

Chapter 1

The Past: A Review of Five Reviews

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From 1979 up till the present day, the language policy in Singapore has undergone five major reviews. These include Goh Keng Swee Review (Goh 1979), Ong Teng Cheong Review (Ong 1992), the Ministerial Statement on Chinese Language in Schools (Lee 1999), Report of the Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review (Wee 2004), and the 2010 Mother Tongue Languages Review (Ministry of Education 2010). With regard to the review of the teaching of Chinese language, both the Report of the Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee and Nurturing Active Learners and Proficient Users 2010 Mother Tongue Languages Review Committee provided clear directions toward implementing a pragmatic and functional system. These five reviews have many recommendations on the teaching of Chinese in primary and secondary schools in Singapore.

Goh Keng Swee Review

Education forms a foundation of a country and language takes on the role of capacity-building and imparting cultural values. Singapore's schools had no consistent media of instruction during the pre-Independence and the earlier part of the post-Independence stages. With Independence in 1965, there was a need to have a common working language to facilitate communication between people of all races and enhance our global competitiveness. Standardizing the media of instruction in schools allowed students to learn both English (for social and development purposes) and their mother tongue languages (for cultural identity reasons).

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After the release of the Goh Keng Swee Review, the Singapore education system underwent a major revamp where streaming was introduced in primary and secondary schools. The first three years of primary school focused on language learning, to allow students to build a strong foundation for the English language and mother tongue languages. Students were channeled to three different streams according to their language abilities: EM1 for students taking both English and mother tongue language at the “first language” level; EM2 for students taking English language at the “first language” level and mother tongue language at the “second language” level; and EM3 for students taking English at the “first language” level and mother tongue language for only oral proficiency. To cater to these three groups of learners, an extended course was also designed for students who needed more time to complete the normal curriculum.

In secondary schools, students were channeled to three different streams: the Express Stream for the higher-ability students, the Normal (Academic) Stream for students of lower abilities, and the Normal (Technical) Stream which is more technically oriented to give students a wider educational choice.

The Ministry of Education also revised the then existing curriculum according to the recommendations and published a new syllabus named *Chinese Language Instructional Materials for Primary Schools* in 1979. The primary aim of this new Chinese language syllabus was to enhance students’ interest in the learning of Chinese and develop confident learners who can speak proper Chinese, read extensively, and write fluent sentences and essays. To cater to the less academically able students, a set of supplementary materials named *Special Chinese Language Materials* was designed to stimulate students’ interest in the learning of Chinese using simpler texts and innovative audiovisual resources and language games to improve their reading and writing ability.

The diversification of syllabuses and instructional materials took into consideration the students’ learning abilities and needs where Chinese language was concerned. This also reflects the beginning of curriculum differentiations with different goals for students with different learning capacities and has since been followed through in subsequent curriculum reviews.

Ong Teng Cheong Review

Moving into the twentieth century, the dominance of the English was significant as it became the main working language in Singapore. The majority of Primary 1 students also came from English-speaking families. With constant exposure to the Western culture, the concern that students were losing touch with their culture and heritage was real. It was then up to Chinese language teaching to take on the role of sustaining Chinese cultural heritage among ethnic Chinese students.

This review hopes to improve the Chinese language standards of students by boosting their confidence in the learning of the Chinese to prevent it from causing stress to students due to their lack of ability to cope with the language. Thus, it was

important to create a conducive environment to learn the language. Some suggestions of the Ong Teng Cheong Review were to teach Hanyu Pinyin earlier instead of waiting until primary four and allow approved Chinese dictionaries to be used for essay-writing in examinations. Consequently, *Chinese for Young Learners* which included short stories and rhymes was published.

The review also recommended to rename Chinese at the “first language” level as “Higher Chinese” and Chinese at the “second language” level to “Chinese.” This was to minimize the stigma caused by the names of the subjects, that is, misconstruing “second language” as “second-rate language.” Moreover, the listening component which was easier to score was given a higher weighting in the examinations, and more allowances were also made to allow the top 20 % of the students of a cohort to take Higher Chinese instead of the previous 8 %. The Review also suggested the development of the Language Elective Programme to nurture high-ability students who are proficient in Chinese language.

Ministerial Statement on Chinese Language in Schools

In 1999, 43 % of Primary 1 Chinese students came from English-speaking families, resulting in many students facing difficulty in learning Chinese. To adapt to the changes in the Chinese language environment in Singapore, the emphasis of Chinese language teaching was placed on listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

In a bid to nurture high-ability students in Chinese, the Ministry of Education introduced the bicultural program. Students in The Chinese High School, Nanyang Girls’ School, Dunman High School, and River Valley High School participated in the four-year bicultural programme; their students could choose to take Chinese History and Philosophy lessons in addition to Higher Chinese. When they entered the junior colleges, they would also choose to study Chinese Literature and China Studies.

Nine secondary schools with strong Chinese language and cultural background were then designated as the Special Assistance Plan Schools. Extra financial and other resources were endowed to ensure successful implementation. The first nine Special Assistance Plan Schools were Anglican High School, Catholic High School, Chinese High School, Chung Cheng High School (Main), Dunman High School, Maris Stella High School, Nanyang Girls’ High School, River Valley High School, and St. Nicholas Girls’ School. In 2000, Nan Hua High School was selected to become the tenth Special Assistance Plan School. Junior colleges which offered the Language Elective Programme were Hwa Chong Junior College, Temasek Junior College, and Nanyang Junior College. Having more schools with a stronger Chinese environment would help in efforts to nurture Chinese-proficient students.

The Ministerial Statement of Mr. Lee Hsien Loong, the then Deputy Prime Minister, proposed flexibility in the learning of the Chinese language to take into due consideration the ever-changing Chinese language environment in Singapore. For this, variants of Chinese language curricula were implemented, with Higher

Chinese for students to gain a better understanding of the traditional values and to attain higher standards of Chinese language. At the other end of proficiency, Chinese Language B syllabus was installed for students who faced difficulties in the learning of the language.

To make the learning of Chinese manageable to most students, conceptually difficult texts were removed and a new set of syllabus *Chinese Language for Primary Schools* was implemented in 2001. Selected classical texts were included in the Higher Chinese syllabus to help students gain a better understanding of Chinese history and culture. Schools were also encouraged to organize cultural activities to enhance students' interest and knowledge in traditional Chinese culture.

Mind-mapping and audiovisual resources like audio recordings of passages and educational videos were also listed in the new primary syllabus to make use of technology and encourage student-centered learning in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing so as to create a student-oriented and interactive learning environment for students.

Report of the Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee

In 2004, Wee Heng Tin, the then Director-General of Education, led the Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee. The committee was tasked to find ways to further enhance innovation in Chinese language learning and to enhance future global competitiveness of our people, in line with the vision of Thinking Schools, Learning Nation, which was introduced in 1997 by the then Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong.

This Report placed emphasis on differentiated learning as vast disparities among students' ability to learn the Chinese language were noted. It was also noted that developing communication skills and enhancing students' reading and writing abilities were key to improving students' overall Chinese language abilities. The committee recommended that more opportunities should also be given to students who were interested in Chinese history and culture, especially Higher Chinese students who have good mastery of the language.

The committee also recommended the modular approach to cater to students of different language backgrounds and learning abilities, with the belief that as students have varied language backgrounds, differentiated learning would help by customizing learning suitable for various students. Modifications were therefore made according to the modular approach, introducing three different levels which catered to students' individual learning needs and provided a solution to learning difficulties faced by students in class. Teachers were also given white space time for them to design interesting and innovative lessons for students.

At the 2004 National Day Rally, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke about Teach Less, Learn More. Teaching less will free up class time and engage students

in meaningful learning and prepare them for their future. Interaction between teachers is key to inspiring students and engaging them cognitively.

In line with Teach Less, Learn More, many schools started to introduce meaningful learning activities into their curriculum, like implementing differentiated learning by allowing students to work in groups with teachers as facilitators and introducing an interactive mother tongue language module which allowed students to learn how to converse in mother tongue language.

Placing emphasis on skills-based education in the twenty-first century, the Ministry of Education introduced the PETALS framework in 2005 which comprises five dimensions of practices, namely, Pedagogy, Experience of Learning, Tone of Environment, Assessment, and Learning Content, which promoted engaged learning in the classroom.

Using newspapers as a resource of teaching Chinese language was then also a key part of curriculum as schools attempted to expose students to the language and encouraged students to use it in daily conversations. An example was the use of *Thumbs Up* (a newspaper published specially for young students) for primary school students to enhance their knowledge of current affairs and promoted the use of Chinese language in their daily lives.

The Chinese Language curriculum was also modified to adapt to changes in the twenty-first century. Primary schools were allowed the flexibility of streaming students to EM1 and EM2, and students were allowed to take Higher Chinese or other Chinese curricula according to their language abilities. There was no change to the streaming of students to EM3 and students in this stream were still able to take oral Chinese language. The streaming system in secondary schools remained unchanged but schools could allow students to take different Chinese curricula depending on their language ability, aptitude, and parents' intent.

Nurturing Active Learners and Proficient Users

The latest review of the learning of mother tongue languages in Singapore was done in 2010, and various pedagogies were recommended to accommodate the changes and diversity in the language-learning environment in Singapore. The Report recommends modifications to be made to teaching and assessment modes so that students can use Chinese effectively and school were to provide resources to cater to students of different learning needs so that a conducive environment can be created for students to learn and use the language. In order to help students have better mastery of the language and use the language effectively to communicate and interact with others, oral interaction was introduced in 2011 to complement the listening and speaking components in Primary 1 and 2 textbooks to allow students more opportunities to use the language during lessons.

At the secondary level, spoken and written interaction is also a focus in Chinese curriculum. Listening comprehension is based on real-life scenarios so that students

will be accustomed to using the language and responding to others in the process of learning. The modified syllabus also comprises of self-directed learning and self-assessment components for students to consolidate the knowledge and skills learned during the lesson. *Character and Citizenship Education* was published in 2013 to instill the six core values of respect, responsibility, integrity, care, resilience, and harmony in the students.

The systematic learning process specially designed for Chinese language learners in Singapore and the change in assessment modes aimed at developing students who are able to use the language to communicate and interact with each other. An example is the upcoming change of oral examination stimulus from pictures to videos to be implemented in 2017.

To ensure the effectiveness of the teaching of mother tongue languages in the changing language environment, continuous improvement and innovation are essential to allow Singaporeans to communicate in their respective mother tongue languages and appreciate their cultural roots.

Influence of the Five Reviews on Chinese Language Curriculum in Singapore

After looking through the five reviews, it is encouraging to see that Singapore's education system has been constantly undergoing changes to improve the ability of Chinese language of students in Singapore.

The Goh Keng Swee Review introduced the bilingual policy in Singapore and appointed English as the first language and mother tongues as the second language. At the same time, streaming was also introduced to ensure that students could complete their studies successfully. Thus, Chinese language is used more as a medium of communication and a tool to promote cultural values.

The Ong Teng Cheong Review emphasized the importance of the imparting of rich Chinese culture and traditional values and not just the use of Chinese as a communication tool. However, there should be a change in the use of teaching methods as traditional methods of teaching might not be able to engage students effectively, especially students from English-speaking families.

The Ministerial Statement on Chinese Language in Schools stresses the opening up of opportunities for more students to take Higher Chinese and introducing the Chinese Language B for students who were very weak in the language. This provided opportunities for those who excelled and for those who were not doing as well to learn the language at a level commensurate to their respective abilities. However, at this point, there was still not much change in the teaching methods used in class.

The Report by the Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee did a timely review and revamped the teaching of Chinese language by introducing the modular approach to enhance students' abilities to listen, speak, read, and write and introduced many new types of teaching activities to enhance the effectiveness of Chinese language teaching.

The Nurturing Active Learners and Proficient Users 2010 sets the direction for the teaching of Chinese, teaching students based on their different language abilities with a focus on their oral and written interaction skills, and giving teachers more flexibility to design their lessons and make classroom learning more interesting for students.

We have seen changes in the teaching of Chinese language in Singapore, from the 1979 Goh Keng Swee Review to the 2010 report by the Mother Tongue Languages Review Committee. All these were efforts to ensure that the Chinese Language curriculum is relevant, matches the different needs of students, and ensures that students are engaged in their learning and motivated to study.

In sum, the teaching of Chinese Language in Singapore has to be based on the language abilities of students and cater to their differing needs to give them maximum opportunity to develop their potential. Refinements to the Chinese Language curriculum were made after visiting schools, gathering feedback from teachers, and understanding students' responses toward the existing curriculum. It is hoped that the future reforms to the Chinese Language curriculum in Singapore will be one that is diverse, interesting, and able to prepare our students to face the challenges of the twenty-first century. Moving into the twenty-first century, technology is a tool that we can make use of to create innovative and engaging lessons to give students opportunities to learn language-related knowledge and retain traditional cultural values.

Having reviewed the five Reviews, the present writer would like to make the following practical suggestions relevant to the design of Chinese Language instruction:

1. The curriculum is the most important component of Chinese teaching as it determines the content that is to be taught. The curriculum should be able to stimulate students' interest in learning and their responses toward the learning process. Students should be able to gather knowledge, learn techniques, and use the language effectively when interacting in real-world situations.
2. The number of vocabulary terms taught in each lesson should not be more than what students can cope with so that teachers will be able to focus on other aspects of the lesson and not put undue stress on the students.
3. Themes used in the syllabus should be broad-based and relevant to students' daily lives so that they will be able to relate to what they are learning.
4. Hanyu Pinyin should be included for Chinese words that students are unfamiliar with, especially for the lower primary oral syllabus as it will help students to identify unknown terms when they are doing their oral practice.
5. Emphasis should be placed on the speaking component to allow students to make use of the language in their daily lives and use Chinese to interact with others effectively.
6. The curriculum designed should be diverse and interesting to engage students. Apart from the usual writing practices, interactive tasks should be included in the curriculum to engage students of different learning aptitudes. Examples are activities that can be completed independently and collaborative activities and tasks that require the ability to analyze, classify, and consolidate information.

7. There should be practice questions of differing standards included in the syllabus so that teachers can use the resources flexibly and cater to the needs of different students. Students can also build up their confidence in the language slowly as they attempt tasks of increasing difficulty.
8. Teaching packages and oral resources should be produced for teachers, including audiovisual, multimedia, and ICT resources.

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