

English as a Subject and Beyond: An Ecological Perspective on Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Policy in Singapore

Jason LOH & Geraldine KWEK

Research Overview (50 words):

This paper interrogates how English functions within Singapore's education system through an ecological curriculum lens. Framing English not simply as a subject, but as a sociopolitical linchpin, it analyses policy, curriculum, teacher education, and classroom practice as interconnected layers that sustain Singapore's language education model.

Purpose:

The paper aims to reframe discussions around English in Singapore by examining it as more than a school subject. It considers English as an ideological, policy, and pedagogical construct intricately embedded in Singapore's national identity, economic agenda, and educational goals. Drawing on van Lier's (2004, 2010) ecological perspective and Zein's (2022) ESBE framework, it investigates how Singapore has achieved curriculum coherence from policy to practice, while acknowledging the tensions and trade-offs that accompany such system-wide reform. The paper also considers how this case might resonate regionally across other ASEAN contexts, particularly through a conceptual Four-Layer Curriculum Enactment Model that accounts for macro, exo, meso, and micro influences on English language education.

Methods:

This study adopts a conceptual and documentary analytical approach, synthesising findings and arguments from national curriculum documents, relevant empirical studies (e.g., STELLAR evaluations, classroom research, policy reviews), and prior scholarship on English language teaching in Singapore. It proposes and applies a Four-Layer Curriculum Enactment Model, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, to map the alignment and friction across layers of English curriculum policy, teacher education, pedagogical practice, and sociopolitical expectations. The STELLAR programme serves as a focal case for examining system-wide curriculum enactment in the primary English classroom.

Results / Discussion:

The analysis reveals that Singapore's English language curriculum enactment is shaped by a unique convergence of strong central policy will, consistent curricular vision, and strategic investment in teacher education. The Four-Layer Model illustrates how macro-level imperatives (economic competitiveness, bilingual policy, and national identity), exo-level systems (assessment regimes and teacher qualification standards), meso-level settings (NIE teacher education programmes and curriculum development teams), and micro-level enactments (classroom discourse and pedagogical moves) work in concert to sustain a tightly woven language education ecology.

While the coherence of Singapore's English Language education system is a notable strength, the paper also acknowledges its complexities and ongoing challenges. For instance, STELLAR has been widely implemented across schools, but institutions often adapt the programme to fit their specific contexts. Early reviews suggest that this flexibility, while beneficial, makes continuous professional learning essential for deepening pedagogical practices and fully achieving the programme's objectives. The analysis also recognises that the standard English emphasis in national policy may intersect with students' multilingual realities in dynamic and sometimes unpredictable ways, highlighting the importance of responsive teaching that honours both curriculum intent and linguistic diversity. Rather than undermining reform, these considerations reflect the evolving nature of policy enactment and the importance of continued support for teachers as they navigate curriculum expectations alongside classroom realities.

The Singapore case illustrates how a system-wide ESBE approach can offer structure, coherence, and responsiveness when anchored in sustained policy-practice alignment. The STELLAR case is used to show how research-informed teaching strategies can be scaled through curriculum materials, continuous professional learning, and ongoing teacher preparation. Furthermore, the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore's sole teacher training institute, actively seeks feedback from the Ministry of Education's curriculum developers to enhance its courses. This demonstrates how curriculum–pedagogy–policy feedback loops are deliberately integrated into the system.

Finally, the paper turns outward to consider how the proposed Four-Layer Curriculum Enactment Model may find relevance in other ASEAN settings. Drawing from Zein (2022), it notes that several ASEAN nations experience similar disjunctures between national EL policy ambitions and classroom realities. The model thus offers a heuristic for understanding and perhaps addressing these challenges, not as a prescriptive blueprint, but as an adaptable conceptual tool. Examples from Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines are used to illustrate how similar tensions manifest, and how some innovations parallel Singapore's coordinated approaches.

Conclusion:

Singapore's case reinforces that the question of English in basic education is not simply about what is taught, but how and why it is taught, whose purposes it serves, and whose voices it includes or excludes. Through an ecological lens, this paper argues for a rethinking of English language education as a dynamic system of interdependent layers, each shaping and shaped by the others. Such a perspective invites more nuanced and regionally grounded understandings of English education across Asia.