

Kay Cheng Soh *Editor*

Teaching Chinese Language in Singapore

Efforts and Possibilities



Springer

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Foreword

The Singapore Centre for Chinese Language (SCCL) was established in 2008 as Singapore's sole government-mandated research organization entrusted to study the teaching and learning of Chinese Language. It is endowed with the following mission:

To provide quality training in pedagogy and research, to enhance the learning of Chinese Language and culture, and to establish Singapore's brand name in Chinese Language teaching.

And, with this mission, the Centre aspires to become:

A Centre of Excellence for the learning, teaching, and educational research of the Chinese Language in a bilingual context.

Over the years since its establishment, the Centre has conducted numerous practice-oriented in-service courses for Chinese Language teachers to meet their updating needs in teaching methodologies. It also mounted master's and doctoral programs for the study of Chinese Language pedagogies in collaboration with The University of Hong Kong. Besides, the Centre published many series of research-based instructional materials for use by students in the classroom and monographs on teaching methodologies for teachers.

The research staff at the Centre has presented a large number of their research outputs at local and international conferences and has their papers published in conference proceedings and learned journals. Some of these have been reproduced together with pre-published ones in the monograph *Teaching Chinese Language in Singapore: Retrospect and Challenges* (Soh, 2016, Springer), to which the present monograph is a sequel.

The present monograph is titled *Teaching Chinese Language in Singapore: Efforts and Possibilities*. It is dedicated to the commemoration of SCCL's 10th anniversary and presents field-tested innovative ideas of curriculum and pedagogies which deserve larger-scale application and further verification in the schools. I hope it would serve as a meaningful reference for the Chinese Language education

research fraternity and inspire young teachers and researchers to take pride in enhancing Chinese teaching and learning through bridging theory and practice.

I am thankful to my predecessor Dr. Chin Chee Kuen for molding the research tradition at the Centre, the researchers for their unrelenting efforts, and Dr. Soh Kay Cheng, our Research Consultant, for undertaking the task of compiling and editing the two monographs. I am confident that the ardent collaboration of them all will leave an impressive mark in the scene of innovative teaching and learning of Chinese Language, not only in Singapore but beyond.

Dr. Suan Fong Foo
Executive Director
Singapore Centre for Chinese Language
Nanyang Technological University
Singapore

Preface

The monograph *Teaching Chinese Language in Singapore: Retrospect and Challenges* (Springer, 2016), as the title implies, first provides a historic perspective and then looks into challenges ahead. The present monograph *Teaching Chinese Language in Singapore: Efforts and Possibilities* is a sequel to it. And, again, as the title implies, the new compilation presents results of recent efforts in solving some instructional problems of teaching Chinese Language and points to possible further developments.

The articles in this monograph are all written by the experienced researchers at the Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University. As their responsibilities, the authors are constantly in search of innovative ideas for teaching Chinese Language more effectively and efficiently. This is a demanding task as Chinese Language is one of the most difficult, if not *the* most difficult, languages on earth. It is made doubly difficult by the complex language environment of the multilingual Singapore and the ever-changing trends in home languages.

The articles are organized into three parts. Part I: *Curriculum and Instructional Materials* includes a keynote speech delivered to international conference and deals with innovative ideas for Chinese Language curriculum, worthy of further empirical verification. There are also thoughts, based on experience and empirical evidence, regarding instructional materials such as textbooks qualities and Chinese characters, with consideration for the students' home language backgrounds.

Part II: *Teaching of Oral and Written Chinese* includes articles on the teaching of oral interaction (which has been emphasized by the most recent review of the Ministry of Education) and the teaching of narrative at the secondary school level. There are also reports on efforts to find effective and efficient methods of teaching written Chinese, a most challenging aspect of teaching the Chinese Language. Topics covered include computer-assisted essay writing, scaffolding, the use of First Language (English) in Second Language (Chinese) essay writing, and strategies used by secondary school students in writing Chinese essays, the use of dramatics and creative pedagogies in teaching Chinese.

Finally, Part III: *Assessment Literacy* presents two reports relevant to assessment literacy, a topic which has come to the fore in the recent years in Singapore. First is a report on a survey of primary school teachers, revealing how much they know and yet to know about this critical aspect of teaching. This is followed by a report on the development and validation of the *Assessment Literacy Scale* for use with teachers.

As for the Appendix, it reports a different kind of research—research into language research reports and ways to enhance the statistics. Data collection is time-consuming in language research; therefore, it cannot be over-emphasized that the usefulness of data should be enhanced and the results properly presented, for the benefits of both the researchers and their audiences.

Although all authors are on the payroll of the Centre, the views expressed in the articles are grounded in the empirical evidence available, within the methodological limitations of the research designs, and the views do not necessarily coincide with the official views of the Centre.

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to organize and edit my colleagues' research outputs into this monograph. I hope it will build a bridge between researchers at the Centre with researchers out there all over the world for the common goal of enhancing the teaching of Chinese Language to learners regardless of their language backgrounds. I must also admit that any errors left in the texts are my responsibility.

Singapore

Kay Cheng Soh

*The original version of the book was revised:
Co-author affiliation has been changed.
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Editor and Contributors

About the Editor

Kay Cheng Soh (苏启祯), Ph.D. (NUS, Singapore). He is currently Research Consultant at the Singapore Centre for Chinese Language. His academic interests include child bilingualism, creativity, world university rankings, and international achievement comparisons. His publications include books on the psychology of learning Chinese Language and various aspects of education.

Contributors

Su Yee Au Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Chee Kuen Chin Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Jiaoyang Cui Peking University, Beijing Shi, China; National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore

Jinghua Fan NUS, Singapore, Singapore

Suan Fong Foo Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Hock Huan Goh Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Cheng Gong Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Siew Hoon Kwek Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore; Academy of Singapore Teachers, Ministry of Education, Singapore, Singapore

Li Li Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Lynn Dee Pua Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Kay Cheng Soh Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Chee Lay Tan Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK; Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Geok Hoon Tan Academy of Singapore Teachers, Ministry Of Education, Singapore, Singapore

Boon Pei Tay Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Hee San Teoh National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore

Jing Yan Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Limei Zhang Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Chunsheng Zhao Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Hong Xia Zhou Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Part I
Curriculum and Instructional Materials

Chinese Language Curriculum in Singapore (1960–2000): From Culture Transmission to Language Application



Chee Kuen Chin

Abstract This article traces the development and modification of Chinese Language curriculum for Singapore schools during the period of 1960–2011. The curriculum modification was influenced by the changing conditions in the social environment and student proficiency in the language. The trend was shifted from culture transmission to language application. This article also reports later development in Chinese Language curriculum in Singapore. As a response to the changing socio-linguistic environment, the curriculum emphasizes clearly on language application in daily life, while paying attention to national and world trends in globalization.

This article discusses the development trail of the Chinese Language curriculum in Singapore since independence. It covers the post-independence period of 50 years (1965–2015). The development of the Chinese Language curriculum in Singapore can be divided into four stages, which include Chinese–English medium schools coexistence (1960s–70s), rigorous education streaming (1980s), complex and diversified curriculum (1990s), and differentiated curriculum (2000s–2010s).

In Singapore, the planning, designing, and implementation of the Chinese Language curriculum were closely associated with the prevailing social, political, and linguistic forces in each period of time. They were the responses to both internal and external driving forces. The curricula were centrally written and released by the relevant divisions in the nation’s Ministry for Education.

The article is previously presented as keynote speech at the International Conference on “Heritage and Creativity: Deepening Language Education Innovation”, Beijing Normal University in 2016 and has been revised since.

C. K. Chin (✉)

Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, Singapore, Singapore
e-mail: cheekuen.chin@sccl.sg

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The article will discuss the main objectives, structures, and language teaching at different stages and make appropriate reference to those driving forces. This article is a factual report on the Chinese Language curriculum implemented over the past five decades or so in Singapore.

Chinese–English Medium Schools Coexistence Stage (1960s–70s)

Singapore became an independent state in 1965. After independence, the government decided to implement a bilingual education policy which required all students to study two languages. In 1968, with the intent of retaining various ethnic groups' language and culture in a multi-racial and multi-cultural society, and to use each ethnic group's mother tongue as an effective channel for transmitting Asian values and traditions, the government made the mother tongue of three main ethnic groups (i.e., Chinese, Malay, and Indian) compulsory subjects in the school curriculum. The mother tongues were also required subjects in all national examinations for primary and secondary school students. The first primary school Chinese Language curriculum was released in 1971, and the first secondary school curriculum was released in 1973. It was the period when both Chinese Medium Schools (CMSs) and English Medium Schools (EMSs) coexisted with CMSs which used Chinese Language as the main medium of instruction while EMSs used English for the same purpose. The Chinese Language curriculum released during this period comprised two syllabuses, one catering for First Language learners in CMSs and the other for Second Language learners in EMSs. They shared several common characteristics elaborated on below.

Ethnic Exclusivity The learners of these two curricula were restricted to ethnic Chinese students. This was in line with the bilingual policy, that teaching in the mother tongue of three ethnic groups in schools was designed to preserve the roots of their cultures as well as to master language skills, irrespective of language courses. Both the 1971 and 1973 Chinese curriculum consisted of two syllabuses. One syllabus catered for Chinese for First Language (L1) learners while the other catered for Second Language (L2) learners. Both curricula arranged objectives into learning phases, with each phase covering two academic standards. The six standards in primary education were divided into three learning phases and the four standards in secondary education were divided into two learning phases. In total, there were five learning phases in the whole foundation of education in Chinese Language.

Use of Essential and Associate Objectives in Curriculum Planning The Ministry of Education (1971, 1973) used two sets of objectives in curriculum planning, the *essential objectives* and the *associate objectives*. The essential objectives were a series of progressive language objectives targeted at the development of three

language skills in different learning phases. The three language skills were oral (listening and speaking), reading, and writing skills. The associate objectives were affective objectives which covered Chinese culture, national education, moral education, care for society, respect for cultures in different ethnic groups, understanding the region, and so on. The associate objectives also served as criteria for the selection of teaching materials. However, assessment of students' Chinese Language ability was only based on the essential objectives.

Use of Essential Objectives The difference between L1 and L2 curricula lay only in the essential objectives (i.e., language objectives). For instance, one of the Phase 3 (primary 5/6) reading objectives required students who learned Chinese as a L2 to be able to “*read short and simple reading materials*” while the comparable objective for L1 learners in the same learning phase required them to read simple story books, Chinese newspapers, and magazines independently (Ministry of Education 1971). For another example, one of the writing objectives for Phase 4 (secondary 3/4) L2 learners was to extract the main points in Chinese articles while the comparable objective for the L1 learners in the same learning phase was to write a summary of Chinese articles (Ministry of Education 1973). The L1 and L2 curriculum shared the same set of associate objectives (affective objectives) in the same learning phases.

Nurture National Consciousness and Promote Traditional Culture The curriculum developed in this stage used substantial amounts of text from various genres as teaching materials to fulfill the educational goal for Chinese Language teaching to nurture traditional culture and values of the East so as to facilitate nation-building in addition to developing language skills.

Teaching materials for the primary school were selected according to the associate objectives spelt out in the syllabus. They were chosen and arranged in a manner compatible with the life experience and psycho-linguistic developmental of primary students. The materials, written in age-appropriate genres like children's songs, poems, stories, fairy tales, were useful in preparing children's good moral and attitude toward life and, at the same time, cultivating their self-discipline and patriotism. It also educated children to respect fellow-Singaporeans' languages and cultures and to be aware of roles and responsibilities for all citizens in the new nation. There was, however, little difference in terms of language used between CMS and EMS teaching materials in lower primary in the 1971 curriculum. The teaching materials began to show differences in the language used at upper primary level, introducing greater complexity in sentence structures, and variety in vocabulary for L1 reading passages.

The teaching materials of the CMS syllabus in the 1973 curriculum were mainly modern Chinese literary works. The CMS teaching materials took the form of an anthology. The selected reading texts in the anthology were organized into two components, namely “*intensive reading materials*” (IRMs) and “*general reading materials*” (GRMs). The IRMs were mainly modern literary works produced by Chinese writers from the twentieth century and some classical literary works by writers or poets from ancient China. Students were introduced to the literary works

to appreciate the beauty of the genre styles and the themes and values behind the literary works. They were also requested to master the linguistic elements of these literary works, including meaning of the vocabulary and word compounds and forms of expressions. The IRMs provided a comprehensive learning experience for students to help them master Chinese Language and understand Chinese culture deeply. The GRMs were more practical pieces used in daily life, commentaries, elementary modern Chinese Language grammars, articles on literature and art, and so on. At the upper secondary level, the GRMs also included *Guoxue*(国学) and basic classical Chinese Language grammars. Content from the GRMs was *not* used in examinations. The GRMs provided students with learning opportunities to broaden their horizon of the Chinese Language beyond examinations. The literary works for the EMS syllabus were rewritten to simplify the vocabulary that suits the language proficiency level of L2 learners.

Emphasize Improving Writing Capacity The 1970s' was a time when fostering Chinese oral skill was not emphasized in the Chinese curriculum. This was closely related to the socio-linguistic environment found in Singapore at that time. In the 70s, the main languages used in ethnic Chinese families were Mandarin or Chinese dialects or both. Mandarin or Chinese dialects were heard and spoken in most Chinese families. As students had already been exposed to their ethnic language at home, the provision of authentic contexts for them to use Chinese Language for interacting was deemed unnecessary. The 1971 and 1973 Chinese Language curricula hence paid more attention to developing students' written capacities.

In general, the main objective of the 1971 and 1973 Chinese Language curricula was to develop students' reading and writing abilities in the language. Both curricula introduced traditional Chinese culture, moral values, and the uniqueness of the local multi-racial and multi-cultural society through the teaching materials. In addition to written language abilities, the Chinese as L1 curriculum included elements of Chinese literature and *Guoxue* that reflected the very strong emphasis on mother tongue-oriented language teaching in the 1970s' curricula.

The overall objectives of Chinese Language curricula in the 1970s' were basically the same for both L1 and L2. However, language proficiency requirements for L1 and L2 were different. The language proficiency gap between L1 and L2 became wider with the increase in class levels. The main differences lay in the domains of reading and writing where writing varied the most.

Rigorous Education Streaming Stage (1980s)

The 1980s' of the twentieth century marked a critical stage in education development in Singapore. Singapore implemented an education streaming system (ESS) in the foundation stage of education (primary and secondary education). The ESS streamed students at two stages, primary 3 and primary 6. Students were streamed into different education tracks according to their streaming examination results in

primary 3 and the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) in primary 6. ESS required all students to study two languages irrespective of their tracks. They all studied English language at L1 level and their mother tongue at either L1 or L2 level, depending on the streams they were enrolled in.

In the primary education stage, students were streamed into Normal Stream (6 years to sit for PSLE) and Extended Stream (8 years to sit for PSLE). In the secondary education stage, based on the overall score they had obtained for PSLE, students were streamed into Special Stream (4 years to sit for Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education (Ordinary level) Examination; GCE 'O' Level Examination), Express Stream (4 years to sit for GCE 'O' Level examination), and Normal Stream (5 years to sit for GCE 'O' Level examination). All streams studied English Language at the L1 level. Students in the Special Stream (overall score obtained in PSLE in top 8–12%) studied Chinese Language at the L1 level. Students in the Express Stream and students in the Normal Stream took Chinese Language at the L2 level. The most significant impact of the ESS on Chinese Language teaching was that students' Chinese Language proficiency were now decided by the education stream that he was enrolled in, not the language medium of the school that he was attending. Language streams that prevailed since independence now ceased and were replaced by education streams. There were a number of important features in the 1980s' curriculum.

Primary School Chinese Language Syllabus (1981) There are two main features in the 1981 primary school syllabus.

First, all education streams achieve the same curriculum goal, and the overall curriculum goal for the 1981 primary Chinese Language syllabus stated specifically that:

The overall goal of Chinese Language teaching is to cultivate students' listening, speaking, reading and writing language capabilities, and instill in them the oriental values that would help in the work of nation building. Upon completion of primary Chinese Language syllabus, students will be able to listen and understand general topics of daily life, speak Chinese fluently, read ordinary children's literature books and local news in brief from Chinese newspaper and write short letters. (Ministry of Education 1981: 1)

In order to achieve this overall goal for students in different streams, the 1981 syllabus classified the curriculum objectives into *general objectives* and *additional objectives*. General objectives were the core objectives that should be achieved by all students irrespective of their education streams. The additional objectives were for students who were taking Chinese as L1, or who were taking Chinese as L2 but possessed a higher level of language proficiency. Both sets of objective were hierarchical in nature where the objectives of lower standards in upper streams could be the objectives of upper standards in lower streams. Table 1 lists some examples of these hierarchical curriculum objectives.

Secondly, it was the first time that a Chinese Language Syllabus included a Chinese Characters List. The rationale was to control the quantity of characters for each class level so that students would be able to acquire vocabularies in texts in a gradual and systematic manner (Ministry of Education 1981). The Chinese

Table 1 Curriculum objectives of primary school Chinese Language (1981)

Language skills	Curriculum objectives	General objectives in standard	Additional objectives in standard
Oral (speaking and listening)	• Use short sentences to converse • Describe a story of more than 100 words • Make a brief speech	Primary 2 (Normal Stream) Primary 6 (Normal Stream)	Primary 7 (Extended Stream)
Reading	• Understand the meanings of the idioms learned	Primary 4 (Normal Stream) Primary 6 (Extended Stream)	
	• Read the general local news		Primary 6 (Normal Stream) Primary 8 (Extended Stream)
Writing	• View the picture(s) provided and write an essay of about 70 words • Understand and apply learned words and phrases • Write an essay of about 200 words with the given topic	Primary 6 (Normal Stream) Primary 7 (Extended Stream)	Primary 3 (Normal Stream) Primary 8 (Extended Stream)

Characters List of the 1981 syllabus specified 1800 basic Chinese characters and another 200 additional characters. In their primary years, students learning Chinese as a L2 needed to master the forms and meanings of 1800 Chinese characters while students learning Chinese as a L1 a total of 2000 Chinese characters.

Secondary School Chinese Language Syllabus (1983) Four key features were observed in the secondary school CL syllabus developed in 1983.

Firstly, inclusion of moral education in language syllabus. The overall curriculum goal of the 1983 syllabus clearly articulated that Chinese Language teaching was to “cultivate students’ listening, speaking, reading and writing capacity while enabling them to recognize and absorb the valuable traditional oriental culture through the language learning” (Ministry of Education 1983: 4). It was thus emphasized that the Chinese Language syllabus should inculcate awareness of patriotism, filial piety, love for others, spirit of serving the society, personal accomplishment, respect for labor, respect for lifestyles, custom and etiquette of different ethnic groups, and so on. The 1983 syllabus reflected the language education view of encompassing moral values in literary texts (文以載道).