

Decoding the language environment

It's not about just English classes, all teachers must speak correctly

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The commentaries of the past few weeks and the recent Ministry of Education (MOE) announcement on how, and by whom, English should be taught in schools, all seem to agree on three areas.

One, that standard English is critical to education as the language of curriculum and to success internationally, as the code of the educated. Two, that standard English (the official, formal language of the English-speaking world) is not the prerogative of the British, Americans or Australians. There are many Singaporeans who use standard English. Three, that books, reading and literature are integral to children learning about, and engaging with, language.

What seems to have been overlooked is the role of the language learning environment in our schools.

The perception that children learn language only when they are being "taught" in an English class is somewhat simplistic. Reggio Emilia in Italy, the acknowledged world leaders in early childhood education, consider environment to be as important to learning as the teacher in a class.

To what extent do Singapore schools constitute standard English environments?

An examination of this requires looking beyond the "teaching" of English in language periods to see whether all subjects, excluding mother-tongue classes, are conducted in standard English. All teachers must constitute models of the standard English we want children to pick up. This must include language used in art studios, science labs or on the football field and so on.

The prime language learning years of children are those before and in pre-school (from birth to six years old). If children are not born into standard English speaking homes, they need exposure to language-rich environments at

kindergarten and in primary school. Yet the minimum requirement for pre-school teachers is only three O-levels, including English, and A-levels for primary school teachers. Are we not setting standards low?

Further, there are "teachers" teaching in primary schools without training for their first year at work.

In kindergarten and primary schools, one teacher usually teaches most subjects, except for the mother tongue. By virtue of conducting classes in English at this critical period in language development, they are all, in fact, English language teachers. But they are not all standard English language models.

In secondary schools, English as a subject is taught by an English language specialist teacher. However, students spend only 10 to 20 per cent of their school day with this teacher. During the rest of their hours at school, they are taught mathematics, sciences, physical education, art and home economics in English. This begs the question: Are these other teachers also good standard English language models?

What we tend to forget is that, regardless of the subject, students are immersed in an English language environment all day, except for mother tongue classes.

So, in fact, they are learning English language almost all day.

To recognise this, hopefully the MOE-led English Language Review Committee's recommendations will include more in-service training in English speech and language for non-English language teachers.

Singlish, born in the 1970s to a second generation of English speakers in Singapore, by the 1990s evolved into common and widespread use. This is healthy, linguistically organic and appropriate, providing Singlish is not the speaker's only code of English.

Essentially, children need two codes of English, with minimal overlap: Standard English for formal purposes and a regional code, Singlish in the case of Singapore, for bonding with local friends and family.

The language environment in our schools is arguably the most critical influence in the life of a pre-school or school-age child. Our learning institutions must work on the use of standard English in every aspect of academic life, paying particular attention to the models of language provided by teachers, to enable every child to develop the necessary language tools for success.

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