

Literature in English: How Students in Singapore Schools Deal with the Subject

ROZITA DASS, ANNE CHAPMAN & MARNIE O'NEILL
University of Western Australia
Australia

ABSTRACT

Recent research on Literature education in Singapore has highlighted the state of ambivalence of the Literature curriculum; suggested possibilities for its reconceptualization, taking into consideration the contemporary Singaporean environment and the impact of globalisation; and considered the offering of alternative curricula. An exploration into the state of Literature as a subject in Singapore secondary schools in relation to this recent research was carried out, by considering the role of Literature in the current political, economic, social and educational climate. This paper presents the findings and analysis of students' perspectives, obtained through in-depth interpretivist case studies conducted at five secondary schools. Data collection methods included focus group interviews, written protocol and document analysis. The findings provided relevant empirical data to support recent research on literary studies in Singapore. Emergent themes included: the insignificant impact of local literature on the study of Literature, the low status, and the lack of desirability of Literature as a course of study, which led to the formulation of three key propositions supporting development of theory on ways in which students in Singapore secondary schools deal with Literature in English studies.

KEYWORDS: English literature, secondary schools, literature education, curriculum, Singapore

Introduction

The research presented in this paper is part of a larger doctoral research study which examined the state of Literature as a subject in secondary schools in the context of the progressive, vibrant and diverse Singapore education system, with the aim of generating theory about how teachers and students deal with Literature in English studies. Where the larger study looked at how teachers and students deal with Literature in English studies, this paper presents primarily the perspectives of students.

The Literature syllabus and examinations with their almost unchanged aims and objectives that date back to colonial times, do not fit comfortably in “one of the world’s best performing school systems” (McKinsey Report, cited in the Ministry of Education Corporate Brochure, 2010) of a highly competitive economy. Introduced to Singapore in 1891, Cambridge examinations syllabuses have since been revised to include post-colonial literatures, with the most recent long awaited change to the Literature curriculum in 2008, which saw the introduction of some local texts for study. That was the extent of the change to the Literature curriculum in Singapore in the midst of extensive international debate on the future of “traditional literary study” (Miller, 2002, p. 10) as a result of the rise of alternative forms such as cultural studies, postcolonial studies, media studies and popular culture. This research brings the Singapore literary scene to the forefront and situates it in an international context as it draws on an analysis of international trends and contexts in literary studies.

The relatively slow response to change with respect to the Literature curriculum in Singapore is not in sync with the rapid developments in the local arts scene. The vision of Singapore as a global arts city by the 21st century entails the promotion of culture and the arts, which will “enhance our quality of life, contribute to a sense of national identity and add to the attractiveness of our country” (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1999, p. 4). The study of Literature complements this objective and has the potential to contribute to its achievement. This research also explored the role of Literature in the promotion of culture and the arts.

The political and economic discourses of the Singapore government continually highlight the importance of Mathematics and Science (Lee, 2010a, 2010b). In addition, as part of the educational initiative of Thinking Schools Learning Nation (Goh, 1997), the focus on Innovation and Enterprise has paved the way for achievements in the areas of Mathematics, Science and Technology. In the midst of all these advancements, there is an uncertainty about the place of Literature in the curriculum. As a result of the concerted emphasis on Mathematics and Science, Literature as a subject is marginalised, and by association so are its teachers and students.

In addition, this research attempted to account for the lack of interest among students that makes them reluctant to take up Literature as a subject of study. Concerns over the falling numbers of students studying Literature in Singapore secondary schools have been raised by teachers, educators, researchers, writers and members of the public who felt the drastic drop of 42.4% over a 7 year period (1990 to 1997) warranted desperate measures to curb

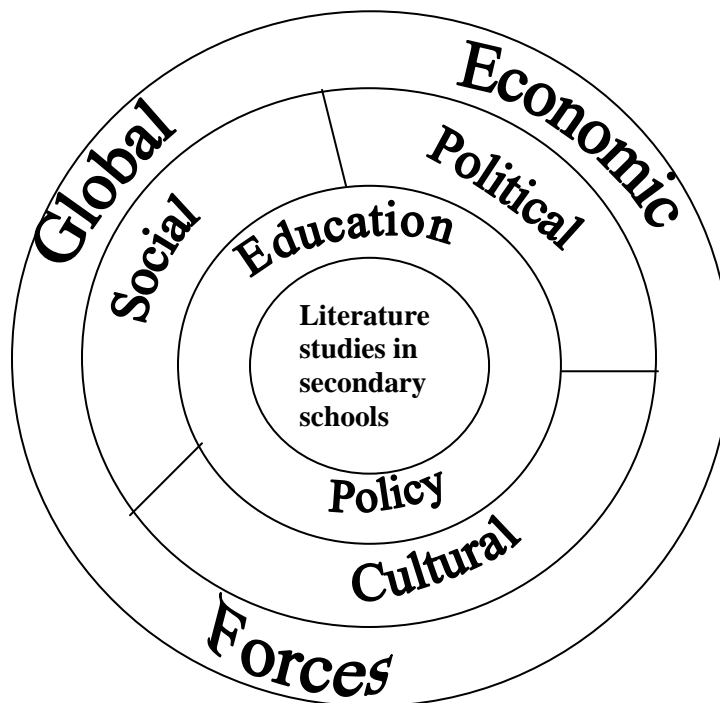
the dangerous trend before the demise of the subject altogether (Big drop in students studying O-level literature, 1997). This overall trend, evident in most schools, is however not the case in some of the independent and government-aided schools where there seems to be a tradition attached to the study of Literature. This raises the question of whether the subject Literature is only be studied by a select few, those considered ‘good enough’ to study it at a higher level, and not for the masses.

With the exception of several research papers on the state of Literature education in Singapore (Choo, 2004, 2011; Poon, 2007, 2009), no empirical study has been done to seek the perspectives of students on the teaching and learning of Literature in English in secondary schools. Generating a theory about how students deal with Literature studies in Singapore secondary schools would increase understandings of their cognitive and affective thought processes regarding the subject. The research on which this paper draws generates such a theory, providing valuable data for future study and to review and refine current practices and curriculum. The findings from this study also serve to support the earlier mentioned research.

Background

An understanding of the political, economic, cultural and social climate in Singapore is crucial to this research as these factors influence the teaching and learning of Literature in secondary schools. The study also took into account the education policies of the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) that have directed the teaching and learning of Literature in English in Singapore schools.

Figure 1. Factors influencing the teaching and learning of Literature in Singapore schools.



Political and economic factors

Singapore, despite its small size and lack of resources, “took full advantage of globalisation” (Lee, 2009, p. 2) and has long since encouraged manufacturing and investment by multi-national companies from all over the world in an effort to compete and survive as an independent nation. The forces of globalisation bring with them a variety of effects, many of which have impacted on literary studies. As this research was located within the broad context of global trends towards knowledge-based economies, it is necessary to examine features of globalisation which affect the study of Literature (Miller, 1998, 2002).

Changes to the education system in Singapore have always occurred as a result of the impact of globalisation and economic challenges. Education policies are planned based on economic planning and manpower needs of the country (Goh & Gopinathan, 2006). The restructuring of the education system aimed to sustain Singapore’s competitiveness in the global market (ibid., 2006, p. 51).

Schools were geared “towards innovation” with the “innovative use of ICT in teaching and learning” in order to prepare the students for a “fast-evolving and challenging future” (Lui, 2007, paras 2, 24). This research specifically explored the relevance of Literature education in Singapore in the context of increasing emphasis on technology and skills.

Singapore aspires to be a regional hub and a major economic force. To fulfil this national aspiration, Singaporeans need to be highly competent in the English Language in order to compete internationally (Ng, 2010). This research study investigated how Literature studies might be constructed in this context, and whether the field was considered to be contributing to the country’s agenda of progress and achievement. The policies of the MOE and their impact on Literature studies in secondary schools in Singapore were reviewed.

Meritocracy is a key political concept and is practised in almost all aspects of life in Singapore. In education, it ensures equal opportunities for all and this emphasis on individual achievement encourages the pursuit of excellence. Students choose subjects and courses of study based on what they believe they can excel at and on the perceived economic demands of the country. Meritocracy provides everyone with equal opportunities; however, these opportunities are tied to the political and economic goals of the country. This affects the study of Literature which is being “widely perceived as a difficult subject suitable for an elite few” (Poon, 2007, p. 51) as well as considered by many to be an indulgence.

Cultural and social factors

The cultural and social environments in Singapore are important factors as they influence the perspectives of students. As a multi-racial country with four dominant racial groups (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian), as well as expatriates working and living in Singapore, the cultivation of a shared cultural identity is a challenge. Added to this are the ties to the colonial past from which Singapore has apparently not broken away, as

evidenced in the predominance of British texts in the Literature curriculum, despite calls for revision of syllabuses and reforms to the curriculum (Holden, 2000; Choo, 2004; Poon, 2007, 2009). Although revisions had been made to the 'O' and 'A' level syllabuses to include post-colonial literatures, they are ultimately part of the national curriculum of another country and therefore, "transplant(s) uneasily to the Singapore context" (Holden, 2000, p. 40). This could be the reason why secondary students could never really feel a close connection to Literature as a subject.

Statements on language and language policies consistently referred to English as the language of commerce while mother tongue languages were regarded as languages of heritage and identity (Silver, 2004). All students who are Singaporeans or Singapore Permanent Residents study their respective official Mother Tongue Language: Chinese, Malay, Tamil, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi or Urdu (Ministry of Education, 2011a). In this respect, the study of Literature in English proves to be a highly challenging task for students from non-English cultural backgrounds. Singaporean literature may be the common ground to help establish a common cultural identity among the different cultures.

Equally important is the issue of national identity. Velayutham (2007) outlines the problems and paradoxes faced by the establishment of Singapore as both a city-state and a nation. Singapore's emergence as a "Newly Industrialised Economy and its engagement with the 'global' and the West was seen as a threat to its social cohesion", and this heralded the "Asian values phase" which saw the promotion of Asian values to maintain "a sense of distinct identity against the West" (ibid., p. 203). The ambivalence towards the study of Literature, which had been associated with the West, could be attributed to this uneasiness about the 'negative' influences of the West.

As Singapore progresses and develops as a nation, the importance of literature as a unifying agent becomes more evident. In his speech at the National Arts Council Award Night, the former Minister for Education, Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam stated that

It is through the works of local writers that a people's past and present, and their aspirations, are defined, explored and passed on to future generation.

(Shanmugaratnam, 2005)

The changing arts scene in Singapore can be seen as a move towards a change in social attitudes towards literature.

Education policy factors

Singapore's colonial history was strongly entrenched within the education system as evidenced by the post-colonial retention of Cambridge 'A' and 'O' levels examinations. Students in mainstream secondary schools are placed in either the Special, Express, Normal (Academic) or Normal (Technical) courses. At the end of the 4-year programme, students in the Special and Express courses sit the GCE 'O' level examinations while students in the Normal courses sit the GCE 'N' level examinations. Students who perform well in the 'N' level examinations may sit the GCE 'O' level examinations at the end of the 5th year. Set texts for the 'O' and 'N' level Literature examinations are mainly

from the traditional canon with the works of Shakespeare, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams to name a few. The 'O' and 'A' levels literature syllabus for secondary schools have been reviewed to feature the work of local writers as well as providing a more varied selection of set texts. The inclusion of a controversial play "*Off Center*" by local playwright Haresh Sharma as an 'O' level examination text in 2008 among other set texts like Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* was a bold move on the part of the MOE to incorporate more Singaporean literature into the syllabus.

The number of literary arts societies and organisations in Singapore has increased and many local top writers have participated in prestigious international literary events. The National Arts Council has also promoted literary arts through numerous initiatives and projects to nurture local writers. The *Renaissance City Report* (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1999) outlined two aims for Singapore, the first of which was the establishment of "Singapore as a global arts city... a key city in the Asian renaissance of the 21st century and a cultural centre in the globalised world" and second of which was "to inculcate an appreciation of our heritage and strengthen the Singapore Heartbeat through the creation and sharing of Singapore stories, be it in film, theatre, dance, music, literature or the visual arts" (ibid., 1999, p. 4). This present research explored the role Singapore literature played in the Literature curriculum in secondary schools towards the achievement of this goal.

The specialised School of the Arts (SOTA) was established in 2008 by the Ministry of Information and the Arts with the aim of providing "a vibrant environment for learning that is uniquely anchored in the arts" in an effort to "nurture Singapore's artistic and creative leaders for the future" (Lee, 2005) through its integrated, multi-disciplinary academic and arts curriculum. With such a vibrant arts scene, it is timely that the teaching of Literature in schools be revised to encourage the younger generation to create "works that fuel the imagination of our fellow citizens and promote an active, thinking society" (Shanmugaratnam, 2005, para 8).

Significant expansion of and participation in the Arts will depend on encouragement of young people as producers (writers, directors, actors for example) and consumers of Arts products. This paper reports the perspectives of secondary school students on the status of literature studies, and their potential to provide pathways to employment or participation in the Arts.

Literature Review

The close relationship between English and Literature is explored through the work of Ball, Kenny and Gardiner (1990) whose model of the constructions of English was adapted by O'Neill (1995) and used as the basis for the conceptual framework in this research (Appendix 1). O'Neill's quadrant model was used to analyse the aims of the MOE Literature syllabuses for secondary schools. The key elements of the model are the four orientations of Functional English, English as the Great Tradition, Progressive English and Radical English; and the roles of the participants within each of the various

orientations. The aims and objectives of the Literature syllabus can be placed within the various orientations O'Neill's adaptation of Ball et al's model is useful in contextualising the study of English and Literature in Singapore. The aims of the Literature syllabus can be placed within each of the different models of the teaching of English and the MOE education policies can be aligned with the various orientations of the quadrant diagram (Appendix 2). This helps to provide a structure for the framing of the research questions to explore at length the aims and objectives of the Literature curriculum from the perspectives of students and teachers.

The current state of Literature as a subject as discussed by Chambers and Gregory (2006), identified factors, such as the "retail model of higher education", that could threaten its future in the school curriculum and beyond. Miller (1998) focussed on the issue of globalisation and its effects on literary studies. He concluded that massive economic, political and technological changes brought about by rapid globalisation would change the nature and essence of literature, such as the rise of new forms of non-print media altering the transmission of literary language and narrative techniques.

The role of Literature in the curriculum in terms of its functionality and relevance is discussed by McGregor (1992), recognising the role of literature in shaping values. Similarly, Chambers and Gregory (2006) investigate how students can feel connected with works of literature. Specifically, Singh (1999) and Yeo (1999) explore the Literature curriculum in Singapore while Holden (1999) proposes a post-colonial curricular reform which includes changes to the manner and rationale of study and the types of literary texts for study. Key findings of both literature reviews were taken into account in the formulation of research questions on the importance and relevance of Literature in the curriculum.

The teaching and learning of Literature in countries with similar contexts to Singapore, such as Canada and Malaysia, provided a background for comparisons. Though these countries share similarities in their colonial backgrounds, they differ in the extent of implementation of the English and Literature curriculum. Canada has placed a great deal of emphasis on the promotion of national literature and there is worldwide recognition of the works of Canadian writers (Holden, 2000). Malaysia has chosen to place English as a second language and Literature is studied as a component of the English Language subject (Subramanian, 2003, as cited in Vethamani, 2007, p. 6; Subramanian, 2007). In addition, current research papers (Choo, 2004; Poon, 2007, 2009) on issues pertaining to Literature studies in Singapore have found that Literature education in Singapore is in a state of ambivalence and that the future of the subject is uncertain with the introduction of Social Studies as a compulsory humanities subject, with schools choosing History or Geography electives instead of Literature.

The review of literature in this area has revealed that the focus of research in Singapore has mainly been on programme evaluations and policy implementation. Despite a great deal of interest in English language policies and curriculum as evident in the revamp of the English Language syllabus, very little has been done in the area of Literature.

Research Methodology

This study is located within the paradigm of interpretivism and uses the grounded theory approach. Specifically this study adopted a symbolic interactionist approach within the interpretivist paradigm as it is concerned with revealing the perspectives of students and teachers on the place of English Literature studies in Singapore secondary schools, to see how they defined, interpreted, and explained situations. The research study was organised around multiple case studies. The qualitative case study method was appropriate as it “has a holistic focus, aiming to preserve and understand the wholeness and unity of the case” (Punch, p. 144), with each of the five schools representing a case. The case study method also allowed for data to be gathered from a variety of sources such as interviews and surveys. Each school presented a unique context and data was gathered from a variety of sources such as focus group interviews, written protocol and documents.

The study population comprised students from five secondary schools: three autonomous, one government-aided and one mainstream school which were identified at random and provided the range and diversity needed for a comprehensive study, the only prerequisite being that they offered Literature as a subject at the upper secondary levels.

Data were analysed using an inductive process (O’Donoghue, 2007) where emerging concepts from raw data were categorised through the processes of constant questioning and constant comparison. Cross case analysis of data collected from interviews, questionnaires, and document study was carried out and analysed inductively. Based on analysed data, a number of propositions were developed to generate theory on how teachers and students in Singapore secondary schools deal with English Literature studies.

This study undertook to answer the following two Central Research Questions:

Central Research Question 1: What meanings and values do students ascribe to studying Literature in English in the contemporary Singaporean environment?

Central Research Question 2: What impact do educational policies and curriculum changes have on the choice of Literature in English as a desirable curriculum subject?

A number of guiding questions were developed to help answer the two Central Research Questions.

Students were involved in focus-group semi-structured interviews. All groups were asked the same set of questions although the sequence in which these questions occurred might not necessarily be the same. Opportunities were given for clarification and elaboration. Opinions were expressed by group members while discussing issues. Each focus group had no more than five students and took up about 40 minutes of interview time. Members of the groups were chosen at random by teachers. At the end of the interviews, students were asked to fill in a written protocol which consisted of seven Likert items, worded in the form of statements, to which students had to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on a four-point scale. The items focused on two areas: text selection and

value of literature; and students' responses were used to validate the data derived from the focus group interviews. The responses were compiled and recorded in a focus group summary sheet from which main themes were identified. Students' responses to the statements were used to check the student interview data. The written protocol was also a means of verifying interview data and establishing the degree of consensus with which key views were held. The use of the written protocols was appropriate in managing the large quantity of data provided by the 89 students who were involved in the study.

Findings and Discussion

Impact of global economic forces on the study of Literature

The majority of the students across all the five schools agreed that the study of Literature does contribute to increased proficiency in English Language. Although they were in agreement on the importance of Literature as a subject in secondary schools, they perceived that the status of Literature is low when compared to other subjects. Many were of the opinion that Literature graduates did not have good job prospects. There were not many career choices available to them besides in the fields of teaching, law, acting and journalism.

The Strategic and Skills-in-Demand List compiled by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) listed occupations that are "key to supporting the growth of key economic sectors in Singapore", and most of the occupations that will be "in strong demand by industries in the coming years" (MOM website, 2010) fall mainly in the manufacturing, construction, healthcare, finance, information communication and digital media sectors. Occupations in the tourism and retail sectors included on the list require job-seekers to have technical backgrounds.

This study was conducted in the midst of the Global Financial crisis, which had its beginnings in mid-2007 and which progressed well into 2008. The uncertainty engendered by the economic climate had to be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. The revised syllabuses for 'O' and 'N' level examinations provided for a wider range of texts; from 2008 a Singaporean text (prose or poetry) was included in the Unseen section of Paper 1 of the GEC 'O' Level Literature examination. The GCE 'O' and 'N' level Literature Paper consists of 2 papers, Paper 1 consists of Prose and Unseen Texts (either prose or poetry) and Paper 2 Drama. Each paper carries an equal weighting of 50%. Normal anxieties about syllabus change seemed to be exacerbated by the uncertain economic climate. Participants' responses to some of the interview questions did reflect these economic concerns. The perception that Literature was a subject in which it is difficult to achieve high grades had long been embedded within the Singapore education system (Big drop in students studying O-level literature, 1997), with more students choosing to study History and Geography instead of Literature as it was easier to score distinctions in these two subjects. Although changes have been made to the education system with respect to the school ranking exercise, which was introduced in 1992 to "induce a healthy competition among secondary schools and junior colleges"

(Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002, p. 156), and the introduction of the Humanities subject with its flexible combinations of subjects for study, the choice to study Literature is still viewed as limiting the overall academic standing of individual students. This has implications in a meritocratic society like Singapore. The need to excel academically, especially in the present economic climate, is crucial and the prevailing belief that Literature graduates would not be able to get jobs in the uncertain economic climate, where the demand is in the financial, technological and scientific sectors, does not encourage students to pursue Literature studies at secondary school. Literature education is not seen as relevant in the current Singapore environment.

Impact of societal influences (political, social and cultural) on the study of Literature

Interviews with students revealed the undeniable importance of Literature as a subject in secondary school. Many participants noted that the subject encourages the development of higher order thinking and creativity. An important point to note, however, is that the vision and mission of the school, and its performance in the School Achievement Table (School Accountability Framework Review, 2006) have an impact on the degree of importance students placed on the subject. Students in the high performing schools were more receptive to Literature studies and this was reflected in their positive feedback and points of view.

Literature had a high functional element; the majority of students commented on its role in the improvement in English Language. There was consensus among students that the study of Literature in English contributed greatly to increasing students' proficiency in English Language. This placed Literature in the English as Skills quadrant (O'Neill, 1995), highlighting the authoritative and highly prescriptive control exerted by the top-down approach of the government and the MOE in educational issues.

The study of Literature focussed mainly on the mastery of skills related to textual analysis and analysis of literary devices and techniques as reflected in the aims of the Literature syllabus (Curriculum Planning and Development Division 2007). Nearly all participants in this research acknowledged the role of Literature in contributing to increased proficiency in English Language.

Responses from students however indicated that they did not place any importance on critical literacy in the teaching of Literature. An analysis of the syllabus also showed that only one of the aims of the syllabus could be linked to Cultural Criticism. It was also noted that most respondents were framing the impact of linguistic and cultural backgrounds narrowly, in terms of textual accessibility and comprehensibility. In thinking critically, students would need to bring their background knowledge of their own cultures when engaging with texts so as to be able to "reflect on different social assumptions, judgements, and beliefs which are embodied in texts, and which different people bring to language and learning" (Davey, 1993, as cited in Locke, 2000, p. 9). This would facilitate critical reading practices, placing emphasis in another possible orientation of literary study (O'Neill, 1995). This has implications on how literary studies

could be conducted in Singapore secondary schools in future, that is with an emphasis on the critical thinking aspect.

There was a general consensus among the participants that the study of Literature can make an important contribution to the holistic education of students. The importance of Literature as an effective means for students “to explore moral and social issues” (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2007, p. 2) was also highlighted and acknowledged by participants in this study. Although this objective was deemed important, it was not specifically listed as one of the aims under Section 2 of the 2007 Literature syllabus; instead it is placed in a separate section under Values. The Literature syllabuses consisted mainly of political, aesthetic and linguistic objectives. Although it was noted by participants that the study of Literature could be used to promote the values of National Education, this was not made part of the Literature teaching syllabus in schools. The National Education programme was implemented in schools and tertiary institutions in May 1997, and aimed to “develop national cohesion, cultivate the instinct for survival as a nation and instil in our students, confidence in our nation's future...cultivating a sense of belonging and emotional rootedness to Singapore” (MOE, website, 2011b). It is infused across the curriculum mainly through subjects like Social Studies, Civics and Moral Education, History and Geography. The subject Social Studies appeared to have taken over the role of Literature in schools as the vehicle for the transmission of moral and social values through the teaching of National Education messages.

It was found that despite the importance placed on Literature in secondary schools, the subject had endured a very low status compared to other Humanities subjects. Many students did not consider the subject relevant to the contemporary Singaporean environment. The political and economic ‘directions’ that the country is taking appear to reinforce the irrelevance of the subject. Education policies, such as the national ranking exercise, and the reluctance of schools to offer the subject at ‘O’ level did not help to improve its status. The lack of emphasis on Literature and the over-emphasis on subjects such as Mathematics and Science served to highlight the fact that Literature is not important or relevant in the future. Teacher shortage was a problem faced by the schools and the use of unqualified relief teachers to teach the subject added to its lack of credibility and status. Literature was also perceived as a difficult subject due to its subjective nature and lack of tangible facts which could be memorised. All these factors have led to the marginalisation of the subject, and hence by association the students of Literature. This has huge implications on the process of teaching and learning.

The discourse of government policies which highlighted Singapore as a centre of excellence in Mathematics and Science, and the promotion of a knowledge-based economy, made students move away from the study of Literature to subjects which they felt would get them jobs in the future. National Day and New Year ministerial speeches constantly highlight Singapore’s educational achievements in Science and Mathematics (2010) and MOE’s efforts to increase Singapore’s global competitiveness through establishment of specialised schools and FutureSchools underscore the importance placed on Mathematics, Sciences and Technology (2007, 2008, 2011b).

Singapore's meritocratic system, where individuals are recognised and rewarded solely on the basis of achievement, merit and hard work, encourages vigorous competition at work and in schools. As a nation, Singapore needs to compete with and have an edge over neighbouring countries (Lee, 2009), and as people are the main resource, every individual feels the need to excel. However, as opportunities are tied to the goals of a knowledge-based economy, students do not follow through on their literature study because of its low marketability. Career prospects for Literature graduates were not considered by students in this study to be as good as those for Mathematics and Science graduates.

According to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of the National University of Singapore, Literature graduates are "well equipped for a number of jobs – typical career areas of recent graduates include journalism, television, public relations in banks and other corporations, teaching and publishing" (National University of Singapore website, 2010). These careers, however, were not considered attractive in terms of status or financial remuneration as indicated by most of the participants in this research.

The responses from students for Central Research Question 1 have led to the development of the first proposition - *although students recognise the functional importance of Literature and acknowledge its moral and social importance, they do not consider it an economically viable course of study.*

Policy makers, teachers and students

Changes to the syllabus and examination formats appeared to be the key movers of change within the Singapore education system. The impact of including Singaporean literature in the 'O' level examination was the creation of "a sense of awareness of Singapore's cultural capital" (Lui, 2006).

The lack of communication between policy-makers and practitioners in schools was highlighted by the poor dissemination of information regarding the pathways of study for Literature beyond secondary levels. The majority of the participants had no knowledge of the H1, H2 and H3 pathways of study for Literature; students were not advised of opportunities available for further study, thereby indirectly emphasising the lack of desirability of Literature as a subject in secondary school.

In an effort to overcome what Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong called "the most serious recession in half a century" (Lee, 2009), the introduction of local literature could be seen as a national move to promote harmony and strengthen local ties within the multi-racial communities. However, despite the merits of Literature (Lui, 2006), the objectives of studying it appear to overlap those of History, Geography and Social Studies subjects, which therefore diminishes the need to study Literature. Literature as a subject is therefore in direct competition with other Humanities subjects such as History and Geography and the introduction of Social Studies as a compulsory elective component of the Combined Humanities subject at upper secondary level, through which National

Education messages are conveyed, nullifies the role of Literature in the teaching of moral and social values.

Research shows that not many changes were made to the Literature syllabuses other than the introduction of local texts and their inclusion in the 'O' Level examination. Choo (2004) attributes the ambivalent status of the subject Literature to the conflict in ideologies inherent in the subject and those of competing social groups, as well as ties to the colonial heritage in terms of texts and assessments, which have remained largely unchanged. Although there were calls for schools to "shed their colonial mentality and introduce local writers to students" ('Myopic' to make students give up literature, 1997) by Associate Professor Kirpal Singh, then Head of Literature and Drama at the Singapore National Institute of Education, local texts were introduced in the 'O' Level syllabus only in 2008. He also commented on the fact that Singaporeans were "lacking confidence in their own literature" (ibid.) and this was illustrated in the responses of some of the participants in this study. Poon (2009) contends that the current Literature syllabus statements and goals do not take into consideration the current global social, political, ethical and cultural issues. An analysis of MOE Literature syllabus statements highlighted the fact that very few changes had been made over the years. Poon's suggestion that cosmopolitanism be made an intellectual and ethical goal in order to ignite interest and significance in the subject entails the inclusion of more multi-cultural and international texts. To some extent this was supported by some of the students in this research in terms of their positive responses to local literature. The mixed reactions of students to the move to include more local texts reflect their resistance to change. Therefore changes such as the introduction of local texts in the Literature curriculum and the introduction of Social Studies as a school subject can only be effected from a top-down approach, consistent with the tight control exerted by the Singapore government on education.

Based on the views of the participants on Central Research Question 2, a second proposition was developed – *students respond primarily to changes initiated at the policy level by policy makers, who in turn develop policies based on societal influences and global economic forces.*

The traditional British canon, the main feature of the Literature syllabus in Singapore since colonial times, had become less significant with the introduction of many literary texts from other parts of the world. The majority of students had no knowledge of the canon or canonical writers. They were quite supportive of the move to include local literature in the curriculum. However, there was still a reluctance to move away from the more familiar traditional texts. The use of the colloquial variety of English, Singlish, in local texts was not viewed as setting the right example for students. The strong government policy of encouraging the use of Standard English is in conflict with the use of Singlish by characters in many local texts, as well as by many students in communication with their peers and family members. Rubdy's research (2007) confirmed that despite its widespread use, students' reactions to teachers' use of Singlish in class indicated strong disapproval and that this would affect their performance in examinations. The lack of value attached to Singlish may have affected students' perspectives on local

literature, as these texts were considered of inferior quality in comparison to foreign texts. Most students did not think the move to include local literature would encourage more students to take up the subject.

The use of local texts to engage students intimately and personally (Lui, 2006) can be viewed as an attempt to forge a national identity within the multi-lingual and multi-cultural Singaporean community. However, given the tension between Singlish and Standard English, this notion of identity may continue to be a contentious issue.

Despite the huge success of local plays and sitcoms which make use of Singlish, there appears to be a divide between the performing arts scene and the literary scene. The vibrant cultural arts programme and vision of a global arts city do not appear to support the growth of the literary scene in schools where local literature still needs to gain wide acceptance.

These findings lead to the development of the third proposition – *local literature has not yet made any significant impact on students in secondary schools in terms of promoting and encouraging the study of Literature.*

Based on the interviews conducted, it can be concluded that the culture of the school plays a huge part in determining the direction of curriculum programmes. The vision and mission statements drive the learning programmes, as exemplified by one the schools whose focus on technology and innovation led to the focus of its learning programmes on Mathematics and Science. Students reflected this in their responses to interview questions where they did not think Literature was important or had relevance in their future.

Implications

The implications from this research are wide-ranging and have potential influences on policies, practices and further research. Firstly, Literature needs to be seen as more than a subject reserved only for a select few: those who are (1) intrinsically motivated to study it, (2) good enough in English to pursue it at post-secondary levels and (3) pursuing a career in teaching or the arts. There has been a gradual change in policies of the MOE regarding the teaching of Literature with more autonomy given to schools on choices of texts for study. It is in the hands of the practitioners to implement change at the micro-level in schools.

Secondly, to reiterate Choo's view, the reluctance to free the curriculum from its colonial influences reinforces its "ambivalent position" (Choo, 2004, p. 77). Although the MOE has taken the initiative of revising the 'O' and 'N' level syllabuses to include local texts and increase the range of texts, the status of Literature has not improved. Literature may be more successful as a subject of appreciation rather than an examinable one. It needs to be seen as a viable subject for study, possibly by incorporating it into either English Studies or Social Studies or expanded as Cultural Studies.

Thirdly, the vital link between the subject Literature and the local Performing Arts and Literary scene needs to be made and continually reinforced in order to increase its relevance in the contemporary Singaporean environment. Literature as a subject needs to free itself from the colonial ‘baggage’ and develop its own independent identity. Singapore literature has also developed significantly over the years and as a young nation, the incorporation of local literature in the school curriculum would help promote and strengthen national identity.

Finally, although Singapore has responded positively to global economic forces, by upskilling its workforce and expanding foreign policies to attract overseas investments among other initiatives, necessary changes to the Literature curriculum to bring the subject into the 21st century, such as a more varied curriculum to include different genres as well as a more encompassing mode of assessment, have not been made. In Singapore’s environment of constant change, where the need “to continually reconstruct itself and keep its relevance to the world” (Lee, 2009, para 2) is vital, the aims and objectives of the Literature curriculum remained stagnant. Literature is viewed as an indulgence and can therefore do with just minor improvements to its curriculum. The calls for a change in mind-set from students and teachers of Literature who are marginalised by association cannot be ignored and need to be actioned by stakeholders at all levels.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to generate theory on how teachers and students in Singapore secondary schools deal with Literature in English studies, by looking at the meanings and values teachers and students ascribe to studying Literature in the contemporary Singaporean environment and evaluating the impact of educational policies and curriculum changes on the choice of Literature as a desirable curriculum subject. Based on the three key propositions, this theory proposes that students possess a strong sense of complacency and ambivalence towards the teaching and learning of Literature. They do not see the economic viability of pursuing Literature studies beyond the secondary levels. There is a tendency for the subject to be seen as an ‘elite’ subject, suitable only for students from the better performing schools. The subject Literature is seen as a disparate entity, unrelated to the vibrancy of the local Arts and literary environment. The future of the subject is dependent upon the formulation of policies by policy makers at the institutional and governmental levels, which are enacted at the school level without much resistance.

This research recognises the fact that it takes a long time for a literary culture to be established, especially in post-colonial countries which still retain some of the educational practices and standards of the colonial past. Having attained economic stability and internal cohesion, the time is conducive for the concerted development of a multi-racial literary culture in Singapore. Singapore is fast becoming a regional financial and technological hub, with a vibrant Arts scene especially in the area of performing arts. Within this stable environment, the potential for the development of an exciting, current and meaningful literature programme would only enhance one of the best performing school systems.

Acknowledgements

This paper was presented at the MELTA 2012 Conference in Kuala Lumpur on 29 May 2012.

References

- Ball, S., Kenny, A., & Gardiner, D. (1990). Literacy, politics and the teaching of English. In I. Goodson, & P. Medway, (Eds.), *Bringing English to order* (pp. 47-86). London: The Falmer Press.
- Big drop in students studying O-level literature. (1997, August 16). *The Straits Times*, p. 3.
- Chambers, E., & Gregory, M. (2006). *Teaching and learning English Literature*. London: Sage Ltd.
- Choo, S. (2004). Investigating Ideology in the Literature curriculum in Singapore. Unpublished master's thesis. Department of English Language and Literature: National University of Singapore.
- Choo, S. (2011). On literature's use(ful/less)ness: Reconceptualising the literature curriculum in the age of globalisation. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43(1), 47-67.
- Curriculum Planning and Development Division. (2007). *Literature in English, teaching syllabus*. Ministry of Education: Singapore.
- Goh, C. B., & Gopinathan, S. (2006). The Development of education in Singapore since 1965. Background paper prepared for the Asia Education Study Tour for African Policy Makers, June 18- 30. Retrieved July 8, 2007, from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1121703274255/1439264-1153425508901/Development_Edu_Singapore_draft.pdf
- Goh, C. T. (1997, June). Speech at the opening of the 7th International Conference on Thinking at the Suntec City Convention Centre Ballroom, Singapore Retrieved November 6, 2011, from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/1997/020697.htm>
- Holden, P. (2000). On the nation's margins: The social place of Literature in Singapore. *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 15(1), 30-51.
- Lee, B. Y. (2005, January). Speech at the opening of the School of the Arts at 90, Goodman Road, Singapore. Retrieved October 9, 2006, from <http://app.mica.gov.sg/Default.aspx?tabid=79&ctl=Details&mid=540&ItemID=181>
- Lee, H. L. (2010a, August). National Day Rally speech. Retrieved January 11, 2011, from http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/pmosite/mediacentre/speechesninterviews/prime_minister/2010/August/national_day_rallyspeechenglishbyprimeministerleehsienlongon29a.html
- Lee, H. L. (2010b, January). New Year Message 2011. Retrieved January 11, 2011, from http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/pmosite/mediacentre/speechesninterviews/prime_minister/2010/December/prime_minister_snewyearmessage2011.html

- Lee, K. Y. (2009, April). *The fundamentals of Singapore's foreign policy: Then and now*. Speech at the Rajaratnam Lecture at Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore. Retrieved September 15, 2010, from http://www.news.gov.sg/public/sgpc/en/media_releases/agencies/pmo/speech/S-20090409-1.html
- Locke, T. (2000). English in the New Zealand Curriculum: Benchmarks and Milestones. Retrieved April 17, 2012, from <http://edlinked.soe.waikato.ac.nz>
- Lui, T. Y. (2006, July). Speech at the MOE Literature Symposium at the Singapore Polytechnic Auditorium, Singapore. Retrieved April 6, 2007, from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2006/sp20060721.htm>
- Lui, T. Y. (2007, May). *Gearing up for the future: Innovation in Singapore's education system*. Speech at IBAP Teachers Conference at Grand Copthorne Waterfront Hotel, Singapore. Retrieved July 12, 2009, from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2007/sp20070331a.htm>
- McGregor, R. (1992). Imagining realities: values and literature. In Thomson, J. (Ed.), *Reconstructing literature teaching: New essays on the teaching of literature* (pp. 137-148). Norwood SA: Australian Association for the Teaching of English.
- Miller, H. (1998). *Effects of globalisation on literary study*. Department of Comparative Literature, Aarhus Universitet, Denmark.
- Miller, H. (2002). *On Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Ministry of Education. (2007, May 22). MOE selects first five future schools@Singapore [Press release]. Retrieved November 12, 2007, from http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/2007/pr20070522_print.htm
- Ministry of Education. (2008, March 3). New school of Science and Technology to open in 2010 [Press release]. Retrieved May 4, 2008, from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/press/2008/03/new-school-of-science-and-tech.php>
- Ministry of Education. (2011a, July 25). Mother Tongue Language Policy. Retrieved January 20, 2012, from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/admissions/returning-singaporeans/mother-tongue-policy/>
- Ministry of Education. (2011b). Gifted Education Programme: Integrated Programme. Retrieved January 30, 2011, from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/gifted-education-programme/integrated-programmes/>
- Ministry of Education Corporate Brochure. (2010). Education in Singapore. Retrieved October 12, 2010, from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/about/files/moe-corporate-brochure.pdf>
- Ministry of Information and the Arts. (1999). *Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore*. Ministry of Information and the Arts, Singapore. Retrieved 20 January, 2010, from http://app.mica.gov.sg/Portals/0/2_FinalRen.pdf
- Ministry of Manpower. (2010). Strategic Skills in Demand. Retrieved January 12, 2011, from <http://www.mom.gov.sg/skills-training-and-development/skills-in-demand/Pages/skills-in-demand.aspx>

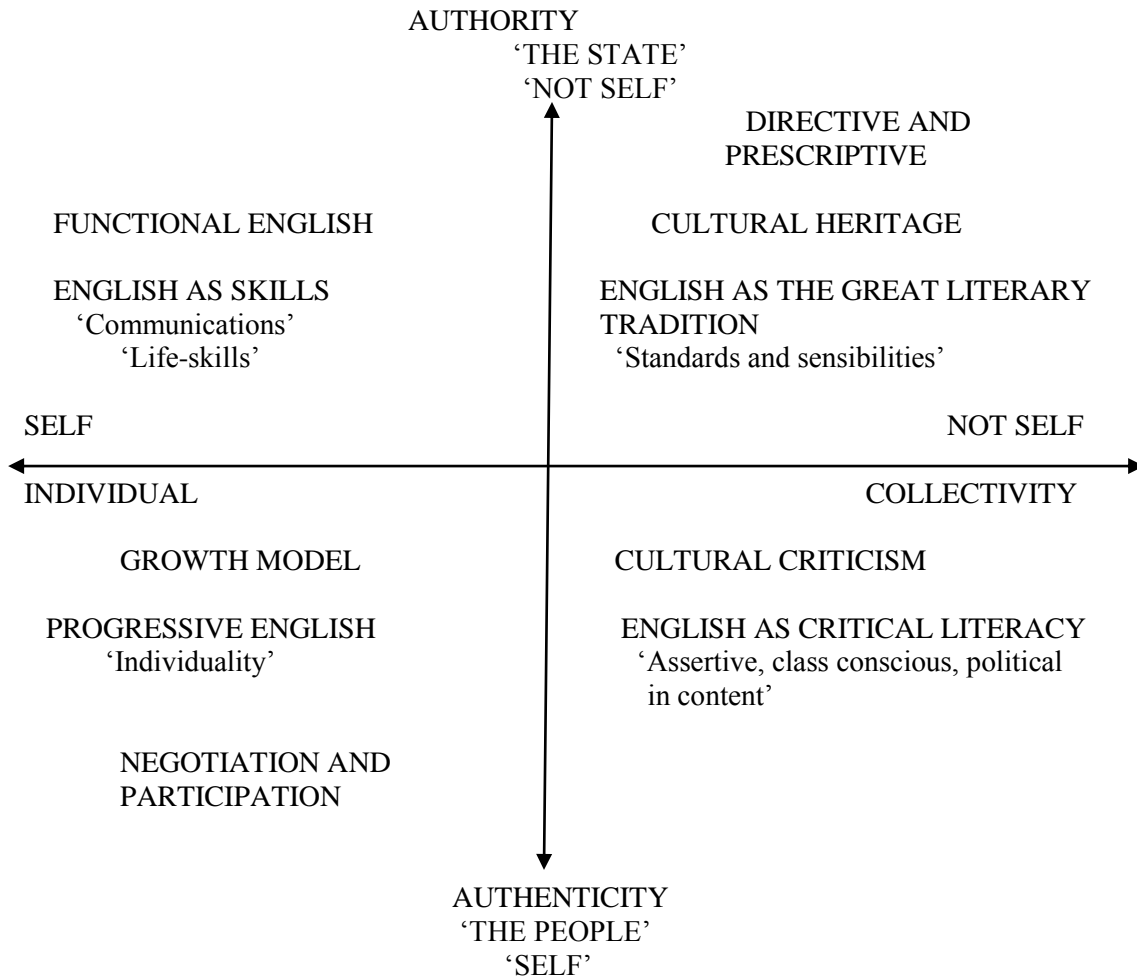
- 'Myopic' to make students give up literature. (1997, May 30). *The Straits Times*, p. 53.
- National University of Singapore. (2010). Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. English Literature. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from <http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/prospective/faqs.html>
- Ng, Eng Hen. (2010). FY2010 Committee of supply debate: 1st Reply by Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence on strengthening education for all. Retrieved March 10, 2010, from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2010/03/09/fy-2010-committee-of-supply-de.php>
- O'Donoghue, T. (2007). *Planning your qualitative research project: an introduction to interpretivist research in education*. London: Routledge
- O'Neill, M. (1995). *Variant readings: A cross-cultural study of reading comprehension and literacy texts*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Murdoch University, Western Australia.
- Poon, A. (2007). The politics of pragmatism: Some issues in the teaching of Literature in Singapore. *Changing English: Studies in culture and education*, 14(1), 51-59.
- Poon, A. (2009). Introduction: 1990- present. In A. Poon, P. Holden, & S. Lim. (Eds.), *Writing Singapore: An historical anthology of Singapore Literature* (pp. 359-379). Singapore: NUS Press and National Arts Council of Singapore.
- Poon, A. (2010). Constructing the cosmopolitan subject: Teaching secondary school Literature in Singapore. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 30(1), 31-41.
- Punch, K.F. (2005). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. London: Sage Publications.
- Rubdy, R. (2007). Singlish in the school: An impediment or a resource. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 28(4), 308-324.
- School Accountability Framework Review. (2006). Singapore -Education system and school accountability. Retrieved October 12, 2007, from <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/accountability/docs/singapore.pdf>
- Shanmugaratnam, T. (2005, August). Speech at National Arts Council's Golden Point Award Night at Drama Centre, Singapore. Retrieved June 7, 2007, from http://www.moe.gov.sg/speeches/2005/sp20050831a_print.htm
- Sharpe, L., & Gopinathan, S. (2002). After effectiveness: new directions in the Singapore school system? *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(2), 151-166.
- Silver, R. E. (2004). The Discourse of linguistic capital: Language and economic policy planning in Singapore. *Journal of Language Policy*, 4(1), 47-66.
- Singh, K. (1999). Literature in the Singapore curriculum: Challenges for the future, in S. H. Chua, & W. P. Chin (Eds.) *Localising pedagogy: Teaching Literature in Singapore* (pp. 62-67). Singapore: National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.
- Subramaniam, G. (2007). Literature programmes in Malaysian schools: Then and now in M. E. Vethamani, & R. Perumal (Eds.), *Teaching English in Malaysia* (pp. 32-51). Kuala Lumpur: Sasbadi Sdn. Bhd.
- Velayutham, S. (2007). *Responding to globalisation: nation, culture and identity in Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Vethamani, M. E. (2007). The ebb and flow of English Language in Malaysia. In

M. E. Vethamani, & R. Perumal (Eds.), *Teaching English in Malaysia* (pp. 1-10). Malaysia: Sasbadi Sdn. Bhd.

Yeo, R. (1999). National education and the literature curriculum in Singapore schools. In S. H. Chua, & W. P. Chin (Eds.), *Localising pedagogy: Teaching Literature in Singapore* (pp. 68-78). Singapore: National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

APPENDIX 1

English and forms of literacy (Adapted from O’Neill, M.H. (1995) *Variant Readings: A Cross-Cultural Study of Reading Comprehension And Literacy Texts* based on Ball, S., Kenny A., and Gardiner, D. (1990). Literacy, politics and the teaching of English’. In I. F. Goodson and P. Medway (Eds.), *Bringing English to Order* (pp. 75-76). London: Palmer Press).



APPENDIX 2

1. Mapping the 1999 and 2007 Singapore Literature in English Syllabuses to orientations to English

...to develop students' ability to:
1. enjoy the reading of literature and appreciate its contribution to aesthetic and imaginative growth; <i>(Personal Growth / Cultural Heritage)</i>
2. explore areas of human concern, thus leading to a greater understanding of themselves and others; <i>(Personal Growth / Cultural Heritage)</i>
3. read, understand and respond to various types of literary texts to appreciate ways in which writers achieve their effects, and to develop information retrieval strategies for the purposes of literary study; <i>(Personal Growth / Cultural Heritage / Functional English)</i>
4. construct and convey meaning clearly and coherently in written and spoken language. <i>(English as skills: Functional English)</i>

(Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD), 1999)

2. Mapping 2007 Singapore Literature in English Syllabus to orientations to English

(Lower secondary)...to develop student's ability to:
1. discover the joys of reading Literature and become aware of new ways of perceiving the world around them; <i>(Personal Growth / Cultural Heritage)</i>
2. explore the elements of the different genres via the study of literary texts and to understand how these function in enabling literary works to achieve their desired ends. <i>(Functional English)</i>
3. articulate perceptive and logical thinking when discussing and writing about Literature <i>(Functional English)</i>
4. select and interpret relevant material judiciously and to express ideas in coherent and clear English; <i>(Functional English)</i>
5. understand the importance of the contexts in which literary texts are written and understood; and <i>(Cultural Criticism)</i>
6. engage personally with texts, showing a strong intellectual and emotional awareness of themes, characters, settings and contexts. <i>(Personal Growth / Cultural Heritage)</i>

(CPDD, 2007)