

## **Newspaper literacy: An investigation of how Singaporean students read the *Straits Times***

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*ABSTRACT: Little is known and written about newspaper literacy in the classroom. Yet reading the *Straits Times* constitutes an important part of the “English” curriculum for pre-university students in Singapore. The study reported in this article is part of a larger classroom intervention project, which aims to investigate how first-year, pre-university students in a junior college in Singapore read the newspaper. From the analysis of an online survey and classroom talk, this paper teases out the pedagogical implications for a critical literacy education that aims to encourage students to be critical readers of newspapers.*

*KEY WORDS: Critical reading, classroom action research, critical literacy, newspaper literacy.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Reading a newspaper is hard work for pre-university students<sup>1</sup> in Singapore. Not only are they required to religiously read the newspaper every day; students are also asked to analyse important newspaper articles from the *Straits Times*. This is all part of what is required in studying the *General Paper* (GP), a curriculum subject that requires students to write mature and informed expository and argumentative essays. Because the *General Paper* is inter-disciplinary in focus and requires students to evaluate and formulate cogent arguments (see Ministry of Education, 2003)<sup>2</sup>, the newspaper is relied on as the “text” to help students acquire knowledge and understanding of diverse, global/local issues. Hence, there is great emphasis on the importance of reading the *Straits Times* in many Singapore schools.

However, little is known and written about how students read the newspaper or of the pedagogy involved. Hitherto, research pertaining to the newspaper as a field of study has been largely confined to the analysis of the language of newspapers, as evidenced by Fowler’s (1991) work, and practitioners in the field of critical discourse analysis (see, for example, Fairclough, 1989, and Goatly, 2000). In education, the focus seems to be on how newspapers can be used as authentic materials in the “English” classroom (see, for example, Reah, 2002, and Sanderson, 1999). This means that in the local context, teachers still have little pedagogical knowledge that might assist them to understand the connections between young people’s participation in the everyday ritual of “reading the word” and “reading the world” (Freire, 1972).

The study reported in this paper is part of a larger classroom intervention project investigating how first-year pre-university students in a junior college in Singapore read a newspaper. The participants were students whom I taught for a year before

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<sup>1</sup> Pre-university is equivalent to Year 11 and 12 in the Australian education system

<sup>2</sup> The GP syllabus can be downloaded from [www.moe.edu.sg/exams/syllabus/2002/8005.pdf](http://www.moe.edu.sg/exams/syllabus/2002/8005.pdf).

taking up an academic position at Monash University. It needs to be noted that English is the medium of instruction in the Singapore classroom and it is taught as a first language. This background knowledge aside, the purpose of the newspaper literacy project was to investigate the possibility of introducing an intervention program that might bring about change and improvement in the way students read the newspaper. From a macro perspective, this vignette from a Singapore classroom also shows how classroom research can offer opportunities for the teacher-researcher to re-examine what constitutes good classroom practice – the design of an intervention program and how a teacher-led classroom inquiry can contribute to the professional growth of a teacher.

### CONCEPTUALISING “NEWSPAPER LITERACY”

It needs to be defined at the outset what newspaper literacy is, since my intention here is to contribute to a burgeoning research field called “The New Literacy Studies” (see Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). Underpinning this research is a view that literacy is “multiple” and that any form of literacy practices is located in a specific “semiotic domain” (Gee, 2003), particularised by specific types of social practices and new media (Kress, 2003). By “semiotic domain”, Gee (2003) meant “any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meanings” (p. 18). It must be noted that Gee’s conceptualisation of semiotic domain is derived from what the New London Group (1996) has called “multiliteracies”, where they argued that the terrain of literacy is no longer print-based but multimodal.

In a similar vein, I take a socio-cultural perspective on literacy that understands the reading of a newspaper as a semiotic domain which demands specific reading practices. Consider the various genres that constitute a newspaper: news story, feature article, human interest story, political cartoon, editorial, letter to the editor (also known as the “Forum” in the Singapore *Straits Times*) and the visuals in advertisements. All these genres and textual repertoires require specific *situated* reading practices – reading practices that not only require the reader to be familiar with the form, structure and textual composition of the newspaper but also, and more importantly, call for an understanding of the political culture and the *social practices* connect with the way news is “manufactured” in the Singapore *Straits Times*.

At this juncture, it is necessary that I briefly explain the ideological function of the press in Singapore in order for readers to fully appreciate the model of (critical) reading I am advocating here as “newspaper literacy”. In doing so I am making explicit the social practices involved in reading the Singapore *Straits Times*. It has been noted that the press in Singapore is politically also the Government’s mouthpiece and “an agent of consensus” used to shape and conscribe its audience to Government policy and rhetoric (Birch, 1999, p. 6). Furthermore, the press in Singapore is also likened to the performance of a daily ritual of “mass tutorial”, educating Singaporeans about the Government’s ideology, policy and action (Bokhorst-Heng, 2002, p. 562). In this light, reading the *Straits Times* is synonymous with “reading state communication” (Birch, 1999, p. 19) where the prevalent voice and perspective is notably that of the Government’s.

Against this backdrop of the ideological function of the *Straits Times*, I conceptualise newspaper literacy as a *situated* reading practice that understands the ideological and discursive working of the newspaper (i.e. the *Straits Times*) as an instrument and mechanism of power (Foucault, 1979) used to disseminate regimes of truth about the Singapore life and society. A situated reading practice is a *necessary* starting point for any form of critical reading to take place within the discursive framework of Singapore. As Pennycook (1999) has rightly pointed out,

any analysis of language, discourse and literacy in Singapore has to take into account both the nature of the particular salient discourses that construct Singaporean life, and the ways in which such discourses circulate, operate, regulate and produce forms of language, action and thought (p. 223).

It therefore matters that reading the newspaper as “state communication” and as regimes of truth-making require that one asks important questions that foreground the *process* of this communication rather than the *what* of communication (Birch, 1999). In other words, newspaper literacy privileges a more critical and dynamic reading that interrogates “*how* communication is situated; *why* communication is situated; *where* communication is situated; *when* communication is situated and *who* it is situated with and for” (Birch, 1999, p. 23). It is along this pathway of critical reading that the truth effects of news can be interrupted and deconstructed, along with the dominant mediation of representations and ideologies. In essence, newspaper literacy is a counter-hegemonic reading practice that questions, and counter-reads and writes against, hegemonic news discourses in the Singaporean context.

In implementing newspaper literacy in the Singapore classroom, my intent was to make students realise that treating the *Straits Times* as a “text” and amassing the “knowledge” therein may be necessary to pass the subject, but this should not be the end all of studying the *General Paper*. Rather, I wanted to impress on my students that the ability to develop alternative viewpoints and to question the construction of “knowledge” and “truths” should be the overriding pedagogical concern. Operating out of a position which believes that critical literacy is valuable to their life pathways and the “social field” that they eventually enter, I wanted my students to begin to problematise news discourse and to develop a critical awareness that any act of reading is always political and unstable. However, before I could suggest how to embed critical literacy in the reading of the newspaper, I needed to investigate first how my students read the *Straits Times*. I turn now to explain how I framed this newspaper literacy project and the methodology used.

## **RE-FRAMING ACTION RESEARCH: TEACHING THROUGH INQUIRY**

My interest in investigation-oriented research began when I returned to the classroom in Singapore as a teacher after a four-year stint studying for a doctoral degree in Australia. I was eager to try out new approaches, well aware that I was returning to an education system that places great emphasis on “thinking” in the classroom, and a system that rewards schools that value-add. Personally, I was also challenged pedagogically to actualise what I wrote about a year before on the possibilities of

practicing critical literacy in Singapore classrooms in place of a narrow conception of teaching critical thinking (Koh, 2002).

The problem that I wanted to investigate was premised on my lingering suspicion that students did not know how to read a newspaper critically. There was also the problematic assumption made by curriculum planners and teachers of *General Paper*, that junior college students were interested in the adult world of current affairs, and that they did not encounter any difficulties when reading a newspaper. A further related problem was that when tasked to write a newspaper critical commentary, students merely summarised. This led to my inquiry: to identify the problems that students face when they read newspapers, and to think of possible interventions that would help students move from writing summary to critique.

In theory, this typifies the starting point of action research: to locate a specific problem in the classroom and to “explore purposeful changes in educational practice” (Freebody, 2003, p. 85). The literature on action research has characterised it as a spiral cycle comprising “problem identification, systematic data collection, data-driven action taken, and finally problem redefinition” (Johnson, 1993, p. 1). Without going into the “nuts” and “bolts” of the action research spiral, action research can be summarised as a systematic approach to finding possible solutions to a problematic educational situation or practice.

I find this spiral cycle, however, too linear and simplistic; it does not reflect the essence of educational research, which is always messy and unpredictable. Herr (1999) made a similar critique about action research when she pointed out that the “discrete stages” in action research in actual fact blur in the real world of teacher research. She therefore argued that “the textbook model of action research had to be recreated to fit the lived experiences of school life” (Herr, 1999, p. 12).

Because of the messy terrain of research, there is always a need, I argue, to adopt a self-critical and self-reflective approach to teaching. This is also what Wells (2001) advocates when he argues that optimal learning is achieved when “inquiring into our own practice” becomes a habitual practice in the teaching profession (p. 2). Therefore, the cyclical feature of action research needs to be interrupted through constant dialogue with teacher reflection, assembled and reassembled according to the problem studied, the theoretical nuances, and the pedagogical repertoires offered. The following section describes the methodology used to gather the required data.

## **METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

A survey on newspaper literacy was completed by a random sample of first-year pre-university students on the Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE) platform at a junior college where I was teaching. In constructing the survey, I avoided the scaled response which is typical of the survey instrument. I felt that the scaled response would not serve the purpose of the research which was primarily aimed at gathering specific information relating to how students read newspapers. Therefore, the responses assigned to each question were in a sense the possible, but conjectural, responses of students. The predominant concern in constructing the survey was to design questions that would gather data about the how, what, why and where students

read newspapers (see Appendix 1 for the survey questions). However, the data collected in this first part of the research were later backgrounded to give way to insights gleaned from the focused group discussion, which I found to be more useful. The survey nevertheless provided some knowledge of newspaper reading habits amongst junior college students in a Singapore school.

Because the aim of this research was to investigate how students read the *Straits Times*, there was a need to listen to the voices of students from a “shared stage” (Goldstein, 2003, p. 30), where students engaged in “exploratory talk” (Mercer, 1995, p. 104) around how they read the newspaper. Hence, a focused group discussion was organised with three groups of students coded as class 26/03, 10/03 and 29/03. A focused group discussion that is organised from a “shared stage” and as “exploratory talk” essentially means that classroom talk has equal participation from students and the teacher, and there is an ongoing and sustained conversation centring on a specific topic/theme. Because of space constraints, this paper concentrates on the transcript of only one class – 26/03.

In transcribing the focus-group discussion, I have not included the conventions used in relation to the transcription. This is because the concern of this research was to find out the problems students encounter when reading a newspaper. Hence, it is what they say that is more important than the way (that is, the tone) the exploratory talk has been conducted.

The juxtaposition of the survey findings on newspaper literacy with the use of a focused survey group discussion was a deliberate complementary act. As I had expected, the findings of the survey would give only a partial picture of how, what, where and why students read the newspaper, and in quantified terms. There was a need to get a more grounded perspective by setting up a context for exploratory talk with students. In a sense, the authentic voices of students would provide the researcher with more informed views on the necessary interventions needed to equip students to be critical readers of the newspaper.

In presenting what was said in the “exploratory talk”, I have followed Goldstein’s (2003, see the methodology chapter in Appendix B, pp. 183-196) approach in her ethnographic study of how immigrant, high-school students from Hong Kong achieved academic and social success in a Toronto school. I will begin with segments of the transcript and follow each with a critical commentary on the exploratory talk. This is to allow the reader a textual space to engage with the transcript and to engage in a reading different from my own. The transcript is, however, presented in segments and organised around salient themes.

## **MAIN FINDINGS: WHAT HAS BEEN SAID IN THE “EXPLORATORY TALK”**

**Segment 1**

1	T	The first general question that I will ask you is what are the problems that you faced when you read the newspaper?
2	S1	For me is when you read a particular article, it may be covering on one issue and that issue is something you have never read about and what they say you can not really relate to. Hence you cannot continue reading.
3	T	Okay, in other words, you don't really know the context, and you find that some of the articles that you read are culturally very distanced. Am I right? Okay, move on to another problem, Jin Loong.
4	S2	Don't even understand
5	T	You don't even understand some of the articles. Okay.
6	S3	As in the the the way they...
7	T	The way it is being written, the style
8	S5	Very "chimp".
9	T	Huh?
10	S5	Do you mean that you don't understand because it is very "chimp"?
11	S3	Not "chimp" lah as in...
12	S6	Vocabulary...sometimes it is too difficult
13	S5	Yah yah.
14	T	Okay, so there are words that hinder your comprehension. Okay.
15	S7	...even the structure of the sentences right.
16	T	...you find it too complex?
17	S7	indirect
18	T	Too indirect?
19	S7	Eh.
20	T	Okay. Any other problems?
21	S8	At times, they use technical terms and those jargons, there might be some inunderstandable, we are not used...
22	T	Okay you are not familiar with the jargons and probably some of the articles are also too very academic. Yah? pitched at a more intellectual level and you can't really relate. Okay.

**1. Reading newspaper is very "chimp"!**

In this segment of the transcript, students explore the issue of what makes reading a newspaper difficult. They describe their experience of reading the *Straits Times* as "chimp" and give reasons why they find it to be so. "Chimp" is "Singlish" and it means "too deep" or "difficult to understand". The general feeling is that the *Straits Time* is inaccessible and, hence, difficult to understand.

That the newspaper is "chimp" has to do with how the reader/student is positioned by the newspaper. For example, one student (line 2) remarks that he felt distanced by the article because he could not relate to it, and that it was something he had not read about. In other words, the reader is positioned by the newspaper as the uninformed reader who needs to be given a context in order to understand the newspaper article more fully. This explains why students felt disconnected from what they read and their general lack of interest.

From the transcript, students also show a preoccupation with the micro-textual and semantic meanings of newspaper articles. They have identified “vocabulary” (line 12) and “the structure of sentences” (line 16) as the reasons why students find reading newspaper to be “chimp”. In other words, their comprehension of newspaper articles is often hindered by unfamiliar words and complex sentence structures. Therefore, it can be surmised that students do not comprehend beyond the micro-textual level of newspaper articles and, more importantly, they still do not have the resources to be a text user, a code breaker, a text participant and critic (Luke & Freebody, 2003). Hence, it cannot be assumed that students know how to read the newspaper, as this segment clearly illuminates that students do not have the resources to cope with reading what is to them a difficult text.

## Segment 2

106	T	How do you describe the way you read the newspaper?
107	S17	Browse.
108	T	Browse
109	S3	No leh. Very specific I will fall asleep one.
110	T	Slow and very specific.
111	S3	But will fall asleep.
112	S1	Cannot be too fastidious
113	T	You feel that it shouldn't be too serious?
114	S3	You can scheme through another time
115	T	You can't possibly read every article right?
116	S3	Too much.
117	T	Too much information for you to digest. Do you feel that way.
118	S3	But you need to be able to scheme through to get the main point, Some people just have to be, like me (laughter), slowing
119	T	Slow down.
120	T	Anybody else? You want to share with us your experience how would you describe the way you read the newspaper. Yeiling?
		(Laughter)
121	S18	Got time then (...) no time then (...)
122	T	So can I kinda generalise that your reading of newspaper is very selective. Yah? You pick and choose what interest you.
123	S3	If it is more difficult, then I skip.
124	T	If it is more difficult, you'll skip.

## 2. “I am a selective reader!”

In this part of the commentary, I make reference to a question in the online survey, which asked students to describe the way they read the newspaper (See Appendix, Question 8). This question is closely related to the theme of this segment of the transcript. The survey result was as follows:

A	Browse only headlines	13%
B	Selective reading (i.e. read only interesting articles)	64%

C	Look at pictures only	8%
D	Read closely and question what I read	15%

It is clear that students are decidedly “selective readers”. Furthermore, what is worth pointing out is that only a small percentage of the students read newspaper articles closely and question what they read. In other words, selective reading here does not mean that the student is a careful reader. Neither is there any evidence to suggest that they are critical readers. This is further revealed in the exploratory talk, where students affirmed that “browsing” aptly described how they read the newspaper. As one participant remarked, slow reading and “very specific” reading would only put him to sleep (line 111).

It can be further deduced from the transcript that there are three reasons why students are selective readers. Time factor is one (line 121); the level of difficulty of the article (line 123) is another, and lastly, the student is faced with many articles to choose from (line 116). Therefore, while selective reading characterised the way students read the newspaper, it needs to be pointed out that there would appear to be an *absence* of deep engagement with newspaper articles. This observation has a significant bearing on the kind of intervention program that can be designed to move students’ selective reading to a more critical dimension. I will return to the pedagogical implications this has in the classroom in the concluding section of this article.

### Segment 3

23	S9	Especially the commentary section.
24	T	Okay, especially the commentary and analysis section. What do you find most difficult about that section of this paper?
25	S10	Boring!
26	T	Boring.
27	S11	The articles are very long!
28	T	The articles are very long.
29	T	What else?
30	T	Repetitive comments.
31	S	Very difficult to summarise
32	T	Very difficult to summarise
33	S1	When we do commentary on that, it’s already commented. What do you? We have to comment.
34	T	What else is there to comment on?
35	S3	I rather comment on those current issues in other section of the paper

### 3. What else is there to comment on?

In this segment of the talk, students discuss why they find a particular section of the *Straits Times* difficult. They singled out the “Comment and Analysis” section to be the most difficult part of the newspaper. This section of the paper contains the editorial. In their opinion, this section of the paper is “boring” (line 25), “very long” (line 27) and “very difficult to summarise” (line 31). These utterances do not only reflect the attitude of the readers; they also reveal that students need to be initiated to a level of reading that is demanding in terms of content. Their complaint of boredom



is an indication that they lack the skills and resources to cope with articles that appear to be serious and heavy-going.

It needs to be mentioned that the commentary and analysis section of the *Straits Times* is also where senior journalists from the political desk comment/argue on any global/local issues from a particular worldview. But students are not able to see that the writers are writing from a single, particular perspective amongst others. As one student remarked, “When we do commentary on that, it’s already commented. What do we have to comment?” (line 33). This comment reveals that students are not aware what these articles “do to them” – how they are being positioned by the news articles. It also suggests the level of textual authority they attribute to journalists. Therefore, within the context of a classroom intervention, students need to be taught to read resistantly and critically as a central aspect of newspaper literacy.

#### Segment 4

35	T	Okay, now which is your favourite section of newspaper?
36	S	Life! ( <i>Giggles</i> )
37	T	Okay, it seems like the other groups also say the same thing. Some of you mention sports. Let me ask you a few questions why you like Life section so much.
38	S3	More relaxing.
39	S4	Light reading.
40	T	Easier to relate to?
41	T	Very light reading and what else?
42	T	Irvin what did you say?
43	S6	No need to think so much about it; just read for pleasure
44	T	Okay, no need to think so much about it, lazy reading; unlike your commentary and analysis serious reading. Okay.
45	S3	Sometimes you read halfway you sleep one. ( <i>Laughter</i> )
46	T	Okay what else about Life section that attracts you?
47	S3	The movie
48	S13	Comics
49	S3	The movie section
50	T	Movie review!
51	S3	Comics!
52	T	Comics.
53	S1	I think the content also. The articles are very pitched at a younger...
54	T	...targeting at young adults?
55	S3	Then they talk about celebrities
56	S4	There are lot of gossips
57	S3	...at the last, last page of

#### 4. On my fav section!

Related to the above segment, one question in the online survey asked students to indicate which section of the newspaper they read (See Appendix, Question 7). The results are computed as follows:

Home news	16.4%
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Life!	14.8%
Prime news	14.6%
World news	14.2%
Asia	11.3%
Comment & Analysis	9.3%
Forum	9.3%
Sports	8.7%
Classified	1.4%

It is not surprising that “Home news” is a popular choice with students. This is because the context is familiar and accessible. To them, home news is about Singapore and its happenings. It is the familiarity that strikes a chord with them. It can therefore be said that cultural proximity determines the level of interest in a news item. As discussed in Segment 1, students find news items “chimp” when they feel disconnected or when they feel that a particular news item has no relevance to them. Therefore, *how* students read a newspaper depends on *what* the context is of what they are reading.

With regard to the importance of the cultural proximity of a news items, in the exploratory talk on newspaper reading, students (see segment 4) also singled out the *Life!* section as their favourite section of the newspaper. *Life!* is a sub-section of the *Straits Times* where popular culture and everyday life-related articles are published. Movie reviews, fashion commentary, comics, gossips on Hollywood and local celebrities, and so on, appear in this section of the newspaper. These news items generate a lot of interest amongst students because, to them, it is “light reading” (line 39), “more relaxing” (line 38) and more importantly, where one need not think too much (line 43).

It can be deduced from the exploratory talk in Segment 4 that students operate between two modes of reading the newspaper. If it is for leisure reading, they adopt what I call “lazy reading”. This means that students merely browse and do not read with much intent other than to amuse themselves and for self-entertainment. The choice of news articles is also less serious – such as articles in *Life!* In other words, “lazy reading” is light reading. It is during “lazy reading” that students do not regard the newspaper as a “schoolie text”, and, as one student remarked, when “there is no need to think so much about it”. In contrast, students engage in “serious reading” when they have to read for information, especially articles in the “commentary and analysis” section, comprehension notwithstanding. Hence, how students read a newspaper is conditioned by *what* they are reading and for what purpose.

### Segment 5

91	T	Now tell me what are some of your experiences of reading Prime news for instance. Now you know that Prime news need not be news about Singapore right? It can be something very serious that has worldwide impact, like Terrorism or Bush’s visit.
92	S1	But that’s why we keep seeing every day, you have the see Bush’s photo and on terrorism. It gets boring lah.
93	T	You feel that...
94	S1	Like when are we going to be done with this...?
95	T	US is given too much exposure and news coverage right? Do you feel that way

		too, sometimes? Like this is over-exposure about what is happening, what the US is doing and the fight against terrorism and all. I think we are just too jaded with too much of this information.
96	S4	Too much

### 5. It's about Bush again!

In this segment of the exploratory talk, students noted that news items can be repetitive. Terrorism and news about Bush's administration have been identified as recurring news items in "Prime news". However, other than the comment that it is "boring" (line 92), and the observation that "too much" (line 96) media exposure has been given, the student is not able to comment on the significance of the repetition. My speculation is that students do not have the cultural resources and knowledge to make sense of such a news item. Furthermore, unlike home news, which is much closer to their own lives, it is not unexpected that students feel alienated from a source of news which is remotely distanced from their own world.

On reflection, a teaching point that can be gleaned from this co-construction of talk is that the teacher-researcher could have re-directed the exploratory talk and asked the student and the other participants how the repetition had foregrounded particular ideological interests, and *whose* interests did the repeated motif serve. Instead of agreeing that "we are just too jaded with too much of this information" (line 95), the focus of the talk could have generated a discussion on representation and how this works in media discourse. What is perceived as media saturation could be turned into a classroom discussion on how the media construct a preferred reading over other possible readings. This would be an instance where a critical literacy education could be introduced into the classroom. Evidently, the role of the teacher is instrumental in skewing towards critical discussion.

### Segment 6

126	T	Now one more question. I don't know whether you pay attention to the use of language when you read newspaper. What matters more to you? Content or language?
127	S5	Content
128	T	So you all don't pay attention to language at all? You do?
129	S20	Mine is very vague, cannot remember the content, so I go for language.
130	T	Which is more important to you? Content?
131	S20	Content lah.
132	T	Do you actually memorise the content? Then why do you read it for? Why do you read newspaper for? Huh?
133	S	(...idea...)
134	T	Okay, now how do you translate that to GP?
135	S	...after a few thousand articles you definitely will catch the thing
136	T	You feel that it is repetitive, you will catch something after reading a few articles
137	S1	I think that's why, because we didn't catch it. That's why we have nothing to write.

### 6. Newspaper as "schoolie" text.

How Singaporean students read the newspaper is revealed in this segment of the talk. Students tend to regard the newspaper as a “schoolie” text whence knowledge can be obtained. This is why they emphasise reading for content as more important than paying attention to language. I would describe their way of reading a newspaper as guided by a purposeful and pragmatic logic that aims to uncover (*not* “discover”) as much information as possible. In other words, students read to gain more knowledge in the belief that reading for content will help them in their *General Paper*. Hence, students believed that reading for content is more important than paying attention to language.

## **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

My inquiry into how Singaporean students read newspapers has led me to develop an intervention program that aims to address some of the difficulties they encounter when reading newspapers. Based on the findings gathered from the survey and the focused group discussion, I offer a few pedagogical points in this part of the article. In a sense, the pedagogical intervention that I suggest here is driven by a bottom-up approach, where a preliminary investigation was conducted before the design of an intervention program was prepared. The pedagogical points that emerge in this study are, however, not to be taken as prescriptive. Instead, they should be subjected to ongoing dialogue, and shaped and reshaped by classroom practice.

### *Explicit teaching of the newspaper genre*

It should not be assumed that students are able to read the newspaper without any form of help given. As is evident in their exploratory talk, students find reading the newspaper difficult and “chimp”. Therefore, there has to be explicit teaching of the newspaper as a genre. By explicit teaching, I mean that teachers should show students how news items are constructed and the process of selection that news items undergo. This would help students to understand that news items are always selected, and written from a particular worldview that does not necessarily reflect the reality of the world. In addition to this, students should also be shown and taught how to read the various genres (such as news stories, feature articles, human interest stories, political cartoons, editorials, the forum and even advertisements) that make up the newspaper. Being explicit about the newspaper as involving specific genres would provide a starting point for students to know and recognise the schematic structure of the newspaper. This would help them to get started, once there is some familiarity with the textual features of the newspaper and its genres.

### *Form a newspaper reading community*

For first-year, pre-university students, not knowing where to begin reading the newspaper can be a difficult and isolating experience. A greater difficulty is posed when the student has no one to talk to about his/her reading experience. It is thus recommended that a newspaper reading community be formed. That is to say, there should be time set aside in the classroom for students to read the newspaper together. The class could focus on a particular section of the newspaper and begin to talk around a few selected articles. This does not only build confidence, but also provides students with the opportunity to share what they have read. By creating a platform for discussion, the space for critical reading can be further engendered.

### *Reading the familiar first*

Reading the newspaper would not be a difficult task if students were initiated to this ritual by reading something they can relate and identify with. As the exploratory talk has revealed, students prefer to read the “Home” section and “Life!”. This is because they are familiar with the context and do not feel that they are alienated from the textual world. Students would feel more confident about discussing the “Home” news and “Life!” sections, because they would already have the cultural resources and intertextual knowledge to draw on. Getting students to begin thinking how a news item in this part of the newspaper positions them would provide a good starting point for doing critical literacy.

*Questioning textual authority: Re-positioning the text*

From the exploratory talk, it is also evident that students tend not to question the authority of the newspaper. In other words, they tend to believe what the news reports say and take what has been analysed and commented on as “truth”. (See, for example, Segment 3, where a student remarked that he had nothing else to comment on in respect of the articles in the Comment and Analysis part of the newspaper.) What is implicitly suggested is that an expert opinion has been drawn upon, and the reader is positioned as the “informed”, whereas the expert opinion does the “informing”. This relationship is an uneven one and dangerous. Students must be taught what texts do to them and how they are being positioned by the news they read.

*Reading within a critical literacy framework*

Because students have the tendency to summarise their newspaper commentary, it would be useful to provide students with a reading framework. While this framework may appear formulaic, nevertheless, it would serve as a good starting point to question what they read. The following framework, derived from Comber (1993), O’Brien (2001) and Luke (1996), would enable students to switch from a descriptive mode of reading to a more critical mode.

- What issues are re/presented in the article?
- Why has it been written?
- Whose view and in whose interest is the article written?
- Who is disadvantaged?
- Do you agree/disagree with the views expressed?
- Why or why not?
- What people are in the text?
- Who is left out?
- What does the article want me to feel, think and act?

*Learning a meta-language for textual analysis*

Here I am suggesting that learning the vocabulary and analytical tools of critical discourse analysis can help students to unmask the ideologies and representations in news items (Fairclough, 1989, 1995; Luke, 1996; Janks, 1997). There are many ways students can be taught the grammar and CDA toolkit. For example, students can be shown how the use of passification or agentless passives can be used to obscure the agency in a text. For instance, instead of using the active voice in a sentence such as, “Police bashed an Aboriginal”, an agentless passive construction might be, “An aboriginal was bashed”. This has the effect of “hiding” the doer of the action, which otherwise can be read politically as a racist attack! In addition to the use of active/passive construction, in news discourse, nominalisation can also be used to project an objective and “neutral” account of a news item. Nominalisation is said to take place when a process (predominantly a verb) is converted into a noun thereby becoming a state of being (Fairclough, 1989). Using the same sentence earlier as an example of how nominalisation works, a nominalised sentence might read, “The

bashing of an Aboriginal took place...”. This has the effect of leaving the causality and responsibility of the action unclear. What takes place becomes a neutral event. To further unpack how representation and ideology work in a news item, students can also be shown how an event or person is constructed in the news by analysing lexical items (see for example Kamler, 1994; Luke, 1997) and the kinds of metaphors that are used in a text. Fairclough (1989) explains that different kinds of metaphors are invested with different ideological attachments. Last, but not least, an analysis of the use of pronouns can also give students insight into how texts work to position them. If students have a basic mastery of the metalanguage of CDA, they will have valuable tools to read and write critically.

## **CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON THE TEACHER AS RESEARCHER**

Although this article reports the early stage of an action research project, it has given me many insights on teacher research, curriculum design and the contribution of teacher research to professional growth. First and foremost, teacher research can contribute to new definitions of what it means to be a classroom teacher. To me, a classroom teacher must not be presumptuous about how students learn. The teacher’s role should be as one that does not teach by the book or be in the position of dispensing knowledge. Instead, the teacher has to slip into the role of being a researcher, one who constantly engages with his/her students to seek new solutions to new problems that crop up in any aspect of classroom teaching. The bottom line is that the teacher has to be in constant dialogue with students about aspects of their learning in order to find out how best to teach them. One could call this a customised approach to teaching and learning, an approach that stresses teacher-student dialogue.

An important quality of being a teacher-researcher is being and becoming reflective – this also constitutes an important cycle of action research. It is through a reflective inquiry that the teacher-researcher learns and unlearns the complexities of teaching as well as learning. By engaging in exploratory talk with students on how they read the newspaper, I am able to hear and learn, from their perspective, their struggles and difficulties in reading the newspaper. It is through a critical reflection on their classroom exploratory talk that my students and I co-explore the possibilities of resolving some of these difficulties. In this way, critical reflection enables students to re-examine their learning; for the teacher, classroom pedagogy can be reconsidered.

Engaging in classroom research also gives the teacher-researcher the opportunity to re-think curriculum design. An effective curriculum design is one which is not rigid and prescriptive, but is contingent on the needs of the learner. In other words, a top-down approach to curriculum design may overlook the diverse learning needs of students. In the case of this newspaper literacy project, the pedagogical implications have been drawn up in close consultation with student voices. The curriculum design is therefore a bottom-up approach that incorporates the learning needs of the students. Yet this curriculum design is in no way definitive, or the only approach to an effective pedagogy. The pedagogical design has to be flexible enough to shift on the basis of further praxis and further reflection.

While action research can drive curriculum development and design, importantly, it also renews and contributes to professional growth. What I have gained as a teacher-researcher is that I have broken the routine work that governs teaching and the

teacher. I have strayed into the path of researching my own practice. By moving away from the traditional role of the teacher as dispenser, I have repositioned myself as a learner trying to learn and unlearn my own teaching practice. It is only when we take a “critical” look at our own practice that growth in our own teaching can take place. Teacher research or action research, however one wants to call it, can and will contribute to new definitions of what constitutes teaching and what it means to teach.

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## APPENDIX

### Newspaper Literacy: A Survey

The **objectives** of this survey are to find out what you read, why you read the newspaper, and how you read the newspaper. The outcome of this survey will enable teachers to design lessons that will help you to improve your newspaper literacy skills.

Please answer all questions, and give details where appropriate.

1. Your gender
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  
2. Which newspaper(s) do you read? *You may tick more than one box.*
  - a. The Straits Times
  - b. The New paper
  - c. Streets
  - d. Today
  - e. Lian He Zhao Bao
  - f. Other language newspaper
  
3. How often do you read the newspaper?
  - a. Everyday
  - b. Every other day
  - c. Only weekdays
  - d. Only on Saturdays and Sundays
  
4. Where do you usually read your newspaper most of the time?
  - a. In class during GP lessons
  - b. In the school library
  - c. At home
  - d. During my bus/train ride
  - e. On-line @ <http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/>
  
5. Why do you read the newspaper?
  - a. Because I want to be kept informed of what is going on in the world.
  - b. Because I want to improve my English.
  - c. Because it is a requirement for General Paper.
  - d. Because it is daily habit for me.
  
6. What are some problems you have when reading the newspaper?
  - a. No time.
  - b. Don't understand what the articles are talking about.
  - c. The language is difficult.
  - d. Don't know which articles I should focus on.

7. Which section of the newspaper do you read? *You may give more than one answers.*
  - a. Prime News
  - b. World News
  - c. Asia News
  - d. Home News
  - e. Comment and Analysis
  - f. Forum
  - g. Sports
  - h. Life
  - i. Classifieds
  
8. How would you describe the way you read the newspaper?
  - a. Browse only headlines
  - b. Selective reading (i.e. read only interesting articles)
  - c. Look at pictures only
  - d. Read closely and question what I read
  
9. Do you pay attention to the use of language in newspaper?
  - a. No. Is there a need to?
  - b. No. Where got time?
  - c. No. I treat newspaper as “facts” and “truths”.
  - d. Yes, but only when the headline is catchy.
  - e. Would like to, but do not have the specific tools and vocabulary to do so.
  - f. Yes, I am aware that the use of language in the newspaper is selective.
  
10. Do you think a focused lesson how newspaper literacy will help you to read the newspaper more critically?
  - a. Yes, it will be beneficial.
  - b. No, don't waste my time.
  
11. Would you like to be given a template how to write a critical newspaper commentary?
  - a. Yes, it will be of great help.
  - b. No, I think I know how to it.
  - c. No, no use; don't waste time.