimes. His mother stopped reading to him once he started Primary One. This is because, she says, he can take care of himself.

He watches television, draws and does things on his own. His mother does not have time to watch television because of her shift work. But when she has time, they watch "Gotcha" (a local version of candid-camera). They do not discuss what they watch unless Yoga asks questions if he does not understand. She tries to answer his questions



but sometimes she says, she does not have the knowledge. "Many things I don't know. So I say sorry, boy, Mummy don't know". He asks questions about cars, motorcycles and Robocop (a TV programme). She directs him to the baby-sitter's son. They used to look after him when he was small and now they are family friends.

The Tamil teacher has complained that Yoga is talkative in Tamil class (compared to when he was in Primary One) and that his work has slackened. Yoga has not been seen talking in the English class (unless nominated), because the "teacher is very fierce" (strict) and she "beats children" (comment by Yoga). Yoga's mother felt it was good to have strict teachers. She has not been to school to see the teacher, because there have been "no complaints".

Yoga has been doing well in school scoring ninety to ninety-five per cent in all his subjects. His mother, however, sends him for Maths tuition, although he actually does not need it, "but it is better". Yoga's mother felt that the tuition would help him maintain his good grades. Closer to the examination, Yoga's mother sets him work to do.

Yoga goes to church on Saturday evenings and Sundays. His mother attends whenever she is free.

On the whole, Yoga is a quiet boy. His teacher stated that he was very mature for his age. He prefers group work and I think this is because it gives him the opportunity to interact with other children. He felt that, during shared book reading, "the teacher should read



the entire story and then ask questions instead of interrupting the story". He will respond to the teacher's questions only if he knows the answer. He said he feels "frightened" when the teacher calls him and he does not know the answer, because "she is very fierce and sometime she will beat us". During my home visits, I noticed that Yoga did not talk much with his mother. He either watched television or read a book. By circumstance, he has to fend for himself and this ability the mother has interpreted as being independent and responsible. Mother-son interaction seemed to be minimal because of the above belief as well as the nature of the mother's job and the single-parent background. Yoga spends his weekend mornings at church. The rest of the day is spent watching television and doing his homework. Yoga is not allowed to leave home to play. His mother only allows him to go cycling below the apartment block they live in. Yoga said that he has no hobbies but does "not mind reading".

#### **Sze Lin**

Sze Lin is of Chinese ethnicity, lives in a five-room flat and has a four year old brother and an eleven month old sister. The house is very tidy. Sze Lin has her own room with her artwork beautifully pinned up on the walls. Her father is a technical officer at a petroleum company and her mother works as a clerk in a government organisation. The combined monthly family income exceeds \$S2000.00 (Singapore dollars). This may be said to be the average household income in Singapore. The children are looked after by a Filipino maid when the parents are at work. Both parents check on



Sze Lin's school work. Her father used to work shifts before but now he works from 8am to 5.30pm. He said that he makes a point of checking Sze Lin's school books when he returns home, however late. Every day, before going to work, Sze Lin's mother "circles the pages in the assessment books for Sze Lin to do".

Sze Lin enjoys reading and very often buys her own books during school book sales. Her father has bought her the entire Bookworm collection. He now feels that it is "not of good quality" (content and language). She has a very large collection of books in both English and Chinese. The books were bought by her parents. She does not like reading Chinese books because, she says, they are not interesting. Her mother used to read to her when she was small but now that she reads on her own, this is not done. During the interview, Sze Lin's father emphasized that she could read at two years of age. Her father narrated how during her frequent library visits at that age, she would choose her own books by looking at each book's cover and returning it, till she had found one she liked. Another incident occurred when he took her to a story-telling session at a library. He waited outside the closed doors expecting her to run out crying but, Sze Lin sat through the entire one-hour session.

The family subscribes to the local English daily, The Straits Times, and occasionally the woman's magazine "Her World". Sze Lin's mother reads religious books on her way to work by train. Her father hardly reads except for work-related manuals. He wants to read the books Sze Lin reads, but does not have the time. During an



interview Sze Lin's parents expressed concern over Sze Lin's story book reading: "She loves to read story books. You think it is Okay?" Her father was concerned that she was not reading non-fiction: "She is not interested in animals, science and all that. In fact, we bought her a science encyclopaedia and all that. But she is not interested. Maybe because she is a girl". Sze Lin's father also complained that his son does not read: "He is not like the sister, she could read at that age. He walks away when I take a book to read to him". The father felt that it was his fault because with three children now, they do not have the time: "When she was small we spent a lot of time with her, read to her. She is very lucky. That's why quality time is important".

Watching Mandarin serials on television is Sze Lin's favourite pastime. She reads the English subtitles to understand what is going on. With the introduction of CNN, the parents feel they have no control over their children's television watching in the daytime. In the evening, the family usually watches the Chinese Dramas and a current affairs programme, "Extraordinary People". They do not discuss what they watch because, the parents said, "Sze Lin understands and would ask if she did not".

Sze Lin's father said that he talks to the children to "widen their knowledge and to expose them to the world". He gives them examples which they can understand. For example, when driving along the expressway, he "points out the satellite dish and explains its functions and use". He draws Sze Lin's attention to things around.



He says, "She listens but I don't know if she remembers". Sze Lin said that she likes talking to her mother because she helps her with her schoolwork. But it is usually the mother who talks to her. Sze Lin talks to her parents in English and uses Mandarin with her brother. The father pointed out that Sze Lin talks non-stop and tells them "what she wants to when she chooses to". However, if her "parents asked her about her day at school or initiated a conversation, Sze Lin will not respond". Every day, when they return home from work, even before they enter, she is telling them something or other. She enjoys playing guessing games with her parents and "is always testing them on their knowledge of riddles".

The family usually spends weekends visiting the grandparents who speak Mandarin. The kids look forward to this because they have a wonderful time with their cousins, who live in a house. Otherwise, they go for picnics or to the cinema. They have not done this for some time because of the baby.

Sze Lin's father said that he has high expectations for his children. And while he is aware that they are very much pressurized these days, he emphasizes education. All his younger brothers and sisters attended university. He very often cites his sister, a dentist, living in a bungalow, as an example to his children. He reminds Sze Lin that a better education means "she can earn more money, which in turn, ensures a good life". For this reason he said that, although he "does not push his children", he "makes it clear that they have to work hard".



Sze Lin is described by her teacher as a well-behaved, intelligent girl. Although she does not respond of her own accord during class discussions, she assumes leadership roles very effectively. Sze Lin mentioned that she will feel "very frightened" if the teacher nominates her to answer and she does not have the answer, because "she is very fierce". In several of the group writing sessions, I observed Sze Lin very efficiently assigning roles to each member. Although she consulted her group members for spelling and used their contributions, she never failed to start by writing about something that interested her. I observed that in class, she has very high self-esteem and is confident about herself.

Sze Lin's home environment displays nurturing and caring adult parents. Expectations pertaining to school work and education are made clear. Reading that does not contribute directly to good school grades is not looked upon favourably but is tolerated. This is more out of fear that it is interfering with school work and tangible results are not forthcoming - parents appear to be doing a lot of listening to Sze Lin, who obviously enjoys the attention. The constant reference to her early reading ability, which her father cites so proudly, adds to her self-esteem.

In asking questions, drawing attention to things around them and explaining their use, Sze Lin's father is engaging her in talk. He sees this as important for learning and hence his concern whether she is



listening to his explanations. Because both Sze Lin's parents speak English at home, she is confident in her use of the language

Sze Lin said that her favourite pastime is reading followed by watching television. She does not play any games with her brother. She sometimes likes looking after her baby sister.

### **Faeza**

Faeza is Malay and lives in a four-room flat. Her thirty-five year old mother is a clerical officer and her father is an electrical adjuster. Faeza's mother has completed her 'O' levels while her father has primary education. She has a fourteen year old brother. They speak Malay most of the time with some English. Only the mother spoke throughout the interview. The father was present but did not participate in the interview.

Faeza's mother said that she tells her children to "study hard because education is important". However, she does not pressurize them and allows them to relax during weekends and school holidays. After work, she is also too tired to teach them.

There was only a handful of books in the house and neither of the children owned any story books. The house was immaculately clean and had decorative pieces. As the father works overtime and returns home only at nine in the evening, the children interact with the mother more. Even this, the mother felt, was reduced somewhat because she worked full-time.



**Faeza's mother said that she reads daily, usually, English story books which she rents from a second-hand bookshop close by. She borrows the books "to improve my English". She borrows about three books a month. Her purpose of reading is to "improve communication at my work place and for my children's sake". She read to Faeza when she was between one and three years old. She used hard-cover books. Now she does not read to her. Faeza reads her own books. Her mother does not pay attention to the type of books she reads. When they go on outings together, mother and daughter "read their own books". They do not go to the library. the family does not subscribe to any newspaper.**

**Faeza is set homework by her mother daily and her brother checks her work. Faeza had tuition before but her mother had stopped it "because the teacher was not good". She is trying to arrange another tutor and has contacted a tuition agency.**

**Faeza watches television with her mother and brother. Her father is usually busy doing overtime. They watch Chinese Drama serials, Chinese movies, local comedies like "Gotcha" , "Under One Roof", Malay family programmes and a local crime programme "Code Red". Faeza also watches cartoons in the morning before she goes to school. The siblings "argue and comment when they watch comedies. Faeza's mother points out to her son", the harmful effects of drug-taking, when they watch "Code Red".**



**Faeza's mother said that she does most of the talking at home. She shares her experiences with her children. For example, when her son gained entry into the Normal Stream course after the Primary Six leaving Examination, he was very upset. She advised him to "work hard and come up". She is very "concerned about the company he keeps" and feels "it influences him very much". "The children seldom approach the father for help". The father, she said, is essentially the disciplinarian.**

**Faeza's mother keeps in touch with what is going on in school through the school exercise books that are sent home regularly for parents' signature. She does not go to school and has not seen Faeza's teacher. She concentrates on her son and speaks with his form teacher because he is more easily influenced. The children have a computer and play computer games usually during the weekends. Faeza's parents are not computer literate and occasionally watch their children play.**

**Faeza's paternal grandparents are closer to the family and are more tolerant. Usually, during the mid-year and end-of-year school holidays, the children spend a month with them. Faeza's brother spends his weekends with them. The grandparents tell the children stories based on Islam. Faeza and her mother spend the weekends window-shopping or going on picnics. Faeza attends art and religious classes on Saturdays. She and her brother spend a lot of time with their mother and "they do things together, because the father is usually busy working overtime".**



**I observed that Faeza is an average pupil and does not participate in class discussions. During the three months I was observing her class, she was nominated by the teacher only once to respond to a question. She is very quiet but carries out assigned tasks.**

#### **Faeza (2)**

**Faeza, also a Malay, lives in a four room flat bought eleven years ago. Her thirty-two year old mother is a professionally-trained nurse and holds a child-care qualification. She “quit nursing after being on the job for five years because of the three shifts” she had to work. The changing shifts resulted in her “losing touch with the children. They would be asleep when I went to work and I would be asleep when they were awake”. It ended up with her “daughter addressing her grandmother as 'mother'”. So Mrs Noor quit her job and joined a child-care centre as a child-care nurse. She “became very involved with the children at the centre and started filling in when teachers were absent”. Because of her interest in teaching, the supervisor at the centre sent her for child-care training. She has been a child care teacher for eleven years now. Five of these she spent teaching at the National Trade Union Congress Child Care Centre - the largest child-care giver in Singapore. She is currently working on her Montessori Diploma.**

**Faeza's father is thirty-seven years old and works as a salesman in a tailoring business. The total family income exceeds two-thousand**



dollars a month. The family speaks Malay and English at home, with the father and grandparents speaking Malay and the mother speaking English. The family unit comprises Faeza and her two younger brothers, her parents and three grandparents.

Faeza's mother said that she has very high expectations of her children and helps them achieve in school by organizing their learning. She stated that she applied information she had gathered during her "child-care training to teaching and nurturing my own children". The children are constantly reminded of the need to excel in school.

During my visits to Faeza's home, I noticed that a lot of emphasis was placed by Faeza's parents on their children's learning. They read stories, looked up meanings of new words together, sat down to solve mathematical problems and discussed the solutions, tested each other on riddles, joked with each other and played board games. When they watched television, the parents and children commented on the characters, their utterances and appearances. The parents also drew parallels of their own experiences for the children and drew their children's attention to unacceptable behaviour, use of language and mannerisms. Faeza's mother felt that "doing this helped the children learn the right values and understand parental expectations". The grandparents also contributed by extending what the parents say to their children.



The family buys the New Paper (an afternoon tabloid) and the Malay Daily (Berita Harian). Faeza has numerous books at home and “saves her pocket money to buy books because she wants to own them”. Her favourite is Enid Blyton. Faeza's mother reads Malay magazines to the children, neither of whom borrow Malay story books or are keen to read them. When Faeza was a year old, her mother “used to read aloud the newspaper and more specifically show her the pictures” because she knew children that age liked pictures. By five years of age, Faeza could read simple storybooks on her own. “Now that Faeza is older and can read on her own”, her mother does “not read to her”. Faeza reads voraciously and borrows books from the school library. If Faeza takes a book back home, they sometimes read it together. Her mother tells “her to look up words she does not understand in the dictionary. There are about five different dictionaries at home” and they compare meanings. Faeza's mother buys books for Faeza. Faeza is also told to write her diary daily.

The family watches Malay News, local sitcoms like "Gotcha", "America's Funniest Videos", "Power Rangers" and cartoons. “The children are not allowed to watch television after 8pm on weekdays because the programmes are not suitable for them”. “They are told of the consequences of watching the "wrong" programmes and learning the wrong things”. For example, they were told "Renegade" was not good for them. The mother said good habits are inculcated this way.



Islamic religious lessons are taught by the parents daily, for a few minutes after the children have completed their homework. They say their prayers as a family three times a day. Evening prayer is done when the father returns home from work. "Faeza and her brother used to attend daily religious classes. However, when they started school, the school examinations clashed with the religious exams". Faeza's mother felt "the school examinations were more important and did not want to stress the children". Now they only attend Sunday classes from 9am to 12 noon. There are tests but no examinations and Faeza's mother feels this is adequate.

The family spends the weekends going out. They visit the library, or browse through books in the shopping centres. Mrs Noor herself 'reads medical books and books on health and diseases'. She said this may be because of her nursing background. Faeza's mother said that she picks up learning aids such as puzzles for her children, that way. She buys "items that develop MY children's thinking skills". When they are out, they also "draw the children's attention to signs and banners put up". Faeza also said that she plays with her brother after studying on weekends.

Faeza and her family always have dinner together. "Talk during this time centres around schoolwork". It is the mother who usually talks and Faeza likes talking to her mother the most. She talks to her mother in English and Malay and to her father and brothers in Malay. Her mother asks about the school day but usually her questions are "Did you concentrate?" "Did you understand?" She



said that she reminds them to "ask the teacher if they did not understand". She explains to them that "since there are forty pupils in class, the teacher would not know if any one pupil had not understood what she had taught".

When the mother punishes the children, "the grandparents support them" (defend the children and console them) because they feel the children "are too small to be beaten". Faeza's father, on the other hand, "rationalizes and explains to the children the reason for their mother's anger". The mother said talking is important and she tells her children that she is their "friend and they can ask me for advice on anything". But she emphasizes to them that they must think before talking. If they do not understand she tells them to ask questions. Otherwise she will ask them. Mrs Noor said that "age has to be borne in mind when children talk to elders". If her children raise their voices when talking to their grandparents, she would call them immediately and reprimand them. She would tell them that "they looked after you when you were a baby and you dare talk to them like that?"

Faeza's father tells them stories based on his own experiences. Very often he translates stories from Malay to English. The father plays with the children, games like "piggy back", where he pretends he is the elephant and the stories develop from the play. The grandparents also tell the children stories about their childhood and about old Singapore. The children are told "how difficult life was in the past".



**The grandparents also advise the children to "study hard, listen to the parents and to be courteous".**

**Faeza's mother is very focused on her children's school success. The teacher said that "Faeza's mother would go to school to find out how to teach her daughter some problem in the book or to check if she had used the right approach". She sets the children homework and calls them from her office to check if they had done it. "If the assigned homework is not completed, the amount of work is doubled. Faeza knows this very well and would often warn her brother to complete his work". The mother usually teaches them before they go to school in the afternoon. She also buys them assessment books and gives them regular work to do. "Faeza's father is good at Mathematics so we usually work out solutions to problems and then compare our approaches and teach the children accordingly". When the children miss school because of sickness, the mother goes to school to find out and collect work so that they are "not left behind when they go back to school". She gives the children regular dictation. Mrs Noor said that she "works very hard with the children to make sure they do well in school".**

**Faeza said she likes doing the Close Passage best. She has two friends Li Ping and Raphael with whom she shares what she has read. She said she will only respond to teacher's questions if she knew the answer. She spends her free time reading.**

**Generally, during my class observations, I noticed that Faeza was an extremely quiet girl in class. She was never noticed because she never**



**spoke in class or volunteered information. However, she was first in position in the final examination and has been streamed into the best primary three class.**

**The family plays Lego, chess, checkers and Ludo together twice a week for about twenty-five minutes. Mrs Noor plays with the children but moves on to do her own work. The father continues to play with them. Otherwise, the kids play themselves. Mrs Noor writes out recipes dictated by her mother-in-law, who is very old. She said otherwise "these will die off and be forgotten".**

### **Lokman**

**Lokman is of Malay ethnicity and lives with his parents, a five year old sister and an eight-and-a-half months old brother in a five room flat. The father is forty years old and has an "A" level qualification while the mother is thirty-years old and holds an 'O' level qualification. The family speaks English at home because the mother said that they know "Malay children are weak in English". Lokman's father works as a laboratory technologist. His sister attends a People's Action Party (PAP) Foundation Kindergarten. Her mother said that all the Malay pupils are grouped together in class and she is not happy because her "daughter's English is deteriorating". So, when the daughter comes home after school, she "insists that she speaks English".**



**Mrs Shah said that she always impresses upon Lokman on the need to do well in school. He has been told he has to do well and be placed in the best class at his grade level in school. Their “discussion with the two older children usually centres around education and good behaviour”. She said that educational expectations are conveyed to the children by regularly monitoring their learning at school, planning their homework, purchasing good books and watching and discussing educational programmes on television. They also listen to Lokman's problems at school as well as his achievements.**

**Mrs Shah stated that they try and provide a tidy and quiet environment for their children to study. This includes not watching television when the children are studying and during examination periods. Both children had their own study tables and shelves of books. This, way, Mrs Shah felt they provide a nurturing environment which ensures their children succeed in school.**

**Lokman reads a lot. At the age of two, his mother said, he could repeat a story that had been read to him earlier, word for word. Mrs Shah thinks that he is unique among her three children. He is also very talkative at home. Reading English story books is his favourite pastime. Before he started school, Mrs Shah “used to make flash cards to teach him reading”. She obtained her ideas for teaching him reading from books and magazines. Lokman's mother herself is interested in reading. She said that she reads "all kinds of things". Her staple reading diet comprises the Reader's Digest, Family and Motherhood magazines which she buys regularly. The family spends**



about a hundred and fifty dollars every month on books. Mrs Shah feels it is reasonable and is good for the children - "Money spent on books is not wasted". They do not go to the library because in the past, she had "borrowed children's books where the pages had been torn". The family usually purchases its books at MPH and TIMES (two established bookshops). When Lokman was younger, his mother used to read him stories before he went to bed. His mother chooses books for them by browsing around at bookshops. She advises him to read while travelling by train and when they go out, Lokman takes along a book to read. He loves to read Enid Blyton and Famous Five and "gets lost in a bookshop". If Lokman takes a book home from school, his parents look at it and they give him some time to read it. After that, he has to tell them the contents of the first chapter. Mrs Shah feels "it is important for parents to know what their children are doing - that includes reading".

Mrs Shah said that there is a great deal of talk at home especially at dinner time. The family always dines together. Lokman's mother felt it was important for them to listen to their children's opinions. Dinnertime is also used to tell the children about the need to study hard. Lokman likes to talk about school and his friends. When she sends Lokman off to school, Mrs Shah tells him to pay more attention in class because "that is the only way to score high marks". Mrs Shah gives Lokman regular work to do at home. She purchases assessment books and ensures he finishes them. When he does not understand, she or her husband would teach him.



Mrs Shah does not know how reading and writing are taught in school. She tries "to keep track" but says it is difficult to communicate with the teachers because "they are not around and they do not bother". She wants "two-way communication" with the teacher. She has not gone to school to see the teacher as yet, but if she does, it would be to "find out if Lokman's work is improving or deteriorating". Mrs Shah said that "school success takes priority" and for this reason she had told her mother that "the children would visit when there was time". As the examination approaches, the visits are cancelled. Mrs Shah has told her mother that "Lokman's studies are important".

Lokman used to attend Islamic religious classes daily a year ago. His parents have stopped him now (as of 1994) because he has a great deal of schoolwork to do. Mrs Shah discussed the religious education of their son with her husband and decided that "he could continue with his religious studies when he is older". This, she felt, would allow him more time to concentrate on his studies.

Lokman watches television daily for an hour. His favourite is cartoons. The family watches "Under One Roof" and "Gotcha" (two local sitcoms). The children are not allowed to watch shows with violence. They discuss what they watch to advise the children on "what is right and what has to be avoided".

Lokman did well in his Primary Two examination and has been streamed into the best class. During my classroom observations, I noticed that he was fairly responsive during shared reading sessions.



**Lokman's family relaxes during the weekends by browsing at bookshops, watching television and visiting the grandparents.**

### **Kala**

**Kala is an Indian and lives in an HDB executive apartment with her parents, a twelve year old sister and a six year old brother. Kala is eight years old and fairly tall and solidly built. She is one of the tallest in her class and a prefect. Her mother is thirty-eight years old, has an "O" level qualification and works as a nurse. Her father has an "A" level qualification, is forty years old and worked in the army till a year ago. He had since resigned and is working as an insurance agent. The family income exceeds two thousand, five hundred dollars a month. The family uses English and Tamil at home although English is the predominant language. Mr Rama said that he now made it a point to speak in Tamil because if "you want to learn a language, you must use it". The children, however, still respond in English. However, during my home visits the father spoke only in English.**

**Kala's father said that his children knew that they had to do well, otherwise they would be punished. Despite teaching them and setting them work, he said "he does not pressurize them". During examination times, he "locks up the television so that they are not distracted and can concentrate".**



The father, I observed, had a lot of say in running the household, guiding the children in their school work and disciplining them. The mother, because of the shift nature of her work, did not play as important a role in the children's education. During home visits, however, I noticed that the children talked to her more than the father, about television programmes they had watched and their friends.

The family buys the Straits Times and the Young Generation - a children's magazine. Mr Rama said that he reads the newspaper daily for about half an hour. Occasionally, he reads suspense thrillers. The parents generally do not read to their children. The father said that the son who was entering Primary One could not read or write. He felt it was "not necessary for a child to have acquired these skills before starting school". His opinion is that they "pick it up fast when they start school". Each child, he said, has "his own pick-up point - when the child shows interest and asks, he will teach". For example, he said his son asked about number so he sat down to teach 101 - 1000 and explained the number of ten-cent coins in one dollar. His perception of reading and writing is "the ability to express ideas and opinions in a manner people can understand". He does not think it is important to explain a story to a child. The child would derive its own meaning. Talking about his role in preparing a child for school, he said:

"the standard now is very high, teaching is going very fast, so parents play a guiding role, to go through what is done in school".



**Mr Rama monitors his children's schoolwork and teaches them. He buys books for them. He also manages the house and "makes the rules". He feels reading to children will definitely benefit them. Whenever he reads relevant or interesting articles in the Straits Times, he "tells the children about them and they read it on their own". The children spend about an hour daily reading on their own. Their favourite is Enid Blyton - the books belong to Kala's older sister. Once the children start school, they are left to read on their own. Kala said that she reads daily and borrows from the library or her sister's friend. Mrs Rama reads to her son before he goes to bed. He loves books on animals and dinosaurs of which they have a small collection.**

**Kala's parents do not go to the school at all. Mrs Rama said that her daughter would cry if she did. She, however, obtains feedback about the children from the Tamil teacher who lives in the same block of apartments. The parents have no knowledge about the teaching of English in school. Mr Rama felt that the assessment books available outside school are an accurate guide of the standard.**

**The children watch cartoons, Chinese serials and a locally-produced drama "Masters of the Sea". Mr Rama said he sits and watches the programmes with the children because there is only one television. But Kala said that they are allowed to watch television only during the school holidays. The television is locked otherwise. She said that her father does not watch television with them because they have different interests. So her father watches television in his bedroom.**



The children play Scrabble with their parents occasionally during school holidays. Kala spends her free time after school roller-skating with her 'gang' in the void deck below her flat. She has about ten friends living in the same apartment block. Saturday and Sunday afternoons are also spent playing with this group. Her brother and sister also join in the playing. Every Sunday at 2pm the father books a badminton court for them to play. Kala spends Saturday mornings in school attending band lessons and art class.

The children attend church every Sunday from ten in the morning to one in the afternoon. Kala said she enjoys going to church. The parents are not Christians.

Kala said that she liked talking to her father because "he is very clever". She is not close to her mother and felt that she had been "neglected" by her because she is the middle child. She said that her mother had told her she "regretted not spending time with her". The children use English when talking to their parents and talk to the maid in Tamil. Kala sometimes talks to her father about happenings in school. The family has many social gatherings. The week of the interview, they had returned from a three-day chalet stay. Kala said that in class she would not volunteer or share her experiences with her classmates unless the pupil nominated by the teacher does not know the answer. Her classroom participation attests to this.

Both parents are fairly relaxed and "do not push their children to achieve". Kala's father said that it is adequate if the children scored between 80 and 90 per cent. He feels allowance must be made for



**"human error such as careless mistakes". The children are given a great deal of playtime. Mrs Rama observed that the other children in the apartment block "do not come down to play". Kala has done well in Primary Two and has been streamed into the best class. Throughout the interview her mother was busy with getting the children organized for a church outing. She did not sit down for the interview.**

### **Ganesh**

**Ganesh, of Indian ethnicity and the only boy in a family of teenage sisters, lives in a five-room HDB apartment. His forty-four year old mother is a housewife and his father is a computer logistics officer. One sister is doing her 'A' levels at a junior college, while the other sister sat for her 'O' level examination at the end of 1994.**

**Ganesh's mother said that she always tells her children to do well in school "so that they can have a better life" than her. Her husband gets the children whatever they need to succeed in school. Although he does not sit down to teach them, he emphasizes to them the importance of a good education. Through arranging for tuition in subjects that the children are weak in, and monitoring Ganesh's work, they convey to the children their emphasis on doing well in school.**

**The home environment is quiet and nurturing with family time spent watching television. I observed during my home visits that the**



children had time to talk to their parents when they returned home from school in the evenings and after they had finished their school and tuition homework. On days when the children have tests at school, the amount of time available for talking with family members is reduced.

Ganesh's family spends the weekends at home watching television and the children catching up with school work. The family subscribes to the Straits Times daily. When Ganesh was small his mother "read to him simple story books". He started reading independently at five years when he was in kindergarten one. Mrs Das said that she usually does not buy books because there are many books at home. She had kept all her daughters' books. Occasionally when she sees good books she would buy them. The family does not visit the library "because the children do not have time". Ganesh reads a great deal. If he takes a book home from school, he reads it on his own. Mrs Das said that she picks up magazines like Her World occasionally. Her husband used to subscribe to the Indian Movie News magazine for her. But this has since been discontinued.

Ganesh watches cartoons on his own. The family watches the locally produced drama serial "Masters of the Sea" and a local quiz programme, "Pyramid Game". The children watch wrestling and football matches with the father. This is usually during the weekend. The family also watches a Tamil movie (rented video) fortnightly. They do not discuss what they watch because Mrs Das said that "the children understand".



Mrs Das does not know how English is taught in school. She goes through Ganesh's schoolwork and helps him every day for between one and two hours. She makes him do assessment books - "one book a month". She has not been to the school because "the teacher is busy" and "parents have been told not to go to school". Mrs Das said that "the previous teacher would call her at home" and tell her about "Ganesh's progress, but the current teacher did not". Mrs Das teaches Ganesh mathematics. He also attends tuition classes twice a week conducted by the Residents' Committee at the community centre nearby. This group tuition is held in the morning. In the evening, after school, he has Tamil tuition twice a week. The Tamil tuition is individual. Mrs Das expressed concern over her son's work. She said she was doing her best. She "had tried asking the father to spend time teaching Ganesh but he had not made any effort". They have had arguments over this and she is at a loss as to what to do.

Ganesh's family is Hindu but they "seldom go to the temple because there is no time". They pray at home and when the family sings Thevarams (Hindu hymns), Ganesh joins in. "Although he knows the words, he does not know their meaning because it has never been explained to him".

Ganesh interacts with his mother most of the time. They have time together in the mornings before he leaves for school, on the days he does not have tuition. "Ganesh enjoys talking to his sisters and is beginning to feel left out because they are much older and have much more in common between them to share than with him". Their talk



centres around his friends. When Ganesh was in Primary One and Two, the older sister used to ask him about events in school. Since she started college however, “the pressure of schoolwork leaves her no time to talk to him”. Ganesh's father is very quiet and reserved. He advises the children to study hard and gets them everything they need as far as their studies are concerned. Mrs Das said that she sometimes talked to Ganesh about her childhood and school days. The older sister summarizes stories for him. He later reads the books. Ganesh's older sister said that her mother tells her to study hard so that she would have a better life. Ganesh visits his grandmother once in two months. He communicates with her in English and Tamil.

On the whole, Ganesh's family leads “a very simple and quiet life”. Each child has a table with an attached bookshelf. Ganesh has a room of his own and usually studies there. He has been identified by the teacher as an “average student”. He did not do very well in his final year examination in Primary Two.

### **Aparna**

Aparna lives in a five-room HDB flat which the family purchased in 1994. Both parents are from India, but Aparna's father has been in Singapore since 1981. He is thirty-nine years old and holds an engineering degree. He has just completed his part-time MBA degree with the National University of Singapore. Aparna's mother is thirty-one years old and holds a Bachelor of Science degree from India in



Chemistry. She is not working in Singapore. Both parents speak Tamil at home although the children speak both English and Tamil. Mr Shan said that "when Tamil is used, one talks with the heart". "When you want to convey something and convey the message in Tamil it is more effective". Mrs Shan said that Aparna uses English to argue. Aparna has a younger sister who attends nursery classes. The total family income is about four thousand dollars a month. Through their involvement in their children's education and cultural life, Mr and Mrs Shan have conveyed to their children the importance of doing well in school. They tell their children to "pay attention in class", "complete homework neatly" and do additional work at home. Through disciplined and regular work, Mr Shan feels they would be able to obtain good grades.

Aparna's home environment extends her learning at school. This is made possible by her parents guiding her in her schoolwork and ensuring she is above grade level. The regular reading of stories and chatting which I observed during my home visits and the moral games played in the car showed very clearly that the parents were engaged in modelling literate behaviour.

The family subscribes to children's magazines: "Delight" magazine, "Ambuli Mama" (an English magazine from India) and "Balamithra" (a magazine from India written in Tamil). Every month Mrs Shan buys two Enid Blyton books for Aparna. Until Aparna started Primary One, her mother used to read to her. She started reading to her at two years of age and "by three-and-a-half,



**Aparna could read on her own''. Her father reads to her sometimes. In 1995, since Aparna was in the afternoon school, her mother read to her in the morning after she finished her housework. Mrs Shan usually reads English fairytales to her. Sometimes, she "reads a paragraph and asks Aparna to summarize it or write a small note on it". When Aparna takes a book home from school, she would show it to her mother who would "explain the story". Aparna's father reads to her at bed-time. She chooses her own books. If her father makes the choice she would not listen to the story. Mr Shan said that as a student he could not afford to buy books and had to borrow from the library. So he "made a vow to buy the books" he wanted "once he started working". He very proudly showed me his library which had a vast collection of books. Aparna and her sister had their own collection of Enid Blyton and encyclopaedias. The children have their own rooms and study tables. The parents also subscribe to the Reader's Digest, Women's Era and India Today magazines.**

**Mrs Shan meets with the teacher, who stays in the same block of apartments, once a month. She used to ask the Tamil teacher for feedback on Aparna. "The feedback was always negative" - "She is talkative and quite lazy". So Aparna's mother said that she "stopped seeking feedback from the Tamil teacher".**

**Aparna's father expressed concern over the type of teaching that was taking place in the school. He said that, as parents, they "do not know about the curriculum, the manner of teaching or what is being taught". "There is no school diary where parents and teachers can**



give feedback. Communication is not very effective". Mr Shan also felt that the foundation was not being established correctly "Things are learnt mechanically, not with understanding". Aparna's mother spends two hours every day teaching Aparna. Both parents help Aparna with her schoolwork. Her mother ensures that she does her assessment books daily. She also checks her books every day and teaches her.

The children watch "Sesame Street", "Mr Bean", "Police Academy" and "Barney". They will ask the mother for clarification if they do not understand. Aparna also watches the nightly English news. Her favourite programmes are "Extraordinary People", "Code Red", "Under One Roof", "Family Matters" and "Commando". Her parents explain to her when she asks for reasons why something is happening.

Mr Shan said that as he had been busy preparing for his MBA, weekends were spent in the library. Now that he has finished his course, he has decided to spend more time with the children. He felt very guilty about not having been able to do so in 1994. Every day Aparna talks about school events. When they are together, the family talks about movies, stories about their childhood and books they have read. Aparna also asks about words she does not know. She likes talking to her sister most because she talks a great deal. They usually talk when they are in bed. They both talk in English to each other. Mrs Shan said that a great deal of talking takes place in the car because they practically "live in the car". Pre-bedtime talk is also a



common occurrence when they “talk about childhood, Singapore ten years ago and, compare school days now and before”.

Every Friday, the family sings Bhajans (devotional songs) and has "Prasatham" (devotional food). The girls are taught the Slokas (Sanskrit religious chants) and the meaning is explained. On Saturdays, the family goes to the Temple. The parents said that this is essential and never to be missed. Aparna spends Saturday mornings in school, attending band practice. She is also enrolled for English class at the British Council. In the afternoon, she goes for her classical Indian music class at the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society where she learns vocal music. Sunday evenings are reserved for swimming. School holidays are spent with visits to the zoo, Science Centre and going on picnics.

Once a year the family visits the grandparents in India. The grandparents talk to the children in Tamil and tell them stories based on the Mahabharatha (a famous Indian epic) as well as childhood stories. Mrs Shan said that they also tell them "God stories" (stories based on Hinduism) and about lifestyles and children in India. The grandparents also write letters in Tamil to the children quite often.

Aparna is described as a bright pupil who does her work diligently in class. During group work, she assumes leadership position and takes over the writing of a group story. When she is not doing the writing, she reads her story book. She is very quiet in class and responds only when the teacher nominates her. Aparna said that "it will be rude to discuss my experiences with the teacher during lesson time unless the



teacher asks for it". Aparna has done very well in her final examination and has been streamed into the best Primary Three class.

## **Lester**

Lester, an eight year old Chinese boy, lives with his parents in a three-room HDB flat. His father is forty years old and works as a Senior Sales supervisor while his thirty-five year old mother stays at home. Both parents are Chinese educated and have "O" level qualifications. Mr Tan speaks English with Lester while Mrs Tan uses Mandarin with him. The nature of Mr Tan's work requires him to do shifts.

Both Lester's parents spend a lot of time teaching Lester and assigning him written work to do. There were hardly any casual reading materials, like magazines or comics. During the home visits, I observed that Lester had a minimum of two hours written work to do - covering mathematics, English and the mother tongue. After a ten - fifteen minute break, he was given a text, usually taken from the newspaper to read and restate. Lester had time to play with his pet hamster only during the weekend after finishing his homework. Other than watching television and going out to places of interest to "expand Lester's general knowledge", Lester's father said that they ensure that the home environment focuses on learning.



There were a few story books and an encyclopaedia at home. The story books were simple ones bought from the stationery shop near home. When Lester was younger, Mr Tan used to play educational songs for him to listen. He also read stories to Lester while he was still in the womb. Usually, Mrs Tan reads to Lester in Mandarin before he goes to bed. She “explains words which he does not understand” and encourages Lester “to predict events in the story”. Lester usually prefers to discuss the story after the reading is completed. Lester’s father reads him stories in English in the afternoons. Some of these stories according to Lester are funny. All his Chinese storybooks are on animals.

Lester’s father rewrites (in simple English) articles published in The Straits Times and the New Paper. Sometimes, he cuts out articles and pastes them onto a hard cover foolscap book he has. “Lester is given about forty-five minutes to read it and then memorizes it. He then retells it word for word”. Mr Tan feels that this is because Lester has an “excellent memory”. Lester relates what he has memorized to his father after dinner. He is “made to learn the spelling of new or difficult words” because his father feels “it is the best way to improve vocabulary”.

Lester usually watches documentaries and educational programmes such as "Wheel of Fortune" and "Pyramid Game" on television with his mother. During the school holidays he watches variety shows (Chinese) and English and Chinese cartoons. He talks about what he watches with his parents (usually his mother).



Mr Tan pointed out that Lester spent a lot of time practising handwriting in Kindergarten One. So he stopped him from attending Kindergarten Two and taught him himself. The parents have not been to see the teacher but Mr Tan said that Lester's form teacher is "very good, helpful and speaks good English".

Mr Tan does not require Lester to do school worksheets at home. This is to avoid duplication. He emphasises general knowledge, especially from the newspaper eg. rock climbing. The day of the interview, Lester's father had written out problem sums on two sides of foolscap paper for Lester to do. He had retrieved the sums from a few higher grade books. Lester had to do them when he returned home. This is a regular practice to ensure he gets practice solving difficult sums. Mr Tan also said that he did a lot of work with Lester on grammar, because "the foundation is important". In fact, there were many assessment books at home. The teacher observed that "very often Lester brings his assessment books to school and allows his friends to do them".

Every week, the family has "discussion time" when they talk about school matters. Mr Tan said that enabled him "to find out about developments in school and observations Lester had made". Lester is required to think through everything he does. For example, when he wanted to raise money for a pupil suffering from kidney failure in his school, he was asked to explain "why he wanted to do it" and "what different ways he could do it". Lester interacts more with his mother than with his father. Mrs Tan said that she "allowed Lester to play a



lot more". Lester's mother said during the interview that "Lester's father is very strict with Lester and does not allow him much say in anything". Lester said that he is "afraid of his father".

Lester is very talkative, especially with his mother. On my second visit home, he went on talking about his model aeroplane, till his mother told him to stop (in Mandarin). He was also very enthusiastic about his sticker and rubber collection. He also narrated his experiences of his two-day camp stay - to which his father had sent him so that "he will learn to become responsible and independent". Lester is told by his parents to behave in class. Lester said that he talks very much because "I have so many things to say".

Mr Tan never fails to point out to his son that he was first in class from Primary One to Primary Six. He "cannot understand why Lester cannot obtain first position in class". Lester does put across his own ideas sometimes. For example, Mr Tan said that Lester once told him, "but, father, not everyone is the same. I am not like you. It does not mean that if you came in first in class, you would become a doctor later". Mr Tan is very achievement-oriented. Lester had obtained ninety-seven marks for Mandarin but his father said that "was not good enough because the three marks he had lost were due to careless mistakes". He said that Lester knew it and "apologized immediately and promised not to make such mistakes in future". Lester's promised holiday to Australia was cancelled because he came in fourth in rank in class position. His father felt that he should be ranked between one and three, "because all of Lester's other cousins



**maintain those class positions”. “Lester is punished without lunch and breakfast if he does not do well”. Mr Tan always reminds Lester to pay attention in class and warns him about being punished for careless mistakes.**

**Mr Tan expressed his two concerns as follows. One is, Lester being "caught by the principal for bad behaviour" and the other is, his "learning to co-operate with his school mates". He said "At home I emphasize book knowledge, so in school, I wish he enjoy and have team-spirit".**

**Lester's class teacher pointed out that “Lester's parents have very high expectations and punish him when he does not perform”. Lester confides in her occasionally. For this reason, she “allows him to participate more actively in class”.**

**From the age of four, Lester has won trophies for his participation in English and Chinese Speech contests. I counted fifteen trophies on display on a shelf at home. Lester had also done an MTV film shoot and taken on as master-of-ceremonies in several Chinese television-talk shows. Mr Tan mentioned that “when Lester speaks on stage, he has an accent (talks like a native speaker - this is favourably and positively regarded by parents and teachers), which never fails to impress the judges” and surprised even him.**



Lester does not have toys but has a fish tank and some hamsters. They were bought after he promised to look after them. According to Mr Tan, Lester has kept to his word.

Lester's parents are free thinkers, but Lester is a Buddhist. Generally, it seems that Lester is a very bright boy and participates spontaneously in class. He is very polite, always addressing the teacher before responding or making a comment. During group writing, he dominates by carrying out the entire task himself. He speaks well, is very curious and is the only pupil in class who asks questions.

#### **Kai Lin**

Kai Lin, an eight year old Chinese girl, is the eldest of three children and lives in an HDB Executive Apartment. Her mother is an Accounts Manager while her father is in sales. The grandmother stays with the family and a part-time maid manages the house. Mrs Lim works six days a week and is rarely home before nine at night.

With both parents working full-time, Kai Lin and her siblings are left to their own devices. Kai Lin's grandmother stays with the family and monitors their general well-being. She tells them to finish their schoolwork "but is not in a position to monitor their work". On the whole, it appears a relaxed home with the children doing their own work. Kai Lin does not go for any tuition classes and spends her time reading and watching television, especially Chinese serials.



Kai Lin said that she knows she has to do well because her parents expect that of her. Mrs Lim pointed out that Kai Lin "has been managing so far on her own". Although she knew she must provide help, Mrs Lim said her work was so demanding that she was "too tired to think of anything else" when she got home. She does not spend any time going through her children's work or reading, playing or talking to them, because from Monday to Saturday, both parents work till about nine in the evening. When they "get home, the children are usually asleep".

Kai Lin enjoys reading and borrows her books from the library. Her mother also gives her money to buy books. The parents do not read to the children. Since Mrs Lim works late several days in the week, she says she is too tired to read to the children. Both the parents said that their reading is "confined to reading the Straits Times".

Mrs Lim has not had any reason to go to her daughter's school to meet the teachers. She does not have the time and feels that "the teachers will contact her if there is a need". Kai Lin does her homework on her own. When she does not know how to do her work, she waits for her mother. Mrs Lim mentioned that she felt "guilty for not paying attention to her daughter's schoolwork". She said that she knew "Kai Lin needs help but has managed satisfactorily so far".

The children watch local sitcoms like "Gotcha" and "Under One Roof". The grandmother watches Chinese serials with them. Mrs Lim joins them if she happens to be back home early. They do not



**talk about the programmes they watch or the issues raised therein. Because both parents are very busy with their respective jobs, there is "hardly time for family interaction". During weekends, however, they "go shopping or out for dinner". The children spend time playing with each other and occasionally with their grandmother.**

**Given the long working hours, Kai Lin's parents say they have hardly any time to interact with their children. Kai Lin's mother stated that "the lack of attention paid to Kai Lin at home is reflected in her below average performance at school".**



### **PART THREE : PRACTICES OF TALK AT HOME**

The last section looked at the type of talk and the features which facilitated its occurrence during shared reading and writing lessons in three primary two classrooms in Singapore and the profiles of the focal pupils. In this section, the type of activities that the families engaged in and the talk that occurred during shared reading in the homes of the focal pupils from the three classrooms, will be described. The data for this were collected from interviews with the pupils at school and their parents, log entries that the pupils kept over two weeks and audio recordings of story book reading done by some of the parents. Not all the parents in the study recorded their storybook reading because many of them said that they did not read to or with their children at home and therefore were reluctant to do it.

#### **WORKING PARENTS**

Of the ten children in this study, five of them had both parents working. For this reason, the amount of time these children had for interacting with their parents was much less compared to that of the two children whose mothers were at home. One child (Malay) whose mother's working hours were flexible also had more interaction time. A significant observation about children whose mothers were at home, was that the children could communicate with their mothers before and after school. Both the Indian pupils and the two Malay pupils whose mothers were at home to send them to school or receive them when they returned after school, talked to their



mothers about events that happened in the school. The other children, who returned home to a maid or an empty house, did not have the opportunity of interacting with their mothers, who came home at six-thirty or later in the evening- about five-and-a-half hours or more after the child's return from school. This means the immediacy or the excitement of school news was not there anymore for the child to share with his/her mother. In fact, at the interviews, the Malay and Indian pupils said that they talked to their mothers about school, teachers and friends. The Chinese pupils, on the other hand, said that they talked to their parents about school homework if they did not understand how to do it.

## **SIBLINGS**

Pupils who had siblings of or about the same age tended to talk and play more with them than their parents. Those who had older siblings (two) or had no siblings tended to be loners or talked to their mothers. None of the children in the study said that they talked to their fathers. This could be due to the fact that the fathers were working and, more importantly, they were perceived as strict disciplinarians.

## **PARENTS TALKING TO CHILDREN**

While pupils claimed they talked very little to their parents, parents' talk time with their children was also limited. Except for two of the Indian parents and two of the Malay parents in the study, all the



other parents expressed the feeling that there was "nothing to talk about" to or with their children. When asked to elaborate on this, they said they provided for the children's needs and the "children will ask them if they wanted anything". Lester's and Sze Lin's fathers explained it thus: "When we were small our parents never bother. Now we give them (the children) so much and really take care of them". Sze Lin's father said "Our parents had so many children. Where they had time?" The two Malay parents, however, felt differently. Faeza's mother said "In the olden days, our parents didn't know. They just gave us food and made sure we were okay. And that was enough. But nowadays, times are different". She went on to say: "Nowadays, the children have so much stress. We must talk to them so that we can help them and they know we are there. They are my children".

Aparna's mother is a well-educated, articulate person, who is very involved in helping new members of her community (from India) when they have problems. But she is equally involved with her own two daughters. She spent a fair amount of time talking to them, especially after they had completed written work that she had set them to do. Because the family did many activities together, particularly during the weekends, they had a lot more opportunities for talking to each other. Ganesh's mother, who is a housewife and did not complete secondary school, said "nothing really much to talk, he (Ganesh) do his work, watch cartoon by himself". Because of the fairly large age gaps between the older siblings (sixteen years) and the youngest child (seven) and the lack of family-oriented activities, opportunities for talk were much less in this Indian household.



**Kala's mother is a qualified nurse, but appeared to have little say in the running of the household. The father said he made all the decisions. She was much closer to her youngest son (six years) and did things with him. (Kala, the pupil in this study, mentioned this and it was also noticed during home visits that the mother was engaged in doing things with or for her son). Kala is her second child and because of her middle position, she claimed she "has been neglected". Kala is very independent and mature. She idol-worships her father - "he is very strict and gets angry very fast". The fourth Indian child in this study, Yoga, comes from a single-parent home and because the mother worked on shifts, the teacher and mother said that he had become "accustomed to being independent and taking care of himself".**

**This pattern of parent-child talk observed during the home-visits and obtained through the interviews, matches the observation logs that the pupils had completed. The interviews revealed that for many of the children, talking to their parents at home centred around clarifying school homework or answering questions pertaining to school. Talk centering around their feelings, interest, likes and dislikes, was not a common occurrence, unless parents encouraged it (as in the case of the two Malay and two Indian families). The log entries of the pupils describe the occurrence of talk in the homes of the homes of the pupils in this study:-**



**Table 10: Activities Engaging Parents and Children in Talk**

<b>Pupil</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Telling Stories</b>	<b>Talking</b>	<b>Television</b>	<b>Playing Games</b>
<b>Lester</b>	<b>C1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6 (3m h)</b>	<b>18 (8m)</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Sze Lin</b>	<b>C2</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>8 (b) (5p)</b>	<b>31 (12b)</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Kai Lin</b>	<b>C3</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>7(b) (3m)</b>	<b>39 (8m)</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Faeza(2)</b>	<b>M1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>45(m) (3b)</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Lokman</b>	<b>M2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>33(30m,11s)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Faeza</b>	<b>M3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>20 (m)</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Aparna</b>	<b>T1</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>38(m,f)(49s)</b>	<b>29(6s)</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Kala</b>	<b>T2</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>10(f)(6s/b)</b>	<b>29(b/s)</b>	<b>13(2p)</b>
<b>Yoga</b>	<b>T3</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>5(m)</b>	<b>18(4m)</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Ganesh</b>	<b>T4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>19(m) (5s)</b>	<b>25(6p/s)</b>	<b>5</b>

Unless otherwise indicated, the activities involved the family. b=brother, s=sister, m=mother, f=father, h=himself, p=parents. The figures represent the number of times the children engaged in these activities during the two weeks.

The table above shows the four main activities when it was felt pupils and parents and children were most likely to be engaged in talk. These were activities the children had said they were engaged in when they were not doing their school work. Some of the activities were engaged in by some children only. Over a two week period, the Chinese children in this study talked with their siblings (C2 and C3) more than they did with their parents. Similarly the Chinese children



watched television usually on their own. This could be because they were watching children's programmes or watching TV (CNN) in the day when the parents were at work. Sze Lin and Kai Lin played games with their siblings but this was less than the amount of time spent watching television.

The Malay pupils spent relatively more time talking to their parents, followed by watching television and some time spent on telling stories. The stories were usually told by the parents as part of teaching the children Islamic values. The Malay pupils also watched television as a family rather than alone (by themselves) as was the case with the Chinese pupils. Playing games (board games, computer games) with their parents was also common practice.

With the Indian pupils, talking occurred in three families. The low ranking in Yoga's family may be due to the effect of a single parent working on shifts. In Aparna's and Ganesh's homes (to a lesser extent), story telling by the parents took place and so did time spent playing games. The lesser amount of time spent playing games in the Indian families may also be due to the age of the parents. Ganesh's parents were in their late forties while the sisters were in their teens. Aparna's parents said that they usually played Scrabble because it was educational. All four parents pointed out that "games are for little children" so they "don't normally join in". Ganesh's parents and Yoga's mother said that they have never played any game with their children. Kala had greater opportunity for playing games because she belonged to the neighbourhood children's group.



Table 11 shows that many of the children in this study had little talk time with their parents. It also shows the distribution of other activities they were engaged in over the two-week log-in period.

**Table 11: Children's Daily Activities Over Two Weeks**

Name	Reading	Writing	Doing Homework	Playing Piano	Studying
Lester	8	3	23	-	24
Sze Lin	27	-	16	6	14
Kai Lin	11	-	16	-	10
Faeza(2)	17	15	8	-	20
Lokman	6	-	16	-	30
Faeza	3	-	13	-	10
Aparna	23	5	9	11	13
Kala	3	-	15	-	18
Yoga	13	-	20	-	16
Ganesh	9	-	19	-	12

The table above shows that for many of the pupils in this study a great deal of time was spent on doing homework and studying. Reading ranked the highest as a leisure activity and writing the lowest. Of the ten children, seven did not engage in any form of personalized writing. Faeza(2), who does quite a bit of writing, has the habit of keeping a diary, while Aparna writes to her grandparents in India. With a great amount of their waking hours



spent doing homework or studying, children in this study, therefore, had less time for interacting with their parents.

## **RESPONDING AND MAKING UNSOLICITED OBSERVATIONS**

Speaking out of turn or making unsolicited independent observations was not a feature of parent-child interaction in these homes. The children assumed the floor only if they were directly addressed by the parents. Throughout the interviews, when the talk related to their schoolwork and their attitude, the children sat there listening and not responding. In two of the homes (Faeza2 and Kala), the children were told to go to their rooms and get on with their work. Many of the children showed me the types of books they read or their art pieces only when asked to do so by their parents. In all the homes, younger and older siblings were requested to go to their own rooms for the duration of the interviews. An interesting observation was that younger children (in Sze Lin's and Kai Lin's homes) were allowed to interrupt or talk to me or the parents, unsolicited. This confirmed statements made by two of my informants - a sociologist and a writer - that the Chinese demarcate childhood into two phases - (Pu Tong Tze).

**Phase 1            Until five years of age.**

**Phase 2            Six years and beyond.**

Until five years of age, the child is considered as not knowing anything and therefore needs to be taught and improper behaviour is



to be excused. From six years, the child is thought to be able to distinguish right and wrong and be aware of proper behaviour. It is therefore treated like an adult, with less indulgence. This view is shared by the Indians as well. Although children are considered God's greatest gift to parents, they nevertheless are to be taught proper behaviour so that they do justice to their birth as a human being (which in the Hindu belief, is the most noble of births to attain in the cycle of life). Malays, on the other hand, treasure their children as innocent little ones who need to be showered with lots of affection (see Chapter 3:160-162).

#### **AUTHORITY AND HIERARCHY**

Respect for authority and hierarchy is another reason for children not speaking out of turn and not making unsolicited observations. Doing any of this reflects upbringing and, therefore, places the blame squarely on the parents. This code of respect for authority is tersely summed up in the Hokkien expression: “boh tua boh say”. The “tua” refers to the “big” or those higher up the social scale and the “say” refers to the “small” or those lower down. One should thus be mindful of proper behaviour towards those higher up the scale or face severe reprimand. Those higher up the scale includes parents and teachers. Disrespect and anger can be expressed downward against the “say” or ‘smaller’ people, not upwards. This behavioural norm holds in the Indian and Malay cultures as well (see discussion on Cultural Scripts in Chapter 3:156-161,166-168,170-173,177). Misdemeanour of this nature is summed up in the Malay phrase



**"Kurang-ajar" (not well-brought up). In Tamil, the age-old saying, Mother, Father, Teacher and God (Matha, Pitha, Guru, Theivam) encompasses the same notion of respect for authority and the severe reprimand for not observing proper code of conduct.**

**For these reasons, children in this study did not partake in conversations with their parents. Parents provided for all the physical needs of their children and had their well-being at heart. Responses were therefore not sought from the children because parents were deemed to know what was good for their children. Opinions were therefore not solicited from the children even on matters such as buying a story book. Although through advice, parents made it clear to their children what was expected of them in terms of behaviour and at school, this did not arise out of discussion between parent and child. They were precepts conveyed by those who know (parents) to those who need to know (the children). Opinions are therefore not solicited, especially from children so young.**

## **CHATTING AND BANTERING**

**Chatting and bantering with children was also not a feature of parent-child interaction in the Chinese homes (refer to discussion on Cultural Scripts, Chapter 3:170,173-176). Although Sze Lin's father described how his daughter enjoyed giving them riddles, he dismissed it as a worthless indulgence. The three Malay parents and one Indian (Aparna's) parent, on the other hand, engaged in chatting with their children - largely through story-telling during meal times**



and occasionally at bedtime. This again is engaged in within the boundaries of respect and authority, especially in the Indian homes.

The following is an excerpt of a talk in Kala's home:

**Father:** At first the show was three hours. Then when they went and saw the show it was two hours. A lot of people got fed up. They come from Malaysia. Then some men, they come from Malaysia.

**Kala :** Their fault what, not they all fault.

**Father:** Ya, but they say, super show and superstar. Then they show everyday on television you see. Everybody thought it was a grand show.... You know Rajini's wife?

**Kala:** Ya, I know.

**Father:** ....A lot of people want to see the organizer, give this type of cheapskate show. A lot of the show was Lata ...

**Kala:** Why they doh want Lata?

**Father:** Ah?

**Kala:** Why they doh want her?

**Father:** Because they said it is a supershow by a super star, not a Lata show, understand?

This talk between father and daughter about a variety entertainment show the parents had attended the night before, may be seen as a sharing of experience. The father explained the context of the show and the expectations of the audience and gave reasons for the poor standard of the concert, the unhappiness of the audience and the inconvenience caused. This sharing of information was punctuated by clarifying questions from the child (four in a ten-minute



conversation) and the father's reading aloud of the newspaper report on the concert. The reporter's comments were expanded by the father's observations and explanations. This father's talk with his children was always focused around newspaper reports. At the interview he said that he read aloud interesting reports in the newspaper to his children. In the course of reading the reports and talking about them, he also explained word meanings and information that had to be inferred:

**Father:**           Somebody kill this driver, you know. (reads headlines)

“...*his back was slashed*”. Somebody take a parang, ah, and slash his neck and he is lying there”. Let’s read what happened(reads) “Police have classified the case as murder”.

That means the people did not want to kill him, lah. Don’t know why they kill him. You know what’s the meaning of ‘patrol’? ‘Patrol’ means the policeman will just walk around the area and will find out. That is patrolling.

**Kala :**           Was there anybody else around there or not?

**Father:**           Nobody there.

He ended the session saying "So this is the sad story of Mr Lee. Like it?" Before he finished the child said:

**Kala :**           Can put a bandage, what?

**Father:**           He's already killed, lah. He already die.

**Kala:**           They just cut the whole head off, what?

**Father:**           Not cut the whole head (demonstrating). Just cut the head, like that, then the blood is coming out, lah.



**This excerpt, like others recorded in this Indian home, showed the father sharing what he had read in the newspaper with his daughter. The sharing generated some clarifying questions from the child but did not lead to dialogue of a negotiated or collaborative nature.**

## **PLAYING GAMES**

**Usually, when games are played, a great deal of talk is generated. It is almost impossible to play a silent game, especially with children. In this study, the Chinese pupils said that they played games either by themselves or with their siblings. Parents, too, agreed that they had no time for games. An opportunity for talking to children is thus lost. Two of the Malay parents (Faeza<sup>2</sup> and Lokman) and one Indian parent (Aparna) spent their free time and weekends playing games with their children. Interestingly, none of these were sporting games. They were all board games and some of these, parents felt, "improved the children's vocabulary and English", eg, Boggle and Scrabble (Faeza's mother and Aparna's father). Watching some of the families playing 'Scrabble' was interesting, because the learning aspect more than the fun aspect was emphasized when parents tried to teach their children how to make longer words and the meaning of the words.**

## **HOMEWORK TALK**

**All the parents (except Kai Lin's and Faeza's ) in this study set rigorous and regular homework for their children. But in the interviews as well as the observations made at the homes, neither the**



parents nor the children engaged in any talk about the work that was set. This was always over and above and ahead of the schoolwork pupils received. The only interaction that occurred over homework was -

“Have you done your homework?” (Lester, Sze Lin, Faeza, Aparna, Kala, Yoga, Ganesh, Lokman's parents) or,

“Make sure you have finished your homework before you watch TV” (Lester's father) or,

“Make sure you do your homework properly, I don't want to see careless mistakes”. (Faeza's(2) mother).

There was no talk about the amount or type of homework parents set. Children assumed that it was the duty of parents to give them homework and their responsibility to finish it. The parents marked the homework (usually not immediately) and reprimanded the children for mistakes and sometimes threatened to deprive them of television watching. But there was no talk about the work set or its difficulty. It was taken as a routine to be carried out without any negotiation.

## **WRITING**

Eight of the parents in this study did not engage in writing of a personalized or official nature. The Malay mother (Faeza2), who is a child care teacher, and a Chinese father (Lester), did some writing by way of setting work for their children. Faeza's(2) mother writes down cooking recipes. Besides this, none of them engaged in any writing activity. All household bills were settled via GIRO (regular



bank deductions). Many of the parents said that they did not write letters because they did not have friends out of the country to write to. Aparna's mother said that she wrote to her parents in India at least once a month. Her children followed her example. This explained why Aparna and her sister engaged in writing activities (other than doing homework) at home.

## **TELLING STORIES**

Telling stories has been the age-old way of communicating values to children. In this study the Malay and Indian parents (three) told stories to their children. Chinese parents also told stories but, not of an entertaining nature. Sze Lin's and Lester's parents said that they often told their children about how difficult their own lives had been and what would happen if they did not study. Many of the parents stated during the interviews that these 'stories' were meant to "teach" and set the children in the right direction. This could be why Sze Lin said her parents "never tell any story". Ganesh's and Yoga's mothers and Kala's father shared their childhood experiences with their children while Aparna's parents also told them stories from the Indian epics. These stories, Aparna's father pointed out, generated questions and comments from the children. The Indian parents (Aparna and Ganesh) acknowledged that the main purpose in sharing the stories with their children was "to teach them the culture and the right values". The Malay parents and grandparents shared stories about their childhood - the difficult times, the changes that



have taken place and the "fun things" they used to do. The aim was mainly "to enjoy" and make them realize that "they are very lucky" (Faeza's(2) and Lokman's mothers). The three ethnic homes thus had different stories to tell and different ways of telling them. None of the parents saw these occasions as talking with their children. The absence of dialogue and the parents' objective of teaching values might have contributed to this perception.

## **READING**

Reading was not a favourite pastime or occupational requirement for many parents in this study. Except for one Indian parent, the rest did not grow up with books or being read to as children. However, the Malay and two of the Indian (Aparna and Ganesh) children and one Chinese child (Sze Lin) were read to as young children, before entering primary school. The practice of reading to children even after they had started school continued only with Aparna. All parents felt that since their children could read independently there was no need for them to be read to. This was confirmed in a survey done by Lee (1991).

Parents also pointed out that they had other children in the family to attend to and work commitments which made them too tired to do any bedtime reading. Except for the three Malay parents, who bought and borrowed books from the library regularly and Aparna's



parents, who subscribed to several children's magazines in English and Tamil, none of the other parents read as such. Of the three Chinese families, only Sze Lin's family subscribed to a daily newspaper. The (English) newspaper was a staple reading diet for all the other families.

When asked about bed-time reading all parents, except Aparna's, stated that they had never engaged in any activity of that nature. When they read to their children (when they were small) it was usually in the library or sitting in the lounge. A significant observation is that all parents said that they read to their children before they entered school, to "teach them reading". Pleasure of reading or the enjoyment of sharing a book with their child was not the focus. All parents pointed out during the interviews that books and reading help "gain knowledge". This seems to be an Asian view (Lee, 1991, Hong, 1991). Many of the parents said they helped their children either learn spelling of words or decode words in the texts. They pointed out that they did not talk about the books they read, but asked questions to see if the child understood what was read. Pronunciation and the articulation of every printed word gained as much attention:-

Yoga: (reads) *At least he showed them a thing or two this time. The animals had no idea that someone else lay awake that night, worrying about their fate. The evening issue of the local paper had carried a very unusual story and there were pictures, too, taken by a local who had witnessed the strange attack of the forest animals. When Alex read about it, she thought she understood so she showed the paper to her friend, Joe, and this time they were alarmed and ready for attack.*



- Mother:** Ready for ...?
- Yoga:** Ready for attack.
- Mother:** Ready for any (emphasizing) attack?
- Yoga:** Ready for any attack....(reads) *I wonder if it is right to ask them to fight", he thought looking round at his friends. For he knew there was little choice. And the men started working and Bosley.....*
- Mother:** And the men started work (stressing last word).
- Yoga:** *The men started work and ... the men immediately ran for the reefel, rifle (self-corrects).*
- Mother:** The men immediately ran for their ? You see, the men immediately ran for their rifles. Okay, okay.

Yoga read this story aloud for ten minutes and then was made to read instructions pertaining to a puzzle about the story. When he stopped twice, the mother told him to continue reading. As the excerpt shows, the mother did not read the story with the child. She made him read it through and stopped only to draw his attention to words he had omitted or mispronounced during the reading. They did not talk about the story after or before the reading.

In Excerpt Two below, Ganesh's mother is sharing a story with Ganesh on "*a bookworm that went fishing in Johor*".

- Mother:** (reads) *"...They had planned to go fishing that day. "I don't think it will.." said Anne, looking at the clouds which looked like gigantic cotton balls. "The sky is always like that here. Anyway it won't be hot today".*



**Ganesh:** A gigantic cotton ball is...

**Mother:** What is it?

**Ganesh:** It is a clouds.

**Mother:** Large clouds

**Ganesh:** Large clouds gathering in the sky.

**Mother** Hmm (continues reading). *"Sam began to sing - "Old McDonald had a farm", "ee, ah, ee ah, oo!" joined in Edison, Smarty and Porky".*

Who are these three people?

**Ganesh:** They are the... they are the bookworm gang.

**Mother:** (continues reading) *"It is not nice to tease others".*

Why did she say it is not nice to tease others? Why? Must tell me why. Because the old man said something very rude to say something back to an elderly person, ah.

(continues reading) *"They spread out the groundsheet and the girls took out the food from the basket. The boys hooked the worms onto the fishing rod".*

What they wanted to do with the fishing rod?

**Ganesh:** They wanted to catch some fish.

**Mother:** (reads on) *"They did not notice the clouds in the sky turning grey. "Can we eat now?" asked Porky, looking at the food.*

**Mother:** What do you mean by 'turning grey?' Why?

**Ganesh:** It means that it was going to rain.

**Mother:** Okay (reads on).

As she read the story, the mother paused to ask questions that check understanding or meaning of words. After completing the twenty minutes reading, she asked the child recall questions. When the



child took time to respond and hesitated, she checked him: "What, you have been listening. What, they, they, what?" The second was a reflective question:-

"Did they enjoy their picnic?"

The child's response was in the affirmative. There was no discussion of reasons or factors that contributed to the enjoyment. This shared reading session was conducted like a comprehension session where attention was not on enjoying the story and talking about the events, but on ensuring understanding of words and events.

### Episode 1

Father: They call fossils.

Aparna: What is cossils?

Father: Fossils, not cossils. F-o-s-s-i-l-s (spells it out).

Aparna: What is fossils?

Father: Fossils is something, okay (pause) this something like the remains of a ... wait, I will show you what is fossils. Let me tell you what is fossils. But we will not go far into that. Okay. The fossils are nothing but the remains of the animals and plants. "Remains" - *ehnraal ehnnathu*? (in Tamil, what does "remains" mean). What do you say about remains?

Aparna: There ...

Father: Suppose you eat something, the balance you throw in the dustbin, is it not? So that balance is called ...?

Aparna: Remains)

Father: Remains).



**Father:** Like some animals they die, okay? Then if there is nobody else to bury it or if it is just lying there, what happens? In due course all the meat will be eaten away by all the worms, and all those things, okay? It will get slowly disintegrated. But the bones, they will be still intact. The bones should be still there. And the bones *ehnnakum*? (what will happen to the bones?) It will keep on, for years and years it will be overlapped by sand and mud and all that. And scientists can tell, they can do some analysis and from the bone, they can find out approximately how many years old is that bone. *Solhlamudiyum avalaleh* (They can tell). But that how and all you will be learning later.

In Episode Two, cited below, Aparna's father established for Aparna what he was about to do and the response he expected from her:-

#### **Episode Two**

**Father:** What I am going to tell you is something about dinosaurs, Okay? How dinosaurs came into this world, okay? What is actually dinosaurs and something about that and this is just only an example. You know Aparna? After that you should read this and understand also and ask questions with me. Okay?

Now, what is dinosaurs? (reads) *Dinosaurs lived millions of years ago.*

You know a million years (stresses word) means how much? Is long, long, long before. Even you cannot think. That is something like one, followed by six zeroes is called a million. So suppose if it is one year, you know how much. If it is ten years you know how much. If it is hundred years? You know hundred years? No, hundred years you can think about it, isn't it? Thousand years we don't know what happen. Ten thousand years, we don't know what happen. Hundred thousand years, we don't know what happen. One million, that means before man came on this earth, there were already some creatures on this earth and according to science. But how did they find that these animals were there in this world so many years before? What they do is, in science, they can find out from what *ehn na kanna*! (an endearing term). So, what is fossil?



**Aparna:** The left-over.

**Father:** Not left-over. The remains of ancient animals or plants preserved in some rock or something. That is called fossils.

So from the fossil study, the scientists found that there were some animals existing a million years before, some million years before, millions and million years before. So long ago, *Ehn na kannu*. But what happened? They appeared some 250 million years ago, but they disappeared some 65 million years ago. That means ... (reads).

"Extinct" means what. That means disappeared completely.

### **Episode Three:**

**Father:** Now dinosaurs were lizards. You know what is a lizard.

**Aparna:** Yes.

**Father:** Okay, where did you see your lizard?

**Aparna:** On the wall.

**Father:** When you study you will see a lizard. Just now, you told you saw a lizard and came running to me.

**Aparna:** (Smiles).

**Father:** Now, what is the size of those lizards? They are all very ....

**Aparna:** Small.

**Father:** Small.

Whereas these lizards are very huge. They are very big creatures.



#### **Episode Four:**

**Father:** Then, there are a lot of varieties of dinosaurs. Like see, when you take human beings, or something like that, there are so many types of human beings. Okay? Like, suppose you take dogs. There are lots of varieties of dogs existing, is it not? Like Alsatian, Labrador and all that you see. Like that, in dinosaurs. There were many species, many types of dinosaurs.

#### **Episode Five:**

**Father:** (reads)....including a tail, fifteen metres long. It had a tail which was fifteen metres.

**Aparna:** That means how much?

**Father:** Can you tell how much will be fifteen metres? Okay. It will be from ... let us assume....one metre will be from here to that length of the court is one metre. So you put, fifteen courts, how long will that be?

**Aparna:** Till your bedroom?

**Father:** Ya. From this wall to the other wall, the tail was long.

The reason for quoting these five episodes from one sharing of a reading session is to show the extent to which the parent was involved in a variety of interactive acts. He not only added new knowledge by relating explanations to the child's current level of knowledge but facilitated understanding by relating the explication to her experiences (the left-over food, the lizard, the varieties of dogs and the length of a baby's court in the house). He talked to her in a caring and sharing manner (addressing her endearingly several times), clarifying and expanding. He asked questions to probe her thinking and connect her thoughts and experiences to what they were



discussing. In this one sharing, the child asked twelve questions, each searching for answers she did not already possess. Where the father knew that the child did not already know the meaning of a word introduced, he explained it by relating it to her experience and simplifying it. Throughout the forty-five minute sharing, the father engaged in scaffolding information and meaning, fifteen times. Both father and daughter were thus involved in collaborative and negotiated meaning-making. He ended the session by asking her a few questions on the reading:

"What is the longest dinosaur called?"

"How long ago did they live?"

and sums up thus:-

F: Ah, very good. So now you understand something about dinosaurs? Very good. Okay? Maybe later, when you are free, you can just write about dinosaurs, okay? And I will try to find out about the meaning of tyrannosaurus and tell you about it. Okay? You understand? Good girl.

This ending of the shared reading session led on to another related literacy event. In another story that the father shared, he told the child to "listen to the story to see how beautifully it is written. You should also try to read it after my explanation". He then told her the context of the story and began reading it expressively. As he read each episode, he stopped to rephrase it. The child asked several vocabulary-based questions and responded to her father's clarifying questions. An interesting feature of both the sharing sessions was the frequent use of Tamil to communicate. These took the form of restating and expanding what had been said in English.



In the shared reading session below, Sze Lin's mother listened to her daughter reading *"The Frog Prince"* aloud, and at the end of the reading, said:-

**Mother:** There are some words which I want you to know. Dwelling. Do you know the meaning of "dwelling"?

**Sze Lin:** Don't know.

**Mother:** Dwelling is a place where a person lives.

**Sze Lin:** A place where a person lives. What about "loathsome"?

**Mother:** "Loathsome", meaning very disgusting (identifies the line in the text and reads it "loathsome dwelling place"). That means it is a very disgusting place. "Morsel" is a small bite of food or a piece of something.

**Sze Lin:** (inaudible)

**Mother:** That means the princess "could not swallow a morsel", that means she could not swallow even a ....

**Sze Lin:** A small bite of the food.

**Mother:** Yes, that means the princess is sitting because the frog is sitting next to her.

**Sze Lin:** And the frog ate from the same plate. What the frog eat, the princess don't want to eat.

**Mother:** "Oblige" is to make a person do something by a promise or a sense of duty. The princess is, er ... (searching for the line in the text) ...(reads) *"He has been obliged to live as a frog in the pool"*.

**Sze Lin:** "Obliged", ah, is it something like asked to.

**Mother:** Errr, yes, by promise or by duty. Asked to do something which the person make to do.

**Sze Lin:** Oh.



**Mother:** Okay, first question, ah... why was the princess crying?

**Sze Lin:** He had dropped her favourite ball into the lake.

**Mother:** Who stuck the ugly head out of the water?

**Sze Lin:** The frog.

The mother focused on vocabulary after the reading and then moved on to asking seven comprehension questions based on the story. Each question, like the two above, focused on recall. A final question "What does this story tell us?" draws the following response from the child:

"It tells us that we must not break a promise". The need to draw a moral or a lesson from a story is typical of stories written in Chinese and of Chinese parents reading to children: A story must teach (refer to discussion on Cultural Scripts, Chapter 3:173).

This last question ended the whole session. In several other reading sessions, the child read non-fiction books - describing things made from leather and the spread of diseases by insects. After each short paragraph was read, the mother asked questions to see if the child remembered what she had read. There was no discussion of the facts mentioned in either of the books. The parents pointed out that they stopped reading to their child "when she started school" and have no time to "read to the younger children".

This format of asking questions to verify children's knowledge and understanding of words was also noticed with Lester's father. The following excerpt demonstrates this further:-



**Father:** Lester, this is an educational story. Before we go further to discuss the contents, would you like to try once (try reading).

**Lester:** Yes. I would like to try once.

**Father:** After we discuss paragraph by paragraph, okay?

**Lester:** (reads).

**Father:** What is the meaning of "bored" here.

**Lester:** The meaning of "bored" here is feeling that the subject he know so he feel like it is very simple for him.

**Father:** Not interested at all. Alright.

**Lester:** Yes.

**Father:** So, what is the meaning of this paragraph? How much you know about this paragraph?

**Lester:** About this paragraph, I knew that when.. when his teacher talk about a subject, Arthur had already knew, so Arthur got very bored and fell asleep.

**Father:** Okay, so is he very lazy?

**Lester:** Yes, he is quite lazy. Oh, no! He is not very lazy, because the subject he knew so he felt, so he got bored of them, is not interesting of them, so he fell asleep.

**Father:** So, do you think it is right or not that, even though he got to know the subject now?

**Lester:** No, I do not feel that it is right.

**Father:** Why?

**Lester:** Because he should listen why. May be his parents taught him the wrong thing so, he, he can be more understanding about the subject so when the examination comes, he will not write the wrong answer down.

**Father:** Very good. Try the second paragraph.

**Lester:** (reads).



**Father:** Why did the teacher, Mr Kim, ask for Arthur's parents? For what?

**Lester:** He asked Arthur's parents because, why ...?

**Father:** To find out.

**Lester:** To find out why Arthur gets bored and sleeps in class.

**Father:** So do you think the teacher did the right thing?

**Lester:** Mm...I think the teacher had a bit of mis, misunderstanding about Arthur.

**Father:** What kind of misunderstanding?

In this example, the child's reading of each paragraph was followed by questions checking understanding, not so much at the level of recall but at an application level, eg "Why did the teacher ask for Arthur's parents?" In addition to such inferential type questions, the father also engaged the child in reader-response talk:-

"How do you find the teacher?"

"What else could the teacher have done?"

"What do you think of the teacher?"

These questions probed Lester's thinking, because the father said "I want him to apply and think for himself".

The text discussion is followed by a 'sharing' session which the father began thus:-

**Father:** Do you think this story very similar to your case?

**Lester:** No. I am not think this story is very similar to ...

**Father:** (Interrupts) Because this one happen when you were studying in Primary Two. Your form teacher told me the same story. You like to talk in the class, you like to move about. So, did you have the same problem as



**Arthur, Lester? Did you have the same problem with Arthur?**

**Lester: No, not exactly.**

**Father: Then why you like to move about? You did not pay attention in class. Tell me. Now, we are having the discussion because, you know, why I selected this story, to talk to you. Because I notice that something happened in Arthur very similar to your case. So tell me. When in the class, do you feel very bored because you know most of the subject.**

**Lester: I do not feel very bored. If I feel bored, I will not explain that. Arthur had, because Arthur felt bored in class so he must continue listen or he maybe his parents teach , teach wrong, he can more realize of the sums, when he comes to the examination, he, he will, he will not give the wrong answers.**

**Father: No, my key point is not that. Do you think this story slightly similar to the case of you?**

**Lester: I do not think that this story is very, very similar to me.**

**Father: This is not a bad thing because, actually Arthur is nothing wrong, he feel bored because he got a reason. If the teacher find out also, so teacher will punish him. So let's say, for instance, supposing you are Arthur, what do you do? Do you think you have to tell the teacher?**

**Lester: Yes.**

**Father: Your problem?**

**Lester: Yes.**

**Father: Why? Why you have to tell the teacher?**

**Lester: But the teacher will be misunderstanding about me.**

**Father: Say, if I do not, say that, clarify from my teacher, say**

**Lester: If I do not clarify from my teacher.**

**Father: The teacher**



**Lester:** Will have

**Father:** The teacher will have the misunderstanding on me.

**Lester:** (repeats).

**Father:** Right?

**Lester:** Yes.

**Father:** You must know how to use the word of misunderstanding (explains in Chinese). You have to learn the difference between misunderstanding and misunderstand. You have to be patient to learn. Right now I am trying to upgrade your standard. Okay? Do not feel so frustrated if I identified your mistake. So do you think this story is very useful to you?

**Lester:** This story is not as useful as you said.

**Father:** Why?

**Lester:** Because the story about Arthur, Arthur fell asleep but I did not fell asleep and was lazy in class.

What was supposed to be a discussion turned out to be a confrontation or confession of sorts. It was the child's convincing and refuting response that finally ended it on a positive note. When the child denied the similarity of the story to his personal school experience and justified it, the father realized the hurt he had caused. He, in turn, rationalized the use of the story and finally ended the sessions by telling his son that he knew he was good in his work, but "he must make sure he did not get bored in class", "This is the lesson I want you to learn".

All reading and talk sessions at home had a purpose in Lester's home. There was always something to be learnt at the end of it. This is because Lester's father has very high expectations for his son and



works very hard to make sure Lester is ahead in class as well as maintains good behaviour. So every reading/talking session was aimed at either teaching him academic skills or skills and knowledge related to good behaviour and living.

In another story-sharing session that was recorded, the father prefaced it by telling Lester "I want you to summarize this story and answer some questions I will ask you. So listen carefully."

These examples show very clearly that reading and talking for pleasure and enjoyment is not a commonly-held belief in many of the families in this study. In Aparna's home, reading was shared and enjoyed. There was warmth, during the sharing sessions, which was characterized by the child's questions, negotiation and scaffolding. In the other homes, the focus was to teach and test memory recall and understanding - not unlike the teachers. Five of the families who recorded their shared reading, demonstrated a teaching inclination. Five families did not hand in the readings, saying that they did not engage in reading with their children and did not have the time to do the recordings.

## **SUMMARY**

To sum up the data obtained from interviews, observation, audio tapes of shared reading and pupils' log entries, the following may be said:-



### **Chinese Homes:**

- i) Both parents were working.**
- ii) Parents did not read to their children.**
- iii) Parents felt there was "nothing much" to talk to their children about.**
- iv) Children usually watched television on their own and played games with their siblings.**
- v) Parents (Lester and Sze Lin) checked their children's homework regularly and set them work to do on a daily basis.**

### **Indian Homes:**

- i) Ganesh's and Aparna's mothers were housewives while Kala's parents were both working.**
- ii) Aparna's father talked to his children and played games with them very often.**
- iii) Kala's parents played board games with their children occasionally. Kala's father would draw his children's attention to reports he read in the daily newspaper.**
- iv) Ganesh and Aparna talk to their mothers about school, friends, and their teachers and their parents also tell them stories about their own childhood.**
- v) Aparna's parents watched television together with their children often.**
- vi) Kala, Ganesh and Yoga usually watched television on their own and sometimes with their siblings (Kala and Ganesh).**
- vii) All parents monitored their children's schoolwork and set them additional work to do.**
- viii) Aparna wrote to her grandparents in India.**



- ix) **Aparna's parents read to her and her sister regularly. All the other children read on their own.**
- x) **Aparna's parents bought books for the children and took them to the library regularly.**

**Malay Homes:**

- i) **Except for Lokman's mother, who was a housewife, the other Malay mothers were working**
- ii) **All three mothers talked (chatted) to their children and felt talking was important.**
- iii) **Lokman's father and Faeza's(2) father also spent time talking and playing games with their children.**
- iv) **Parents watched television with their children and talked about what they watched.**
- v) **Parents talked to their children about the books they were reading.**
- vi) **The mothers monitored their children's homework and assisted them where necessary.**
- vii) **All three mothers read books on topics of interest to them (fiction, recipes, health, raising children, children's stories).**
- viii) **The children had contact with their grandparents who told them Islamic stories and stories about their own childhood.**
- ix) **Lokman's and Faeza's(2) mothers were engaged in writing recipes and setting homework for their children.**
- x) **All families visited the library or the bookshops regularly.**
- xi) **Window-shopping was a favourite week-end pastime.**

**From the above description it can be seen that:**

- i) **Opportunities for talk were greater in the homes of the Malay pupils followed by the Indian pupils.**



- ii) Malay parents expressed the need to talk to their children.
- iii) The Chinese and three of the four Indian parents said that their "children were well provided for" and that there was "nothing" to talk about.
- iv) Shared reading was a feature in Aparna's home and, to a limited extent, in Kala's home.
- v) In the Chinese homes, parents focused on comprehension when children read aloud (Sze Lin and Lester).
- vi) Writing was a rare activity, except in the two Malay homes (Faeza(2) and Lokman) and Aparna's home. Lester's father wrote out homework regularly for his son.

These observations are supported by information described in the pupil profiles (pp.490--532) obtained from parent and pupil interviews.



## **CHAPTER 7**

### **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

**This study looked at the use and occurrence of talk in three primary two classrooms in Singapore. The talk was situated within the context of English literacy lessons using the Shared Book Approach and the Class Dictated Story. Both pedagogic approaches have been in use in the lower primary classrooms in Singapore for ten years. Significant financial and material resources have been invested in implementing these approaches.**

**The data analysis in the last chapter showed the following with regard to the talk that was occurring in the three classrooms:-**

#### **TEACHER TALK:**

- 1) The talk that occurred during shared reading and shared writing was initiated, maintained and concluded usually by the teachers.**
- 2) The talk that occurred during shared writing was composed almost entirely of teacher questions (Teachers A and B) or of teacher instructional statements (Teacher C).**
- 3) The teacher talk displayed the following features:**
  - a) Elicitation questions.**
  - b) Clarification questions.**
  - c) Evaluative questions/statements.**
  - d) Repetition of pupil responses.**
  - e) Reformulation of pupil responses**
  - f) Occasional positive, confirming feedback (Teacher C)**



- 4) Turn-taking, plane changes, topic maintenance were usually controlled by the teachers (with the exception of Teacher C and occasionally Teacher A).
- 5) The agenda for the reading and writing lessons was the teachers'.
- 6) Teachers were focussed on content and comprehension during shared reading.

#### **PUPIL TALK:**

- 7) Pupils talked only in response to teacher questions and usually upon teacher nomination (Classroom B). The exception was Classroom C and, at times, two pupils in Classroom A.
- 8) Pupils' responses tended to be short, simple and very often monosyllabic.
- 9) Only a few pupils were involved in the talk during shared reading and shared writing (maximum of four in Teacher C's and Teacher A's class. Teacher B tended to nominate pupils).
- 10) Pupils in Classroom C talked spontaneously and used Singlish very often.

The nature of parent-child talk at home is given below.

#### **Home Reading-Writing and Talk Practices:**

- 11) Parent-child talk was typically limited to questions/statements pertaining to completing school homework and academic and behavioural expectations (Chinese and Indian homes).
- 12) Malay parents talked to their children about their childhood, ethnic values and other interests.
- 13) Personal writing and reading was engaged in by the Malay mothers.
- 14) Bed-time or shared reading was a regular practice in one Indian home.
- 15) In the Chinese and Indian homes, the children were asked to read aloud and parents asked questions to check their understanding.



- 16) All parents assigned children homework regularly.
- 17) Indian and Chinese parents expressed the opinion that children "should behave and listen to adults".
- 18) Most of the Indian and Chinese children spent their free time watching television alone or with their siblings. Malay pupils watched television with their parents.

A detailed discussion of the nature of talk in the shared reading and shared writing lessons follows.

### **AGENDA FOR TALK**

In all three classrooms, the agenda for the talk seemed to be in the hands of the teachers. They initiated the talk, maintained it and concluded it. And this control over content and language use was manoeuvred by the teachers mainly through the use of closed questions eliciting response and evaluation-type acknowledgements that functioned as feedback. Sinclair & Coulthard (1975) have shown that teacher feedback is almost always evaluative in nature. They pointed out that this conveys the prevalence of power and shows the testing nature of much of classroom discourse, a point emphasized by Nunan (1994). It was only in Teacher C's (Malay teacher) class that there occurred periods of talk where the teacher seemed to take on a non-evaluative role responding to pupils' statements. There were instances in the shared reading sessions in Classroom C, when the teacher seemed to show that she did not have the information which the pupils had. Much of the lesson agenda in the three classrooms seemed to centre around explicating the story that was being read, because comprehension appeared to be the focus. Teacher B (Chinese teacher) did most of the talking and explored her ideas through the talk. In the process, she developed two worlds of talk - one based on the text, the other triggered by



the text. The two worlds developed separately and did not seem to merge to negotiate meaning. The talk in both instances revolved round pupils answering teacher's questions - questions to which the teacher seemed to have a predetermined answer. Thus, talk in the shared reading and shared writing classroom was characterized mainly by teacher questions and pupil responses. Teacher elicitation, clarification questions obtained one or two word answers from the pupils. Rarely, (except for Lester and Han Yao in Classroom A) did pupils seem to initiate a discussion or shift the topic focus.

As the data analysis showed, Teacher C used more positive encouragement "Very good", "that's interesting", "listen to ...", in responding to pupils' responses. Teacher C's questions also tended to encourage pupil thinking and related the text to their experiences, at times. She also allowed pupils to speak without waiting to be nominated. So the pupils spoke freely. The positive feedback, the non-observance of teacher-nominated turns, the prefacing of lessons and the generally relaxed atmosphere created an environment for pupils in her class to talk spontaneously.

Practices of talk at home revealed that the talk between parents and children tended to focus on their schoolwork (specifically, the completion of homework). The Malay families appeared to be the exception to this.

In the classrooms of Teachers A and B, however, the strict adherence to teacher-nominated speaking turns, almost always followed an elicitation-initiation. The absence of positive feedback and the lack of lesson prefacing resulted in pupils



responding with short, brief answers and not engaging in any making of meaning. In Teacher A's (Indian teacher) class, some pupils (Lester and Han Yao) engaged in talk when they appropriated the talk to meet their own needs, interests and questions. But this happened only with three pupils. When the pupils appropriated the situation to explore their personal ideas and experiences, the talk was linear with the teacher asking questions and the pupil responding while the rest of the class listened. Pupil talk was longest at the point where the pupils initiated the talk. This corresponds with Barnes' (1976) observation of pupil talk. Beyond that, however, it took the form of answering the teacher's questions. In Teacher B's class, relatively more pupils talked but only on being nominated by the teacher and in response to her questions. In Classroom C, the pupil talk was spontaneous because most of the time pupils volunteered responses without being nominated by the teacher.

### **CONTENT FOCUS**

The data analysis also revealed the teachers' preoccupation with content. Teachers A and B went to great lengths to probe pupils' background knowledge. Much of the talk in the three classrooms was characterized by teacher questions. Teacher B justified this as "I want them to think" and therefore responded to every pupil reply (answer) by posing a subsequent question. This resulted in Teacher B developing a parallel story, outside the framework of the story which was being shared. In this way, within a shared reading session there were several parallel stories, each triggered by a specific event or episode within the story. But, as the data showed, these different parallel stories were not linked to the main story and pupils, therefore, did not extrapolate the discussion to the



story or vice versa. This lack of connection between the story being read and the 'discussion' might have been due, in part, to the large number of elicitation questions which might have reduced the amount of talk during the shared reading and shared writing sessions.

Barnes (1976) in fact pointed out that teacher elicitation questions reduced opportunity for spontaneous student participation. Elicitation questions also reflect the transaction style of teaching (Barnes 1976). The pupils did not seem to be talking about their experiences but were answering teacher questions. The focus thus was not on the sharing but on the accuracy of the answers/information. This may have contributed to the teacher veering away from talking about and using language (REAP Guidelines 1987) and instead becoming entrenched in retrieving content information.

While Teacher B's questions focused on extra-textual content, Teacher A's questions were aimed at verifying pupils' comprehension of the story being read or understanding of the reasons for the characters' actions. The parallel story which developed alongside the text read, was less extensive in Teacher A's class. The analysis in the last chapter shows that her questions were aimed at verifying pupils' comprehension. This was confirmed at the teacher interviews. This focus also explains the large number of rhetorical questions which occurred during her lessons. In her class, information outside the text was sometimes initiated by the pupils and even in instances such as this, the teacher appeared keen to ensure the pupils understood the rationale behind an action, rule or event. It was thus some of the pupils in teacher A's class who explored content



either through sharing their experiences or through asking the teacher clarifying questions. Although Teacher A seemed to support this and went along with the pupils' interest, her involvement seemed to take the form of requesting more information or seeking clarification. Questions, therefore, appeared to feature more in her lessons.

Teacher C's shared reading and writing lessons were of shorter duration and appeared to focus on the text being read. Her questions seemed to steer away from testing comprehension, towards a superficial discussion of the events in the story. Because her questions did not test comprehension but seemed to focus instead on aspects with which the children were familiar, the atmosphere seemed more conducive to exploring their experiences through talk. The non-testing nature of the questions might have meant that the pupils did not feel threatened and therefore participated spontaneously in the discussion. (It was also in Teacher C's class that the pupils resorted to using informal non-standard English (Singlish). This, too, might have contributed to the spontaneous interaction between teacher and pupils. However, despite the spontaneity and rapid flow of talk, the talk seemed to remain superficial.

It is significant to note that Teacher C and Teacher A, to a limited extent, chatted with the pupils and listened to their talk, while Teacher B's lessons appeared to be devoid of any chatting. The fact that Teacher C picked on pupils' responses and created opportunities for pupils' to talk about them, encouraged more pupil participation. This seems to confirm Barnes'(1976) example of student talk during group discussion without teacher presence.



Chatting takes place when formalities are overlooked and the focus is on sharing thoughts and experiences without being evaluated. It is thus conducive to the development of talk during shared reading and shared writing.

## **TEACHING AS TRANSMISSION**

Teachers A and B seemed to have a transmission view of teaching and hence the predominance of the question-answer exchange structure during the literacy lessons. The predominance of closed questions, correcting of mispronounced words, the absence of positive, encouraging, affirmative feedback, the eliciting of one right response and the attention to content in the shared reading and shared writing lessons reflect the teachers' views of teaching as transmission of content. The opportunities for pupils to respond, but respond in monosyllables and short phrases, the concern with acquiring information (in reading) and recording information (in writing) and the evaluation of every pupil response for its accuracy show that Teachers A and B seemed to be focused on the product - the comprehension, the writing, as opposed to the process. This was also confirmed by their post-lesson interviews.

The predominance of teacher questions followed by short pupil responses also showed the hierarchical nature of the talk that was taking place especially in Teacher A's and Teacher B's classrooms. This seemed to structure the flow of talk during shared reading and shared writing lessons with the teacher always initiating talk with a question to which pupils respond (very often upon teacher nomination) and which in turn is followed by evaluative feedback. Within such a structure collaborated or negotiated talk between teacher and pupils (which the



1987 Reap Guidelines advocates for the successful implementation of SBR & CDS), may not be feasible. Buzzelli (1996) in fact states that the restrictive nature of the I-R-E pattern constrains the types of knowledge that children develop and the ways in which they engage in inquiry. Mehan (1966) and Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) have also pointed to the hierarchical nature of teacher talk and its restrictions on spontaneous pupil participation.

Teacher C, who emphasized the technical aspects of writing in both shared (class) and group writing lessons, allowed for less pupil involvement. During shared reading she used open-ended questions and appeared to formulate questions that allowed pupils to talk about their experiences. Barnes (1976) pointed out it is open-ended questions that facilitate the development of talk in the classroom.

All three teachers therefore appear to be transmission teachers, because their lessons showed that they believed knowledge had to be displayed (content) and evaluated and their pupils had to conform to established criteria in using language and responding to teacher questions and their task appeared to be one of evaluating and correcting pupils' performance according to given criteria (the syllabus, the exams). Teacher C, seemed to differ somewhat because she encouraged her pupils to share their knowledge. Her style did not seem to be deliberately inclined towards an interactive approach but appeared to shift accidentally in that direction. So, quite accidentally and unintentionally, Teacher C seemed to get her pupils involved in the process of interpreting and relating textual experiences to reality and establishing a dialogue with the pupils



which managed to reshape their existing knowledge because they were talking to her and with their peers. There seemed to be a triangulation in the talk that took place in her literacy classroom, although this seemed to be limited. Teacher C stated in the post-lesson interviews that her objective was "simply to talk about the story with the children". In fact she very often had the Teacher's Guide Book opened on her lap and followed the questions given therein. Where her questions differed from the guidebook, it was usually in response to a pupil answer.

### **TEACHER BELIEFS**

Teachers' beliefs about their role and about learning determine pupils' classroom behaviour and expectations. Both Teachers A and B stated that "pupils should be quiet in class and listen carefully". Teacher B said that pupils should "only talk when they are requested to. It is important for them to answer to the point". Teacher C, however, felt that the pupils "could talk so long as they were not rude and gave others a chance". As the data analysis has shown, pupils in Teacher A's and Teacher B's class responded to teacher questions only on nomination (more so in Teacher B's class). Unsolicited responses were extremely rare and speaking out of turn was a rare occurrence, which was usually ignored by the teachers. In Teacher C's class, however, unsolicited responses occurred frequently and pupils spoke out of turn fairly often and their comments or responses seemed to be taken up by the teacher. Because Teachers A and B seemed to practise a transmission model of language teaching and expected most pupils to talk only upon nomination, pupils in their classrooms appeared to have learned to speak only when spoken to. They also conformed to



the teachers' views that 'they learn best by listening more and talking less'. At the pupil interviews seven of the nine pupils pointed out they would "learn more" and get "good marks" if they "listened to the teacher" rather than talk themselves. Pupils soon learnt that personal interpretations and thoughts did not count because the teachers only "wanted you to answer the questions". In fact, the teacher as authority came through clearly in Classrooms A and B. In nominating pupils to answer her questions, directing the development of the lesson and exploring what she perceived to be relevant extension of the story being shared (as opposed to allowing the story and the experiential connections to unfold through pupils' engagement in talk), Teacher B very clearly saw the lesson as a transmission of ideas from herself to the pupils. She confirmed this when at the post-lesson interviews, she stated that the children "do not know very much" and "their exposure and knowledge is limited so I have to give them the information". Teacher A demonstrated her control of the lesson, not just by asking questions and directing the focus (eg. Pronunciation or experiential connection) but also, by standing up throughout the shared reading and shared writing lessons. This was not in line with the procedural implementation of the approaches, which requires teachers to be seated so that they are at pupils' eye level and would appear less threatening and more relaxed (REAP Guidelines, 1987). The rationale is to create a warm, secure environment for the shared literacy lessons, simulating bed-time reading. Teacher A, however, felt that she had a "better view of all the pupils by standing up" and that she "cannot sit down and teach". Standing up and sharing a story or writing a story may be interpreted as giving her a sense of authority and being in control. The perception of the teacher as an authority figure is an important one because



Teacher A and B and their pupils endorsed this view through their participation patterns. The fact that pupils almost always waited for teacher questions and nominations before responding and did not engage in talk about the text on their own demonstrated this. Waiting for teacher cues before answering seemed to be expected behaviour by both teachers and pupils and is located in the Chinese and Indian cultural scripts of respect for age and authority, which required listening and accepting rather than talking and questioning ( Chapter 3:161,166-168, 170-173,176).

In Teacher C's class, because the nature of talk appeared more informal, the pupils might have engaged in dialogue in the classroom with ease. They did not have to assume positions of subordination or assume a stance that did not reflect their natural out-of-class behaviour. This was possible in classroom C because the teacher appeared not to focus on transmitting language or content. She was merely focused on talking about the story. Because the feedback was not evaluative and neither comprehension nor accuracy seemed to be the focus, the pupils might have found it less threatening to respond spontaneously. Teacher C, in fact, stated that her objective during shared reading was for the pupils to "enjoy the story" and "talk about it". In engaging herself with her pupils' interests and world as expressed in their talk, she seemed to be involved in teaching as transaction. She therefore received as much information from the pupils as they did from her. Teacher C's relaxed nature was seen in her willingness to chat with the pupils about their experiences, which they talked about spontaneously. The pupils who participated thus were usually the Malays, followed by the Indian pupils and Chinese pupils. The explanation for this lies



in the cultural scripts of the three ethnic communities. The Malays are said to be more “expressive by nature” (Li, 1993), while the Indians are said to be more vocal (Lee, 1991) and the Chinese cautious ( Kwok, Chang & Ko, 1993).

Engaging in talk during shared reading and shared writing lessons seemed to require pupils in this study to display their comprehension of the text as well as their background knowledge. Requests for such display might not have encouraged the pupils to talk because as they pointed out, they did not want the teacher "to scold for giving the wrong answer" or “be laughed at by other pupils in the class”. The concept of losing face ranks high in Chinese (Naerssen, 1987) and Indian cultures. Malay children respond better to a gentler, friendlier approach (Li, 1993). Chinese and Indian children fear being "shamed" in front of others (Cultural Scripts discussion Chapter 3:164-166, 168-171). For this reason, pupils might have preferred to abstain from talking or expressing a view that the teacher might not accept. In Teacher C's class, on the other hand, the pupils were prepared to take risks because the teacher appeared to adopt a more casual approach with less evaluation. This meant the risk of being laughed at or losing face might have been minimised.

Another relevant factor in the absence of pupil talk during shared reading and shared writing might have been the teachers' use of questions that elicited independent thinking and called for justification. Pupils in Classrooms A and B, who participated or responded only on being nominated to speak, did not have the experience of expressing their personal thoughts to adults. The pupil profiles in the last chapter (pp.493-532) and the cultural scripts discussed in Chapter 3(pp.152-187) attest to this. So to be faced with a reflective question,



requiring textual support, could have been a daunting task for these pupils. Their experience of communicating and interacting with their parents at home had been limited to answering routine questions that were not evaluative in nature. On the other hand, pupils who might have had such talk experiences with their parents, (Lokman, Aparna), said that they did not talk spontaneously in class, for fear of providing the “wrong answer, being scolded by the teacher” and losing face in front of their peers (“friends laughing”).

Hence as the data shows, the predominance of teacher questions during shared reading, the control of turn-taking and topic maintenance by the teachers and the limited use of positive affirmative feedback, might have limited the occurrence of:-

- i) spontaneous exploratory pupil talk, and
- ii) more engagement in talk by the pupils.

Engagement in talk by the pupils during shared reading and shared writing is emphasized as a major objective in the Shared Book and Class Dictated Story Sessions (REAP Guidelines, 1987). Both Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story require the teacher to take an interactive approach. Pupils are encouraged to talk spontaneously and be involved in the meaning-making process. With the increased quantity of talk which the approaches generate, pupils are said to learn language through teacher modelling, immersion and by being given positive feedback and encouragement to their responses. All this is said to take place within a classroom context where language is learned wholistically (PETS Teacher's Handbook 2A, 2B, 1996).



The classrooms in this study however, appeared not to demonstrate many of the features described above. In Classrooms A and B, the teachers seemed to be the source of information and more importantly appeared not to be focused on sharing information but on transmitting it, a finding confirmed by Lim's (1985) study of classroom discourse at the secondary level (see Chp.2:135-136). They seemed to be communicating with their pupils largely through asking elicitation-type questions. This feature which became an observed routine in all their shared reading and shared writing sessions, might have hindered the occurrence of spontaneous exploratory talk from the pupils who waited to be nominated. Pupils' talk was only in response to teacher questions. Teachers A and B did not engage in any declarative comment in responding to pupils' answers or adopt challenging moves (Burton, 1982) to sustain the development of the topic which was being discussed. This might be essential to maintain talk during shared literacy sessions. Teacher C appeared to engage in this minimally when she did not provide the expected evaluative feedback initiated by an earlier preceding move (question -response-). She chose instead to ask clarifying questions, agreed with the pupils' responses or extended them by sharing her own experience. Barnes (1976) showed that these factors were present when children engaged in group discussion (see Chp.2:88-90). This approach might have led to more talk and also helped sustain the topic of discussion as well. In the classrooms of Teachers A and B, however, the teachers' evaluative feedback brought an end to the topic that was being talked about.

A great deal of the research on classroom talk has almost exclusively singled out the teacher as occupying the dominant position and controlling both the



frequency and direction of pupil talk (Nunan, 1994; Wells 1993, Barnes, 1976; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). Barnes'(1976) observation of students' group talk almost suggests that it is the teacher who prevents students from talking and, if students are left on their own, they almost always engage in meaningful talk that leads to successful learning.

### **CULTURAL EXPLANATION**

The successful use of talk in the classroom, therefore, is dependent on the teacher as well as the pupils. The teacher's ability to generate talk during shared literacy lessons, depends on pupils' willingness to participate in that talk and engage in collective meaning-making. This is on the assumption that the teacher believes in the value of pupil talk in effecting learning. Pupils' motivation, interest, ability and perception of talk also determine the extent of pupil participation in talking to learn. More significantly, pupil participation in talk during shared reading and shared writing lessons, is influenced by the pupils' experience of talking to and with adults, the encouragement they have received at home and the nature of the invitation they have received outside school to engage in talk.

The limited extent of pupil participation in talk during shared reading and shared writing might not have been entirely due to the teachers' teaching style. Experiences that both teachers and pupils might have had at home and their perception of talking to learn, beliefs about the teacher's and the pupil's role in learning and teaching, all of which are socioculturally embedded in their perceptions and talk patterns, might have played a significant part in the



classroom talk that was observed (Au, 1995,1993, 1980; Philips, 1982; Anstey & Bull, 1996; Courts, 1991). The importance of the home in school literacy success has been demonstrated by Rohl (1994), Heath (1983) Morrow and Paratore (1993) and Williams (1991).

To a great extent, the approach to talk taken by the three teachers in this study is influenced by their and their pupils' cultural expectation of teaching and learning. As has been discussed in Chapter Three, the Chinese and Indian pupils in this study came from homes where parents held the view that children were "not to be heard". Parents did not solicit children's views on matters concerning them or the family. There was little time for working parents to engage in casual chats with their children. Parents seemed to believe that their children were happy so long as they were provided with the basic necessities of food, clothing and a secure home. Parental talk with children was limited to inquiries about their schoolwork and children talking was considered as 'noise', not to be encouraged. Given this background to children's experience of talk outside the school, any teacher inclined towards a talk curriculum might find it very difficult to initiate and sustain pupil talk. As almost all the children did in this study, pupils seem to carry over their home talk experiences into the classroom. Because many of the children's experiences of talking to their parents and other adults has been by way of responding to questions, in the classroom their talk behaviour with the teachers seems to take on a similar pattern. Lester's and Aparna's home reading experiences illustrate this. Also perhaps, parents carry over their school instructional experience into the home.



As the pupils' profiles show, in many of the homes, parents' talk with their children was limited to asking questions pertaining to school homework. In the case of Lester's, Sze Lin's, Yoga's and Ganesh's parents the type of talk that occurred when the children read aloud was limited to testing word meaning and comprehension ( Chp. 6:550-560). This was not unlike Roadville children's experience in Heath's study, where parent-child interactions focussed on parents asking questions to test their children's factual knowledge and the referential meaning of words ( Chp.2:108-111).

Similarly, Malay children in this study, like Heath's Gateway children, were perceived as conversational partners and acquired both listening and responding skills. These differences in parent-child talk patterns in the Malay and, to a certain extent, in the Indian cultures were not accommodated in the shared reading and shared writing classrooms in this study. The patterns of talk in the classrooms seemed to confirm the approach familiar to the dominant Chinese culture in Singapore.

Pupils' reluctance to engage in talk in the class may also be due to their perception of the context and their role. All the parents in this study emphasized to their children the importance of "listening to the teacher", "paying careful attention" and "not talking in class". Indian and Chinese parents in fact felt that talking was an impediment to learning and the child who talked in class was bound to miss the teacher's focus and content (Pupil Profile, pp.490-530). Both the parents and the teachers seemed to praise a quiet child and describe a child who ventured an opinion, expressed a thought or raised a question, as being "disruptive", "badly brought up" or "talkative". Thus, children who attend



school with the daily parental exhortation not to talk but to listen to the teacher may end up assuming a passive role in class. The teachers, too, endorsed this view of children's 'conduct' in class by praising the quiet child and holding him/her up as a model for other children.

Teachers' cultural expectation of pupil behaviour required pupils to sit through lessons quietly without expressing personal opinions, especially when these did not converge with theirs. The Chinese and Indian teachers in this study perceived it as their role and responsibility to impart what children had to learn. As such pupils were perceived to have little to contribute towards the teaching. The pupil's role was assumed to be to listen attentively and imbibe everything the teacher said. This might have led to shared reading and shared writing being teacher controlled with limited pupil talk.

## **SHARED READING AND WRITING AT HOME**

The absence of shared reading and shared writing in the homes of many of the pupils and teachers in this study, might also explain the difficulty both teachers and pupils might have had in engaging in talk during the shared reading and shared writing lessons. Although the story-reading and class-dictated story are officially seen as shared literacy events in the Singapore classroom context, their absence in the homes of the children, together with the lack of parent-child talk at home, might have contributed to the sessions being academic, formal and foreign (Chapter 6:490-530). Children who have not had the experience of sharing a book with their parents at home, or engaged in joint writing activities might not know how a story is explored through talk in an



enjoyable and relaxed manner, or a story created by talking through the ideas and aspects of writing (Gregory, 1988; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986a,b; Cochran-Smith, 1984). Also there may be culturally different perceptions of what constitutes a story (Gregory,1992). Some of the children and the parents in this study have shared stories. But the sharing was very often limited to a single reading aloud by the child, followed by the parent asking a series of literal comprehension questions ( Pupil Profiles, Chapter 6: 532-560). Stories were told by some parents to teach children something, some value. But the children were passive listeners. They did not engage in discussion about the story or the values conveyed. It is this home experience that the children carried with them into the literacy classroom. And to be called upon to participate in talk and to engage in shared meaning making is like entering a new experience totally unprepared and not possessing knowledge of the rules of the game. In not volunteering responses and limiting their participation to only answering teacher questions, pupils in this study thus might have conducted themselves based on their home experiences of talking to parents and their perception of the teacher and the task at hand. Scollon & Scollon (1991) argue that changing discourse patterns, which reflect a group's worldview and personal and cultural identity, might conflict with the existing culture a learner already possesses. Heath's (1983) study also showed that children whose home literacy practices differed from school literacy practices found it harder to succeed in school.

Au's (1980) study demonstrated that where participation patterns expected in the classroom conflicted with home participation patterns, the pupils did not respond. Courts (1991) & Gee (1992) refer to the need to incorporate the literacy



experiences and practices, which students have already learnt and are in use at home, into school literacy practices. This they argue would account for the diversity and dynamism of literacy practices in sociocultural contexts, thus incorporating Freire's (1987) notion of reading the world in different ways.

The perception of the teacher as the epitome of knowledge and therefore one to whom all pupils must listen and learn from is culturally entrenched. Not only did the parents in this study regard the teachers thus but they also conveyed this to their children. Parents of Chinese children expected total conformity to teacher rules and expectations. Indian parents (as expressed in parent interview responses) seemed moderate and while expecting their children to listen and abide by teacher authority, would step in if the situation called for their interference. Malay parents, however, seemed more protective of their children and as the Indian and Chinese teachers in this study stated, would appeal to teachers to be kinder and understanding towards their children. Thus while Indian and Chinese parents seemed to emphasize the correctness/authority of the teachers and would call on them to mete out punishment should their children err, Malay parents seemed to support their children over the teacher's authority and responsibility. This perception of the teacher as one to be respected meant that Chinese and Indian pupils might have been less forthcoming in engaging in talk in the classroom, while Malay pupils, accustomed to a gentler and more indulgent approach at home (see discussion on Cultural Scripts – Chapter 3:154-163), might have been intimidated by the teachers' authority and control and therefore refrained from engaging in talk during shared reading and shared writing. Khoo (1988) in her study of



classroom interaction patterns at the secondary level highlighted pupils' ingrained respect for authority and its role in limiting classroom talk (Chapter 2:136-138).

The seven year old pupils in Singapore and in this study regard their teacher with high esteem and have unquestioning respect for teacher authority. Teachers are to be obeyed and spoken to only when necessary. The teachers in Singapore, and in this study, are also conscious of their role as models for their pupils. At the same time, they, too, as evidenced in the interviews, are subscribers to the cultural perception that teachers have absolute authority and must at all times appear firm. If a teacher conducts herself in this manner throughout her day in school, it might be difficult for her to relax, be non-threatening, informal and friendly with her pupils during shared literacy lessons so that they may be encouraged to participate in the lesson and talk about their experiences and feelings.

Culturally, the Chinese and Indians subscribe to the notion of hierarchy and are accustomed to a didactic approach to learning, where the teacher is the epitome of knowledge. This view was expressed by the Chinese and Indian parents, who perceived the teacher as having unquestionable authority and possessing the knowledge that has to be transmitted to the learners. This perception of learning as transmission of knowledge and the teacher as the unquestionable



authority is couched in the Chinese and Indian cultural scripts (Chapter 3:161, 166-168, 170-177). Parents often expressed the view that "I am not the teacher, so I don't know, the teacher knows what is best". Sentiments like this were expressed by all the three Chinese parents and two Indian parents. Malay parents, however, while conceding that the teacher had expert knowledge, felt that they knew their children better and did not take heed of the teachers' assessment of their children. The Chinese and Indian teachers' perception of their role as transmitters of knowledge may explain their focus on content and the overwhelming question-answer exchange structure that permeates their literacy lessons. In fact, at the post-lesson interviews the Chinese and Indian teachers stated that comprehension was their key concern when doing SBR.

Hence, because reading and writing are seen as scholarly activities to be approached diligently and seriously (Lee, 1991), the Chinese and Indian parents, teachers and pupils in this study did not seem to perceive shared story-reading as an activity to be pursued for mere enjoyment and the story discussed in a free and open manner. The cultural orientation to reading and writing is mainly academic and viewed purely as a school activity (Data Analysis - Chapter 6, Cultural Scripts, Chapter 3). A similar notion was conveyed by Khoo's (1988) study. The notion of reading and writing for pleasure is thus culturally incompatible for many Singaporeans:

Perhaps our Asian esteem for the book as an educative tool is deeply embedded as to leave little room for us to think of reading as educating in a wider and a deeper sense, especially in the stimulus it provides to feelings, imagination and the sense of communion with the thoughts, emotion and beliefs of others. We seem to be particularly intolerant of the need in ourselves to feel pleasure other than for an objective and conscious purpose. (Lee, 1991:58)



As Heath (1986) points out, to be able to discriminate from the range of words and letters in written texts calls for ways of differentiating them and understanding their different orientations. But such approaches to print and the act of reading may not be culturally compatible for some learners. Deriving meaning of print by unravelling illustrations is not a universal practice according to Samuels (1970) and Schallert (1980). Heath (1983), in her study of a black working-class community in the United States, also showed that adult reading to children was not a known practice. Attention-focusing strategies in adult-child interaction claimed to be universal by Bruner were absent in that community. In fact, the perception of reading and writing as learning and scholarly activities in the Chinese and Indian cultures, explains the absence of shared reading or bedtime reading in many of the pupils' homes. It also explains the testing or comprehension focus (asking questions) that Lester's, Sze Lin's Aparna's and Yoga's parents took when they engaged in story reading with their children. The need to teach their children and to ensure that they understood the text and learnt some moral or value from the text seemed to rank high in the Chinese and Indian homes. None of the parents saw reading as enjoyment. All the Chinese and Indian parents stated that reading is important to gain information. In fact, Sze Lin's and Lester's fathers were concerned that their children were "wasting time" reading story books.

The Shared Book approach introduced into the Singapore primary classroom starts with major disadvantages. Firstly, bed-time reading is not part of the Singaporean culture. Reading to children or parents reading to children is not common practice (Sripathy, 1994). Secondly, children's story books in the



ethnic languages are only now beginning to appear. Children's story books in Chinese (Mandarin) and Malay started appearing only in the 1990s. Tamil story books for children, printed in India, made their first appearance in 1992. Thirdly, even the books which have since been published leave much to be desired in terms of content and presentation quality (Sripathy, 1992, 1991). Fourthly, the books printed in the ethnic languages require them to be read by an adult reader. The size of the print and the run-on sentences mean that children may not be able to read them independently (Sripathy, 1990). Fifthly, beyond the pre-school years, children's books in the ethnic languages are virtually non-existent. Sixthly, many Singaporean adults (parents and teachers) themselves have not grown up in a reading environment. The parents and teachers in this study pointed this out. Children's books were a rare commodity in the home when economic survival was the focus. Seventhly, the Singaporean perception of children is very different from that which prevails in the West – children should be seen and not heard (Chapter 3:160-162, 167-169, 170-173).

The Singaporean child's experiences of interaction with an adult (parent or relative) are few and far between. In the 60s and 70s, children were brought up not to express their opinions or feelings. In the 80s and early 90s, economic affluence, with both parents being gainfully employed, meant even less time for adult-child interaction.

### **LINGUISTIC EXPLANATION**

To engage in shared talk, content knowledge may not be important but language is necessary to express thoughts and opinions. The children in this study are still in the process of learning English and their mother tongue. To engage in



spontaneous, exploratory talk they would need to possess adequate knowledge about the language and its use. The teachers' expectation of correct responses and requests for display of knowledge might have inhibited the pupils from engaging in exploratory talk. In fact, Teacher B suggested that the pupils were not talking because they "did not have the language to express themselves". In Teacher C's class, on the other hand, the pupils responded spontaneously and extended the talk by exploring things that interested them, because the teacher, by her declarative comments and positive feedback, and tolerance with the use of Singlish showed that she was not focused on accuracy - so that, although their language was not as developed, they seemed keen to express their personal thoughts and ideas. Had Teachers A and B perhaps not focused on accuracy of responses but allowed pupils to explore and develop their thoughts and feelings, in Singlish, their pupils might have participated more spontaneously and engaged in shared talk more readily.

## **CONVERGENT RESPONSES**

The absence of negotiated, collaborated talk in the classrooms studied might have been due to teachers' preference for convergent rather than divergent responses from their pupils. Convergence of thought and behaviour was attained by the teacher controlling the frequency, the direction and the structure of the talk by framing closed questions. Divergent behaviour and responses would threaten the teachers' assumed control of the lesson in terms of focus and direction. By directing the talk and not allowing spontaneous pupil talk and by allowing pupils to respond only to the questions asked, the teachers managed to



avoid divergent pupil thinking and talking. Although divergent thinking may have generated a great deal of talk by the pupils, it would have thrown off the teachers' control of the lessons. This may explain the predominance of questions in the teachers' shared book lessons. The sense of hierarchy is not just cultural. It is as much a political phenomenon in Singapore (Chapter 1:27-29 and Chapter 3:153-187). There is little tolerance for divergence (in speech or behaviour) politically and socially. Given this political and sociocultural background and experience (see discussion on Singaporean lifestyle – Chapter 1:54-60), teachers might be unable to accept non-conforming responses, let alone encourage individual expressions of opinions and feelings. The concept of divergence and sense of individuality is not the experience of these teachers. This, together with the hegemonic practices that teachers in general seem susceptible to, might explain the extent of teacher direction and control of the talk during shared reading and shared writing lessons (Gee, 1992, 1996; Delpit, 1988).

The classroom, the Chinese and Indian parents and teachers said, is a serious context of learning and whatever the teacher says must lead to effective learning. As Teachers A and B stated “if the teacher allows for varied responses and spontaneous participation, she is neglecting the trust and responsibility placed on her”. Besides, the children are regarded as young and “not knowing anything” and therefore need to be guided by the teacher. Teacher B said that if the teacher is going to accept all responses as acceptable, she would be “failing in her duty to teach the correct or accurate information”. From the pupil interviews it could be seen that pupils too, seem to hold this perception and



therefore are content to listen and answer teacher questions rather than explore new ideas through participating in talk. Pupils expressing divergent views or asking teachers questions (except in the event of not understanding) are often interpreted negatively by Singaporean teachers.

## **TALK AND CULTURE**

The different ways of handling the shared literacy sessions may have a cultural explanation. Teacher C is Malay and comes from a culture which appears to be very much oriented towards children, chatting and sharing. Teacher C, therefore, seems to perform in the classroom, as she might perhaps at home. Within the rules of classroom discipline and teacher respect, there appeared a certain casualness in her approach. She was therefore, perhaps able to chat with her pupils. Teachers A and B seemed to differ in this regard. Teacher B is Chinese and her culture is one of pragmatism and functionality. Learning is not an activity to be enjoyed. It is perceived as an activity to be engaged in for the benefits it would lead to. It involves hard work. This approach to life may have a historical explanation (see discussion on Chinese cultural script, Chapter 3:170-177). The emphasis on discipline and hard work means that chatting, therefore, is not part and parcel of the Chinese lifestyle (Lim, 1995). Parents are busy earning money because they feel that that is a major means to progress. This allows little time for family interaction or casual chat (Pupil Profiles, Chapter 6:491-531). Informal talk does not seem to be encouraged. Hierarchy is to be observed at all times with the father leading this, followed by the mother, who is superseded only if there are grandparents.



This approach might have carried on into the classrooms where Teacher B expected children to be focused, mature, listen attentively and speak only when spoken to. This is evident in Teacher B's approach to literacy. She maintains absolute power, controls and directs the structure of the lesson, selects the pupils with whom she wants to "interact" and determines the nature of the interaction. There were no "light" moments in her class. Rarely did she or the pupils seem to say anything funny or engage in laughter. Pupils in Teacher B's class did not seem to engage in any informal chat with the teacher or each other.

Teacher A, who is an Indian, seemed to share some similarities with Teacher B (Chinese). Learning is perceived as involving hard work and discipline (Chapter 3:164-165). She said "talking and learning do not go together". "You can talk forever and not learn anything. The less the children talk the more they will learn". The reverence accorded to learning and education by the Indians (Chapter 3:164) might explain the emphasis on listening and understanding that Teacher A places on her lessons. She appeared to be transmitting content and ensuring good pupil comprehension and understanding. Her interaction with pupils during shared literacy lessons revolved around question repetitions (until she obtained the expected answer), clarifications, reformulations and restatements. That she seemed to take great pains to ensure understanding and absorption of what was being discussed is clear from her lesson transcripts. Because she was focussed on ensuring learning in all earnestness, her teaching is divided into minute segments each comprising several lead-on questions which build up into the whole. The concern with ensuring that learning took place (content) and the desire and commitment to facilitate pupil understanding of what was being taught might have contributed to Teacher A doing all the talking



in the manner described above. Her approach (she does not sit down to read a story with the pupils and said that she preferred standing up because she "cannot sit down and teach") to literacy is based on her culturally-based view of "learning as knowledge transmission from the knower (the adult, the parent, the teacher) to the child who has much to learn". For the Indians, interaction is not the key to learning. Rather learning has to be transmitted by precept or example and top-down. The ones who are capable of such transmission are usually the elderly and adults sanctioned by society to assume such a role (teachers, doctors, the learned man). The transmission approach to learning thus requires children to be listeners and not participants. Indian cultural philosophy regards children as inexperienced and innocent and therefore having to be guided and moulded by the experienced, worldly-wise adult. Lessons in and about life are thus transmitted through book knowledge, which is accessed through a teacher or parent. Teachers and parents thus see it as their duty to impart knowledge to children who are expected to receive this unquestioningly. And it is the parents' and teachers' duty to impart as much of this to the children as possible or they would be seen as having failed in their duty. This cultural expectation may describe Teacher A's earnest concern to ensure pupil comprehension of the shared story through diligent questioning, clarification, evaluation, correction and the consequent transmission style teaching.

Because Teachers A and B were focused on imparting content and evaluating content knowledge or content understanding, content accuracy ranked high in their lessons. For different culturally-influenced reasons, discussed above and presented in the discussion on cultural scripts (Chapter 3:152-187), interaction and more specifically talk, was not a feature of their shared reading and shared



writing lessons. Teacher C's shared literacy lessons on the other hand, engaged the pupils in talking about their experiences. She was not focused on imparting content or checking understanding. The world of the text and the world of the pupils' experience were thus explored through talk. This enabled Teacher C to allow for divergent talk because it was the pupils' talk that generated the content and flow of the talk and not the teacher's questions or her personal agenda.

Despite the important role of culture in pupils' participation in class (Anstey & Bull, 1996; Freebody, 1995; Au, 1995; Gee, 1992), the teachers in this study appeared to display little sensitivity to their pupils' cultural experiences and perceptions with regard to talking and sharing experiences in the classroom. Teacher A acknowledged culturally-determined influences on literacy and confirmed teacher stereotyping of pupils based on ethnicity. Teachers' lack of cultural sensitivity to talk patterns may have serious implications for the implementation of pedagogic approaches based on a talk curriculum in the literacy classroom. The importance of taking into consideration the culture of the learner in teaching has been demonstrated in the research of Breen et al (1994) and Anstey & Bull (1996). That the home plays an important part in a learner's literacy acquisition has also been conveyed by Handel (1992), Morrow & Paratore (1993), Myers (1992) and Rohl (1994). The importance of the home and the learner's culture emphasize the sociocultural aspect of literacy learning because through the contextual manifestation of literacy we can see how the learner reads the world and the word (Freire, 1987). This is determined by the enculturation he experiences by being a member of a culture. The learner's behaviour in literacy events and his or her literacy practices arise out of this



sociocultural context (Cazden,1988). School literacy must access this says Gee (1990, 1996). The Indian teacher acknowledged an awareness of culturally-different patterns of parent-child talk at home. Although she made allowance for some pupils in her class to talk more freely, this was based more on knowledge of the individual pupils (needing attention, coming from homes with strict, demanding parents) than from a realized need for cultural adaptation of classroom literacy practices. Teachers B and C said that they treated all pupils as a homogenous group and therefore seemed to see no need for culturally adapting their pedagogic approaches. This inability might be the result of the government exhortation to develop a Singaporean identity that transcends cultural differences.

Despite not making adjustments to their teaching approaches, all three teachers stated that pupils in their classrooms were "shy, reticent and will not talk" during teaching times unless their response was solicited. They explained that this was "the major difference between their pupils and Western children". A significant reason for this, they pointed out, is the Asian culture, which does not encourage children to talk freely, and strict parents.

Thus, although the Chinese and Indian teachers were using the literacy approaches of SBR and CDS in their classrooms they either did not share the philosophy behind them and therefore did not allow for unsolicited, spontaneous pupil talk characterized by negotiation and collaboration, or given their respective cultural backgrounds and experiences, might have been unable to incorporate the interactive element of these approaches into their shared



reading and shared writing lessons. Teacher C's lessons on the other hand, displayed to some extent the features of a shared literacy lesson such as negotiation and joint meaning-making. This, as discussed in Chapter 3 (pp. 154-163), might have been due to her cultural orientation to talk, rather than the mere acceptance and understanding of the SBR philosophy.

Thus, the lack of cultural familiarity with shared reading and shared writing, the culturally-loaded perception of the teacher as the epitome of knowledge from whom all content must flow and who therefore must be listened to at all times (a perception shared and enforced by teachers and parents), and the perception of a good pupil as "one who listens attentively to the teacher" and does not contradict her, "speaking only when spoken to", the need to be convergent, the lack of linguistic proficiency, the fear of losing face and the differing cultural scripts might have contributed towards limiting the flow of pupil talk during shared reading and shared writing sessions in Teacher A's and Teacher B's classrooms.

Due to the respect for knowledge and the perception of the teacher as the bearer of that knowledge, learning in the two classrooms (A & B) seemed to have taken a top-down receiving approach. The SBR and CDS however, emphasize shared talk based on negotiation and collaboration, where teacher and pupils make meaning together. While in the top-down approach the learning is direct, definite and explicit, in the shared reading and shared writing approach the learning is indirect, implicit and incidental. There is no direct teaching of language. The teachers' questions focused on story content. The pupils, in all



the three classes thus, did not perceive their lessons as learning and therefore might have missed the teaching points intended. At the interviews, all the nine pupils said that the shared reading lesson was “not teaching”. This is contrary to the teachers’ perception of the lesson. Based on the above discussions, it can be said that the teachers' and pupils' use of talk in the shared reading and shared writing classroom reflected a number of facts:

1. The predominance of teacher talk and the use of elicitation-type questions and pupil response-evaluation, reflected the content focus in the new syllabus as well as the teachers’ concerns ( particularly Teachers A and B ) with getting results. Encouragement of pupils to talk during shared reading and shared writing thus appeared to be limited.
2. The teaching appeared to focus on the transmission of ideas and checking comprehension through questioning ( to a greater extent in the classrooms of the Chinese and Indian teachers).
3. The prescriptive transmission mode which seemed to reinforce convergent thinking might have resulted in the question-response type of talk during the shared reading and shared writing lessons. Both the transmission style and the prescriptive mode of teaching are culturally influenced (this being the stated experience and belief of Teachers A and B in this study).
4. The teachers seemed to regard their pupils as culturally homogeneous ( Teacher B stated this categorically, while Teachers A and C seemed to accept the cultural heterogeneity, though they stated that they did not usually take that into account in their day to day teaching).



5. The teachers did not seem to take into account their pupils' experience of talk at home.
6. Pupils' lack of opportunity to talk to their parents, their lack of familiarity with shared reading and shared writing at home, their perception of the teacher and their belief that listening contributes to learning rather than talking, might have limited their spontaneous participation and talking during shared reading and shared writing lessons in the classroom.

Other factors aside, the lack of talk during SBR and CDS might also be due to the new English Language syllabus. The new English syllabus for primary schools focuses on meaning-making, transmission of culture and individual growth and development. This is in addition to the emphasis on language learning and teaching as a skills-based process approach. The concept of culture and culture-learning through the English language, although included as a component in the syllabus seemed not to have been adequately explained at the implementation level, ( Chapter 4:191-198). For this reason, the learning of culture through language may have been completely overlooked by teachers, except for some scant attention to symbols that represent the Chinese culture such as talking and writing about Chinese New Year Celebrations. It may be significant to note that teachers seemed not to pay much attention to the cultural heterogeneity in their classrooms. All three teachers, despite expressing culturally stereotypic perceptions of their pupils, said that they did not make any adjustments to the cultural ways of speaking and interacting that their pupils brought with them to class. This is also an aspect, the new Thematic syllabus



and the literacy approaches advocated by the Ministry of Education, seem not to have taken into consideration.

The lack of congruence between the approaches used and the cultural scripts of the teachers and the pupils with regards to talk might explain the type of talk that was taking place in the shared reading and shared writing classrooms in this study.

The primary English classrooms in Singapore emphasize values and ideologies that transcend ethnic cultures. Ethnic cultures had their place in the mother tongue classrooms. Within the English classroom or the wider school context, it was a 'neutral' Singaporean culture that prevailed. Like the course materials used in the classrooms which subsumed sociocultural differences and assumed their non-existence, teachers fitted pedagogic approaches to suit their own beliefs and ideologies about teaching and children's learning. This might explain why while teachers said they were using the SBR and carrying out the CDS, they still felt that the pupils seemed to be having difficulty with expressing themselves in English. While the pedagogic approaches are based on a philosophy of interactive learning and children's use and engagement in talk to learn language and acquire literacy, the teachers appeared not to subscribe to this philosophy and functioned on a different set of expectations and beliefs as revealed in the lessons that were observed and their statements during the interviews.

- i) pupils “should listen rather than talk in class” (Teachers A & B).
- ii) “accuracy is very important” (Teachers A & B).
- iii) “they are too small to know what to talk about” (Teachers A & B).



**This might explain the nature of the talk which occurred in the three classrooms. Home literacy practices, especially among the Chinese and Indians, emphasized the importance of education and knowledge but downplayed children's talk in the learning process. Parents, like teachers, perceived quiet children positively and regarded children who enjoyed and demanded interaction as "difficult and naughty". Chinese and Indian children were expected to work and play quietly at home. This pattern of submissive acceptance and minimal talk with parents, except for satisfying basic needs, may mean a potential source of conflict in the shared reading and shared writing classroom in school. Children who are expected to be quiet and not heard in the home, as was revealed in the discussion of the cultural scripts of the Chinese and Indians (Chapter 3:156-160,161-163,167-169,170-177), and who grow up believing that to be the accepted and right behaviour, may not be able to change their interaction patterns, and perception and practice of talk upon school entry. This experience of little talk at home was found to characterize many of the children's experiences of talking with and to their parents (Pupil Profile, Chapter 6:493-532).**

**The transmission style of teaching will inevitably increase teacher talk and decrease pupil talk (Gregory, 1994; Freebody, 1993; Barnes, 1976; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Cummins, 1986,). It also means the absence of feedback to pupils' responses because the teacher is only interested in the pupils listening to what she conveys and proving this by answering her questions. The teacher may not be focused on pupils' appropriation of what she says in language that is personally theirs. Given this expectation then, the teacher may be keen to**



ensure comprehension not participation by the pupils. Teachers A and B in this study, in particular, did not seem to be inclined towards allowing their pupils to talk about the story from their points of view or interest. At the interviews, Teachers A and B stated that they were keen to ensure comprehension because they perceived the lessons as teaching sessions not as reading sessions to be enjoyed. This perception runs counter to the Shared Book Philosophy set out by the ministry in the English Language curriculum (Chapter 4:209-214). Teaching in the context of their school system meant testing understanding - hence the extensive questioning. The transmission style of teaching with the focus on content comprehension, also meant a preference for convergent thinking, where what is appropriate, preferred and accurate comes from the teacher. Teachers A and B seemed to prefer telling rather than asking pupils, stating ideas rather than inviting them through shared talk. The top-down approach, the transmission style, and the emphasis on comprehension seems to be very much culturally influenced (Chapter 1:27-29, Chapter 3:161,166-168,170-173).

This may be an important explanation for this style of teaching to prevail even now, despite the retraining, exposure to and implementation of many new approaches to teaching. Despite new teaching and training methods, teachers very often seem to rely on their own experiences of how they were taught. Teachers A and B in this study stated that they were allowing "more pupil talk" in their classrooms than their teachers did and emphasized that like their teachers, they felt "a more direct and structured approach to teaching English was needed to ground the pupils in the basics of grammar".



**"The current methods of teaching English through content results in increased knowledge, but not of language and its use". (Teachers A & B interviews 25 Sept. 1994)**

**Both Teachers A and B said that if the pupils were allowed to talk "they will talk, but sometimes they talk rubbish. And this means learning does not take place and time is wasted". A possible reason for the lack of pupil-initiated talk and free talk during the shared reading and shared writing lessons in this study, might also be due to the teachers' perception of talk. The curriculum developers and teacher educators interviewed for this study were convinced of the virtues of pupil talk in learning to read and write. They perceive talk as discussion through which one explores the uses and role of language. The discussion then becomes a transaction between teacher and pupils. The teachers in this study, however, seemed to perceive talk as pupils' answers to teacher questions and so long as pupils were answering their questions, the teachers felt they had allowed pupils to talk. All three teachers in this study thus felt that they had created "ample opportunities" for their pupils to talk during the shared reading and shared writing lessons.**

**In addition to differing perceptions of talk, the teachers' views of learning seemed to vary from the philosophies and beliefs of curriculum innovators. Curriculum innovators, seemed to, attend only to the concepts and methods. Teachers on the other hand, were the implementers. Given their position in the hierarchy, new methods are thrust upon them with little consideration for the personal and cultural adjustments they may have to make in translating the methods into practice in their individual classrooms. Hence, while curriculum planners see pupil talk as contributing to learning, teachers seem to see it as**



**"slowing down their teaching", "not focused", and as "a waste of time". In the conduct of their shared reading and shared writing lessons and in the interviews, all three teachers expressed the view that a "quiet, disciplined class" results in "more learning taking place, more work being done and the syllabus covered thoroughly". Given this definitive view of pupil conduct in the classroom any curriculum change advocating pupil participation, discussion and engagement in talk may find it hard to succeed. Teachers in this study, while accepting the existence of pupil preferences, interest and opinions, felt that the school and the classroom are not venues for discussing these:**

**"The school is a place for learning and teachers have the explicit role of teaching, otherwise why bother to come to school". (Teachers A and B interview - 15 August 1994)**

**Many of the parents shared this view as well. This perception of school and learning is culturally-influenced and falls well within the framework of the Singapore society ( Chapter 3:154-187). This also explains why the three teachers in this study and teachers in Singapore in general, are held in such high esteem and respect. The annual Teachers' Day celebrations in schools, where teachers are showered with gifts and gratitude and the declaration by the Ministry of Education to mark the 1st of September as Teachers' Day with a school holiday, emphasize the recognition of the teacher and the perception of teachers by the pupils and the parents. The Chinese, Malay and Indian parents in this study said that they entrusted the full responsibility of their children's learning and behaviour to the teachers - "Teacher knows best". This unwavering faith and trust in the teacher may explain not only the high regard for the teachers, but also the lack of pupil-initiated, spontaneous talk and**



**challenging moves during the shared reading and shared writing lessons in these classrooms.**

**To conclude this discussion, the existence of different planes of perception, beliefs and practices between curriculum innovators and classroom teachers with regards to talk, and the children's and teachers' lived experience of talk at home as shown in the discussion on cultural scripts (Chapter 3:153-187) and teacher and pupil profiles (Chapter 6:301-305,490-530), may explain the limited talk and the predominance of teacher questions during SBR and CDS lessons.**

**A related point of discussion will be the backgrounds of curriculum innovators and classroom teachers in general. Curriculum innovators are very often successful English-educated bureaucrats who value Western notions of democracy, free expression and participation and an open society. Many of the teachers, on the other hand, are traditionalists with very specific views about teaching and learning. Culturally, their world is Singapore. Their focus is the syllabus and achieving the best results from their pupils by teaching them to exam-perfection. They expect discipline and silence in their classrooms and full attentiveness and obedience from their pupils. Interaction, discussion and participation in the manner that occurs in Western classrooms, does not seem to be their priority or expectation. Parents support this perception and practice. For them pupil interaction and participation is answering teachers' questions and not necessarily expressing an opinion. Talking is not so much to learn, but to express and convey what is learnt. The focus is the product and not the process. Learning is effort and responsibility not fun or enjoyment (Lee, 1991).**



**This is the cultural script of the teachers and the pupils in this study - a cultural script that is very much reiterated by the government. Thinking that contributes to learning is acknowledged, but divergent thought that conflicts with or challenges established practices and beliefs is not always appreciated.**

**The differing cultural scripts of curriculum innovators and classroom teachers may explain the nature and patterns of talk that occurred during the shared reading and shared writing lessons.**

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

**This study is limited to three primary classrooms in one school in Singapore. Although utmost care was taken in selecting a school that represented the 'typical' Singaporean school, the information revealed in this data is exclusive to the three classrooms. Teacher personalities vary across culture, age and with experience. These factors have a significant bearing on the implementation and success of any pedagogic approach. Within these limitations, it may be emphasized that the sociocultural factors that influence and affect the actual carrying out of the two approaches in the primary classrooms in Singapore remain the same. The caution would therefore be in generalizing the findings offered in this study to all primary classrooms in Singapore. While much of what has been said here may have congruence with what is happening in many of the Singapore classrooms, language learning and teaching is very much context-based and is therefore influenced by its participants, their beliefs and**



perceptions, their expectations, their out-of-school literacy experiences and their cultural history, orientations and aspirations and the individual school context. These can never be expected to be the same even for members of the same family. When there is a diversity of cultures, languages and histories in active interaction, the outcome may very well be different. This study is thus grounded in the context of the three teachers, the ten pupils, their parents and their practices and beliefs about talk and its role in children's literacy learning. However, the factors, beliefs and practices which facilitated or hindered the use and occurrence of talk in these lower primary shared reading and shared writing classrooms may be extrapolated to other situations and lessons learnt in implementing curriculum innovations that are culturally incongruent and intrusive. New literacies and approaches to literacy can become culturally intrusive and therefore contribute to marginalization and disempowerment of the learner, unintentional though this may be. As Scollon and Scollon (1994) argue, changing the discourse patterns, which reflect a group's world view and personal and cultural identity is tantamount to changing the group's identity. This is not to state that pedagogic approaches that are culturally at variance have to be abandoned. That may be an extreme, non-progressive and retarding view to adopt. Rather, curriculum innovations may have to be evaluated and explained in the light of teacher philosophies and learner cultures with particular reference to pupils' home literacy practices and experiences (Anstey & Bull, 1996; Gee 1992, 1996) to ensure cultural ways of doing things are not marginalised and lost over time. Adaptations by themselves provide inadequate explanations of the various complexities involved in language acquisition and literacy learning.



## **IMPLICATIONS**

**In this study, I argue that the use of pedagogic approaches such as SBR and CDS with their implied philosophy about how children learn, the role of talk in literacy, learning and adult-child interaction, may conflict with ethnic patterns of adult-child talk (interaction) and perceptions and practices of talking to learn in the Singapore classroom. Besides causing possible conflict between home and school literacy practices, the endorsement of these practices may lead to the transmission of interaction patterns especially that of adult-child talk that challenge the very basis of the ethnic cultures in Singapore. Interaction patterns are the foundation of any cultural nexus. While some societies have promoted interaction patterns which emphasize equality and individuality, other societies have upheld the importance of community over self. Based on this belief and practice, the former encourage spontaneous adult-child talk emphasizing personal meaning. The latter, however, view adult-child talk on a hierarchy and take a top-down approach, with children being disciplined to talk only when spoken to. The unquestionable acceptance of adult authority might have facilitated the transmission of both knowledge and values from the old and experienced to the young and inexperienced in these societies. This, in a way, might have kept these societies together and prevented them from disintegrating. The encouragement of free response during shared reading and shared writing lessons and the sharing of experiences and feelings appears to be culturally at variance to Singapore teachers and children. Pedagogic approaches which require this mode of talk in the primary classroom might therefore be less effective because of children's lack of familiarity with the new demands made**



on them. Pupils' lack of participation through initiating questions and response, sharing of experiences and negotiating meaning might not, therefore, be due only to limited linguistic proficiency in English but perhaps be the result of a lack of awareness of expected behaviour.

The use of foreign sources for literacy materials and the adoption of pedagogic approaches that do not match culturally, may impact upon the quality and quantity of talk occurring during the shared literacy lessons in the lower primary classrooms. In fact, the inherent cultural mismatch may limit the promotion of talk during shared literacy lessons. These pedagogic approaches may also implant in young learners new values through English language literacy and because English language literacy in Singapore is highly valued as an economic passport, its cultural influence may overwhelm ethnic patterns and beliefs (despite the government's exhortation to learn English for functional purposes). Adopting these pedagogic approaches implies an unstated sanctioning of the philosophies on which they are based.

The lack of adequate cultural adjustments to the pedagogic approaches may have resulted in the two approaches of Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story as implemented by these three teachers not promoting much talk by the children. Curriculum planners and textbook writers have focused on the virtues of the approaches in native-English classrooms and overlooked the cultural and sociocultural differences arising from contextual transplantation. Au's (1980) and Philips (1972) research (discussed in Chapter 2:102-104, 98-100) showed that talk between the adult teacher and the children would contribute to improved learning if it is "structured in a manner consistent with the children's



culture” (1980:112). The need for sociocultural synchronization of pedagogic approaches has also been emphasized by Gee (1996, 1992) and Luke (1995). As Lankshear (1996) and Anstey & Bull state, an individual “learns a number of literacy practices which are representative of his or her social and cultural groups” (1996:152). The teachers and pupils will bring their cultural ways of behaving and their literacy practices into the classroom. The introduction of new pedagogic approaches such as the talk-based curriculum of SBR and CDS into the Singapore classroom conflicts with the culturally established patterns of adult-child talk and practices of learning held by the teachers and pupils. The implementation of both SBR & CDS in the primary classrooms in Singapore have been based on a cognitive, psycholinguistic perspective. This study shows that sociocultural experiences and practices play as significant a role in the successful implementation of any pedagogic approach.

The sociocultural differences pertaining to adult-child talk differ across the three cultures (Chapter 3:153-187, for detailed description of the three cultures). For the Chinese and Indian pupils in this study, engaging in negotiated, collaborative talk with adults and shared reading of a story was a culturally new experience. In implementing the shared reading and shared writing lessons in the classroom, the teacher would have to talk through the nature of pupil participation required so as to familiarize the pupils with the new demands and expectations. The Chinese and Indian teachers in this study stated that they viewed the shared literacy lessons as “strictly teaching lessons” and not “a time for children to have fun”. In fact the Chinese teacher pointed out that “letting pupils talk as they please interferes with the teaching because usually they talk nonsense”. The Malay teacher differed in



this respect. She said that she did not mind if the pupils talked spontaneously because “it shows that they are enjoying your lesson and can relate to what is going on”. The talk curriculum advocated in the new approaches and sociocultural perceptions and practices of adult-child talk that the pupils and the teachers bring into the classroom would have implications at the implementation stage. As has been discussed in the review of literature (Chapter 2:98-100), Phillips (1972) found that the hesitancy of American-Indian children to talking in the classroom was due to the marked difference in the way they used language at home and that expected in school. Heath (1983) also documents the influence of family and cultural values on schooling. She concluded that children who came from homes which placed a high value on schooling and had parents who engaged them in information-type questions and had book-sharing routines, were familiar with comprehension strategies. In contrast, children who did not have these experiences at home needed their literacy practices to be bridged by the school. Therefore, there is the need for talk in the context of culturally different literacy experiences.

In adopting any pedagogic approach, it would be important to clarify the function of English language literacy. If the learning of English is to fulfil a functional, economic need, then the approach to its learning might be different than when it is learnt for cultural reasons. Thus pedagogic approaches such as SBR and CDS which function on a plethora of exploratory, collaborative talk might not have a place in our classrooms. Because to engage in exploratory talk means an engagement with and an expression of one's personal feelings and values. But as the discussion and data analysis have shown, this does not seem to be the cultural experience of these teachers, pupils and parents, or the desired



**objective in learning English in Singapore.**

**Another related issue is the philosophy on which SBR and CDS are based. It emphasizes, recognizes and accepts individual opinion and its expression. The Singaporean perception of this is very different. Individual opinion and thought which is divergent is explicitly unwelcome. Given this cultural mould, it would be perhaps culturally conflicting to introduce such approaches to literacy in the classroom. It would be paradoxical to expect Singapore children to value traditional adult-child talk based on the observance of hierarchy and authority outside the school and yet demand that they engage in personalized interactive, culturally differing talk practices in the classroom. This study has shown that Teachers A and B enforced this belief in the way they dominated the talk during the shared literacy lessons and by their explicit statements about pupil talk.**

**Thus, either approaches to literacy in Singapore would have to be made culturally congruent or the learners and teachers would have to be fully informed of the cultural adjustments they have to make in learning and teaching English through these approaches and assisted in making the modifications beyond the procedural implementation level. If, however pedagogic approaches are implemented without adequate teacher participation, the consequence will be what Luke refers to as “deskilling”, where teachers are more and more being asked to implement pedagogies which they had no part in designing ( 1993:48). “This will lead to teaching which is routine, and to formulaic learning” (Anstey & Bull, 1996:287). This was transparent in the Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story sessions that were observed in the three classrooms, particularly with the Chinese and Indian teachers’ classrooms.**



## **THE THEORETICAL IMPLICATION OF ADOPTING WESTERN LITERACY APPROACHES IN SINGAPORE**

Literacy in Singapore occupies a unique position because it is being acquired not just in a non-ethnic language, but also in a language that is developing its own variety. The expanded use of Singlish and the acceptance of Standard Singapore English, place literacy acquisition within a sociocultural framework of research on new Englishes. Second language acquisition paradigms and research on the learning and teaching of English as a second or foreign language do not apply in this context. Singapore may be the only country in the world where a non-native language such as English enjoys official and first-language (medium of instruction from pre-school to university) status and is taught from the pre-primary years. That in terms of resource outlay in the schools, it enjoys a generous supply in comparison with the resource outlay on the mother tongues, is significant. The constant exhortation by the government to preserve ethnic values and culture and the recognition and support given in this direction, together with the emphasis on learning English for economic survival, does assign a unique status to English. More importantly, this approach emphasizes the sociocultural factors which influence the learning of English. The ethnic factors aside, the cross-cultural factors which abound in the context determine not just the approach to the learning and teaching of English, but its very use. These factors, however, seem to have been overlooked by curriculum planners, textbook writers and policy makers. The learning of English seems to be regarded as similar to the learning of science - transcending learners' cultural,



social and linguistic differences. For this reason, second language research paradigms have been readily accepted as being relevant. And yet, ironically, pedagogic approaches that developed in English as a first language contexts (such as New Zealand, Australia, and the United States Of America) have been hailed and implemented in the primary classrooms (SBR and CDS). This study, therefore, is an attempt to emphasize the importance of sociocultural factors in literacy acquisition and the importance of matching pedagogy with the cultural beliefs, experiences and practices of the learners and the teachers.

The link between a society, its values and its culture is language. The values are inculcated both in school and at home via literacy lessons. These lessons are conducted through the medium of language. In the Singapore context, two different concepts of culture, and therefore of values, coexist. As discussed in Chapter One, one is the larger or macro National Culture contained in the National Ideology and the National Education Curriculum (takes effect in all schools in 1998) that has been introduced and the other is the micro or smaller Ethnic Cultures. Although the latter is subsumed in the former, each has its own distinct features. The literacy lessons in school, hitherto, have focused on the macro and assumed the micro would receive consideration elsewhere in the curriculum. That this appears not to be so has been discussed in Chapter 4. The prevalence of at least three cultures in any literacy classroom implies that literacy lessons may be influenced by the micro cultures as well. The role of talk in the primary literacy classroom thus becomes inevitable. But its implementation as a pedagogic practice becomes much more complex given the cultural perceptions of children's talk and practices of adult-child talk. For the



successful learning of English (even if its role is to be limited to functional purposes) and long term political coexistence, literacy lessons would have to encompass dialogue. Perceptions of the literacy events pupils are engaged in are determined by their perceptions of the world as well as their individual roles in that world. These will vary from culture to culture. The literacy lessons must allow the variations to be presented, discussed and accepted (Gee 1996). Bakhtin (1981) refers to this notion of literacy as social dialogue. At one level, this dialogue is necessary because our social worlds vary by virtue of our different cultures. Ethnographic studies (Louden, 1994; Rohl, 1994; Lemke 1990; Harskamp & Harskamp, 1992; Anstey & Bull, 1996) show that literacy practices vary across communities. At another, the diversity of linguistic codes and therefore the multitude levels of meaning that exist necessitates that Singaporean children learn to imbue the language of literacy in the classroom with their personal meanings and frames of reference. This may only be possible if literacy as social dialogue is allowed in the classroom through engagement in talk. That personal meaning is impressed if, like the potter who moulds the clay to convey his personal image and emotions, the pupils are allowed to use language to convey and express their own feelings, thoughts and ideas as they are engaged in the literacy events of shared reading and shared writing.

It is through the social dialogue that talk generates and facilitates in the secure context of the classroom, that children can learn to master the English language, (which for many may remain a school language) and understand and accept its many different levels of contextual and cultural meanings and, at the same time,



transfix it with their own cultural meanings. Through engaging in talk during shared reading and shared writing, children also avail themselves of the opportunity to access the worlds beyond their own community and society. A great part of this world is presented in the Western-literature based stories that they share in class. To understand this world and the varieties of English they would be presented, literacy as dialogue is necessary. The ongoing social dialogue during the shared literacy lessons enables negotiation of world views and meanings so that while they have extended their own values and meanings to English, pupils are also able to situate themselves in relation to other users of English.

This act of meaning-making - which is the crux of the shared literacy lessons - opens doors to creative uses of the language (English). If, in reading a story, children are required to derive meaning - intended by the writer - and to impute meaning based on their experiences and schema, and in writing they are expected to convey meaning, then they would have to appropriate the language for their own use. It is the shared literacy lessons with their in-built social dialogue that nurture this ability. On the other hand, if shared reading and writing are seen as collective meaning-making literacy events, then this would only be possible through engagement in talk. In a multi-lingual, multi-cultural classroom, where even the teachers' English is imbued with culture-specific personal meanings, the numerous worlds of meanings of the learners need to be explicated, negotiated and understood, through social dialogue, before personal meanings can be developed. And this negotiation of meaning may not be final. It is ongoing and renegotiated in each literacy event, and talk would provide



**both children and teachers that forum.**

**The overwhelming content focus in the Thematic Approach to the teaching of English at the primary level means that young children are introduced to the stories, fables, legends and myths which are socioculturally different. If children are to derive personal meanings from such content then teachers may have to provide opportunities for pupils to engage in dialogue about these features and their sociocultural context. Only then might it be possible for these cultural stories to provide children with the links with their culture as they assume new meanings and purpose in the on-going and current context of daily living. But for this to materialize, the perception of pupil talk and talking with children that the teachers in this study seem to have demonstrated would have to be changed.**

**However ‘small’ the world may be getting in terms of accessibility and proximity because of advancement in information networking, culturally established ways of knowing and learning are deeply entrenched. In adopting pedagogic approaches that are in vogue, especially in the field of language learning it might not be sufficient to ensure cultural orientation of teaching material. This is the case with the Singapore English language curriculum. The Primary English Teaching Syllabus states among its Terminal Objectives that pupils should be able to –**

**appreciate that there are varieties of English  
reflecting different cultures and use this knowledge  
appropriately and sensitively in communication.**



and -

adopt a critical, but not negative, attitude towards ideas, thoughts and values reflected in spoken and written texts (in English) of local or foreign origin. (1991 : 8)

This reference to culture does not situate the learning of English in any one culture. Its vagueness as an objective does not favour the teacher or the pupil. A sift through the Teachers' Handbooks and Course books does not throw any light on just how a teacher will achieve the objective of making her pupils appreciate the varieties of English in different cultures. It does not define the cultures in reference. Neither does it explain how thoughts and values reflected in local and foreign texts representing implicitly different cultures may be dealt with. Coursebooks and handbooks do not in any way state the occurrence of these culturally different values, let alone the manner of their handling. In the introduction to the Primary English Thematic Series Teacher's Handbook 2B (1996) it is stated that the PETS materials are "integrated and multi-media in approach to involve learners and to cater to different learning styles" (1996:1). It is not explained to teachers what these learning styles may be. Do they refer to culturally-oriented ways of learning of Singaporean children from the three main ethnic groups or are they general, universal differences as in participatory, non-participatory, open versus closed learning styles? What these statements reflect is an inadequate definition and explanation of culture and the role it plays in English language learning in Singapore – a major omission, considering the acknowledged belief that "language learning is organic and dynamic" and is "enhanced through purposeful language use and varied classroom interaction patterns (PETS Teacher's Handbook 2B, 1996:1). Interaction patterns across the



three major cultures in Singapore seemed to vary and take on a different dimension in adult-child communication (Chp.3:153-187). The interaction patterns that pupils in this study took with them into the classroom and engaged in during English language lessons seemed to reflect their home cultural interaction patterns.

In the Primary Two English classrooms, culture entered English language lessons only by way of symbolic representations such as talking about Chinese New Year customs or reading stories with local names and artefacts – what is known as “celebratory multilingualism”. This was highlighted in her Ph.D dissertation by Cheah (1995). Talking about culture or cultural differences through English language or talking about the culture in which the English language is embedded was a rare occurrence (Cheah, 1995). And yet the English language lesson is about the only lesson in the primary Singapore classroom where culturally different ways of learning and interacting may have a significant effect on learning success and can engender cultural awareness and cross-cultural sharing. The insensitivity of the teacher to the learner’s culture implies scant attention being paid to the learner’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978). The fact that learners from different cultures come with experiences of different interaction patterns, learning expectations and styles means that each child may be at a different starting point. The general differences among children aside, the cultural differences which impinge on learning can enable access to knowledge or hinder it (Cummins, 1986; Gregory, 1994). For the Singaporean child, this is further accentuated or facilitated by his proficiency in English or the lack of it, upon school entry and the degree of match between home and school literacy practices.



**The talk that children engage in during shared reading and shared writing also creates the only opportunity they might have to use English. It is through using a language that children gain facility in it. The absence of this social dialogue may therefore result in speakers who are insecure about their ability to use English. The consequences of this, socially and economically, need no elaboration.**

**The fact that the stories children read and write centre around people or things that concern people means that shared reading and shared writing experiences are going to be multi-dimensional. Even if the children in the Singapore primary classroom were homogenous in terms of language and culture, the very stories they were sharing would necessitate an engagement with them through talk. Given the emphasis on examination in the Singapore curriculum, the English language teacher may have to ensure a uni-dimensional understanding (comprehension) of what is read and written by her pupils. The absence of talk in the shared literacy events implies that this fundamental understanding of literacy skills and language might not be occurring for many children. And this might explain the seeming insecurity displayed by children in using English and the expressed concern with falling standards of English at the tertiary level.**

## **EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

**Pedagogic approaches to literacy need to go beyond assurances of adaptation and modification. As discussed earlier, the approaches are based on beliefs and philosophies that are unique and part and parcel of a different culture and**



consistent with the respective set of values. Modifying the pedagogic approaches by omitting particular steps or relabelling them is not tantamount to making them coincide with the philosophies and perspectives shared by classroom teachers, pupils and parents in Singapore. The educational and sociocultural origins of the pedagogic approaches and the contexts of their implementational success would need more careful evaluation before adaptations are made.

To conclude, the major findings of this study are:

- 1) Talk in the shared reading and shared writing lessons in the three primary two classrooms was characterized by a predominance of teacher questions because the Chinese and Indian teachers felt that comprehension rather than enjoyment was important.
- 2) Pupils' talk was mainly that of responding to teacher questions.
- 3) Teacher questions tended to be closed and therefore pupils' responses were very often monosyllabic, one-word utterances.
- 4) Teachers tended to control the flow, direction and content of talk. Only in the Malay teacher's class and occasionally in the Indian teacher's class did pupils control the content of the talk.
- 5) Cultural experiences of talk(Chinese, Indian) at home seemed to be limited to children responding to adult questions.
- 6) Adult-child chatting and bantering was not a common experience of



**engaging in talk for the Indian and Chinese respondents in this study.**

- 7) Teachers, pupils and parents appeared to perceive talk as a hindrance to learning and upheld the cultural belief of silence and listening as a virtue assisting in the learning process.**
- 8) The importance of hierarchy in the cultural scripts of the teachers, pupils and parents and the consequent perception of the teacher as an authority to be listened to and looked up to with deference, means that dialogue and negotiated, collaborative shared talk as a way of learning is not a common lived experience.**
- 9) Home literacy practices were not incorporated into classroom literacy, and teaching and learning approaches. ( In the homes of Aparna, Lester, Ganesh and Yoga, where parents and pupils engaged in reading-Chp.6:550-560, the practice replicated school practice, based on parents' perception of school reading and their own experiences of reading.**
- 10) To ensure examination success many parents tended to reinforce school literacy practices at home (the doing of assessment books and testing children's understanding of a reading text by asking comprehension-type questions).**
- 11) Teachers implemented the new approaches to literacy ---shared reading and class dictated story, procedurally and were not sensitive to the cultural load of these approaches for themselves or their pupils.**



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in this study clearly show that there is a need for curriculum planners, material writers and teacher educators to perceive the teaching and learning of English in Singapore from a sociocultural perspective and not only from a linguistic perspective. English language teaching and learning is embedded in the social and cultural context of the society. As the data analysis shows, the limited amount of pupil talk and the lack of spontaneous participation during shared literacy lessons has a cultural explanation in the experiences, perceptions and practices of talk which the pupils, parents and teachers subscribe to. This differs from the practices of talk advocated in SBR and CDS lessons by the curriculum planners at the Ministry of Education. Teachers who do not subscribe to and who do not come from a culture of talk may find it difficult to engage their pupils in dialogue about shared experiences (Chapter 3:153-187, Chapter 6:301-305).

In Singapore, these factors are multi-dimensional, complex and highly stratified. An acknowledgment of this variety would necessitate a sociocultural approach to curriculum planning. It seems that language education, unlike other aspects of Singaporean life, cannot be given a quick, technical fix. The role of teachers, not as mere implementers but as active participants, on whom the success of the literacy approaches resides, may have to be given more than lip service. The culture of the research-oriented syllabus developer and the culture of the classroom teacher may have to merge ( Ghami, 1992)). In a top-down



administrative culture, this sharing of philosophies and perspectives may be difficult, but crucial for the success of any curriculum change. The realities and experiences of the classroom teacher may have to be harnessed and their problems painstakingly listened to in introducing any new approaches into the language classroom.

The use of Shared Book Approach and the Class Dictated Story (CDS) in the lower primary classrooms would have to be reviewed in the light of this study as well as on the basis of their current use in many classrooms as a routine methodological requirement, which appears to be conveniently replaced at the teacher's discretion. Teachers would have to be made aware of the cultural adjustments that have to be made to encourage pupils to talk spontaneously in the classroom. Teachers' perceptions of their roles, of pupil talk and talking to learn have to be changed to facilitate this dialogue in the classroom. Ensuring this change in mind sets is particularly important in the light of the recent, current interest and emphasis on teaching thinking skills in the curriculum.

The cultural adjustments the teachers have to make in terms of assuming the role of a facilitator, a joint-meaning maker and a negotiator, who must provide children with ample opportunities to explore the language and the content (story) they are learning through that language, would have to be explicated. The changes a teacher is expected to make in implementing these approaches transcend the procedural. Teachers have to reconsider their beliefs about children's learning through talk that is exploratory (as opposed to accurate) and self-initiated, and teacher scaffolding of the language that is being learnt.



**There is a need to inform teachers and make them more aware of their personal cultural scripts and the different cultural scripts that their pupils bring with them to the English literacy lessons which would influence a more open and frequent use of talk during the SBR and CDS lessons. Cultural scripts that encourage and generate talk in the classroom have to be carefully analyzed to help primary school teachers learn and understand the factors which facilitate the use and occurrence of talk and become fully aware of the adjustments they would have to make to their perceptions, beliefs and practices pertaining to pupil talk during shared reading and shared writing lessons. The cultural differences relating to perceptions of teachers, children engaging in talk, of literacy events and of sharing as a way of learning, have to be discussed and understood by teachers as a way of enabling them to understand the philosophy on which the literacy approaches are based. Sharing might become a conflicting virtue in a competitive meritocracy.**

**Given the cultural perceptions and practices of adult-child talk, teachers would have to be assisted in developing talk during shared reading and shared writing lessons in the classroom. For this, the culture of the classroom, and of the school, where the teacher is regarded as the epitome of knowledge and authority, would have to be changed. Short of being told not to ask closed questions (initial training highlighted this as an important consideration), teachers would have to be guided into engaging in talk with pupils as co-participants - not merely to evaluate pupil response but to comment, make declarations and challenging moves. In order for this to be possible, teachers would have to be guided into changing their teaching style from one of transmission to one of interaction - a culturally difficult task. Teachers would have to change their cultural scripts and become listeners and perceive**



**themselves as partners in pupils' literacy development.**

**The new approaches to language learning and the expected behaviour would have to be made explicit to pupils. Initially, teachers might have to demonstrate to pupils the idea of sharing a story or writing a shared piece of story and the manner in which pupils are expected to respond. Although teachers were told during training that they were not required to focus on the accuracy of pupil answers and had to encourage spontaneous participation, teachers in this study, and in general (based on feedback from in-service teachers), did not seem to implement this. Teachers seemed to believe that accuracy is the hallmark of good teaching and learning. Pupils would have to be told of the culturally different ways in which they are expected to respond during these shared reading and shared writing lessons and the rationale for that so that they are aware of teacher expectations and there arises less conflict with home adult-child talk patterns and experiences.**

**The current approach to language teaching and learning based on themes might have to be evaluated and redefined. The focus on themes could have resulted in teachers not implementing SBR and CDS because of a lack of appropriate Big Books. Two of the teachers in this study confessed to having abandoned it. Information gathered from contact with teachers during in-service and pre-service courses showed that other teachers seem to be having difficulty incorporating the approaches into the new set of teaching materials. Based on the data presented in this study, these two situations could have arisen because of a lack of understanding of how interactive learning and a talk curriculum need to be implemented. Without the necessary assistance and**



a change of teachers' mindsets the approaches face the possibility of being abandoned over time. With that demise, the only opportunity for talking through learning and shared literacy would perhaps disappear totally. Despite the focus on content, given the absence of talk, the new Thematic Approach does not seem to develop an in-depth engagement with the ideas generated by the topics. The superficial dealing with the ideas seems to result in teachers not engaging pupils in using language as a thinking tool - an important feature of the new curriculum.

Teacher education, particularly of new entrants into the profession, should focus on the language-culture link to literacy and make explicit the various dimensions of English language literacy they are likely to encounter in the classroom. Their consciousness will have to be raised of the hegemonic nature of classroom teaching, the cultural framework that nurtures it and the empowering nature of literacy. They will have to be made aware of the inherent cultural diversity that every classroom context may encompass and of the need to harness this in their attempts at literacy so that no child is marginalized. The need to encourage learners to participate by engaging in talk would have to be impressed upon them and their cultural scripts modified during the period of training.

To sum up, the approaches to literacy that are currently in place in the primary schools in Singapore need to be perceived from a sociocultural stance. That shared reading and shared writing are weighted on pupil engagement in talk is not the issue here. Neither is talk the issue of concern. Its importance and contribution to learning has been researched and acknowledged



(Buzzelli,1996; Wells,1991, Barnes,1976). An accumulation of studies (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Whitehurst et al; 1994; Rogoff 1990; Kelly 1990; Short 1992; Wiseman, Mary & Altieri 1992; Wells, 1987) suggest that shared reading experiences as intense social activities, provide children with interactive contexts to acquire and practise developing verbal and conceptual skills and assist in literacy and language development. But an equal amount of research interest has also raised the issue of cultural compatibility of a talk-based curriculum (Freebody, 1995; Gregory, 1992, Dyson, 1993, 1984) and the influence of cultural practices of literacy on pupils classroom participation (Gee,1996; Anstey and Bull, 1996; Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986a; Cochran-Smith, 1984; Malcolm,1979). What is at issue are the cultural perceptions and practices of adult-child talk experienced by the teachers and pupils which seem to run counter to a talk-based curriculum and the sharing of experiences during reading and writing lessons in the primary classrooms in Singapore. That sociocultural factors have impeded its occurrence is the point of this study. In limiting talk during the Shared Book Reading and Class Dictated Story sessions by controlling and directing it and by requiring pupils to answer teacher questions, the teachers in this study (particularly, the Chinese and Indian teachers), have appropriated the approaches to fit into their cultural experiences and expectations of adult-child talk and of reading and writing. In implementing the approaches they have demonstrated shared literacy lessons to be transmission lessons rather than interactive, transactional sessions. Similarly, in the parent-child reading that some of the parents in this study did, the perception and practice of reading as transmission of knowledge and comprehension was transparent. This clearly demonstrates the cultural load in



literacy acquisition. More significantly, the teachers' appropriation of the approaches to fit into their respective cultural experiences and expectations points to the extent of teacher resistance to curriculum innovation, which is top-down (Ghani, 1994). In the light of this study and the discussion, it is clear that English language teachers in the primary schools in Singapore have to be assisted in incorporating collaborative, interactive, negotiated talk into their shared reading and shared writing lessons. This is not an easy task, nor can it be done in the short term. The reasons are obvious. Singapore is a highly regulated, stratified society, where hierarchy, authoritarianism, sense of community above self and technology reign supreme. In such a society, where many things are top-down, any change which emphasizes talk, the open expression of personal thoughts and feelings, the exploration of divergent ideas through engaging in discussion, will meet with resistance. But the resistance will have to be delicately resolved in the wake of the government's call to nurture a thinking society. This will not be possible in the immediate future because beliefs and practices are culturally embedded and rooted in the socio-political history and experiences of the people of Singapore. In a sense, the changes will have to start in the classroom because literacy is empowering and children can be empowered to facilitate the change. Teachers have to change their perspective about engaging children in talk. This can come only with further professional development and redefined teacher perspectives and empowerment. In the short term therefore, talk in the form of short pupil answers to teacher questions during SBR and CDS and teaching as transmission will remain the characteristic feature of the shared reading and shared writing classroom.



## CONCLUSION

This study based on the three teachers and the ten pupils and their parents has shown that shared talk which is collaborative and negotiated is not a feature of these three shared reading and shared writing classrooms. This seems to fit in with the cultural practices and perceptions of adult-child talk that many Singaporeans subscribe to. The option then is to change this perception and practice or abandon the pedagogic approaches which support and necessitate a talk-based curriculum. In order for definitive action to be taken it is necessary to extend this study to a larger , representative sample of teachers , pupils and parents. Given the small sample, it is not the purpose of this study to generalize the findings in terms of cultural scripts and literacy. The objective has been to show that in the context of this study, within a macro Singaporean cultural script which the three main ethnic groups subscribe to and which is moulded by government policies and ministerial speeches, each ethnic group is guided by its own micro cultural script and that the two scripts appear to be incongruent with the talk-based, collaborative shared reading and shared writing approaches introduced into the Singapore primary classroom. It will be appropriate to point out that the limited amount of talk by children observed in this study is not influenced by ethnicity alone. Literacy practices as a whole are affected by a range of factors and the similarities that existed across the three ethnic groups and the differences that appeared across and within the groups in this study (not the focus of this study) point clearly to the need for a large-scale study to further confirm the extent of mismatch between pedagogic approaches



advocated in the Singapore primary classroom and the cultural scripts of the key participants engaged in the process of providing and acquiring literacy in the English Language. What this study has shown is the difficulties and differences that may arise when pedagogic approaches do not match or are in conflict with the lived sociocultural experiences, expectations, perceptions and practices of the participants.

The apparent mismatch in cultural practices and perceptions of adult-child talk and talking to learn and the pedagogic requirement of a talk curriculum, which this small-scale study has shown, may be rectified by matching the curriculum to the culture. As Gee (1996) and Anstey & Bull state, this is viewing literacy in terms of “ways of behaving and using literacy” (1996:52). The teachers, Anstey & Bull point out “can attempt to use the Discourses a student brings to school and incorporate the literacy practices already learnt and in use in the home” (1996:152). This practice response to literacy enables it to be considered a social practice thus reflecting the contexts and Discourses of the learners (Gee 1992) By controlling the agenda for talk, turn-taking, topic maintenance, using positive feedback minimally and limiting the "dialogue" in class to teacher questions and pupil answers, the three teachers (the Malay teacher to a lesser extent), have in a sense appropriated the curriculum to match their and some of their pupils' cultural orientations and experiences of adult-child talk. This is incongruent with the pedagogic philosophy and principles of SBR and CDS as contained in the primary English Language curriculum and the retraining that these teachers have been provided.

If literacy is empowerment this empowerment would be possible to a great extent



if curriculum and pedagogy match learners' culture and their cultural perception of the literacy they are in the process of acquiring (Freebody, 1995). For pedagogic mismatch may result not just in linguistic disempowerment but, more significantly, cultural disempowerment.

The importance of empowering children with this personal voice and meaning through language becomes urgent in the wake of the technological era that Singapore will enter in the next decade. The emphasis on technology may erode the personal dimension of literacy which the current pedagogic approaches seem to be advocating, at least theoretically. Culturally, this might seem to be desirable because social dialogue is not the favoured practice or experience of Singaporeans. The official perception of literacy as neutral, adds to the complexity of teaching and learning English in Singapore. The choice of having children either participate actively in the shared reading and shared writing lessons by talking and sharing their ideas, experiences, practices and beliefs- vital in the drive towards fulfilling the vision of "Thinking schools and learning nation", or sitting quietly, listening and replying to teachers' questions, depends ultimately on the teachers. In a sense, this might not be the empowerment that Singaporeans want.



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