

REPORT on the 1st SAAL Graduate Seminar Series

10 November 2006
National Institute of Education

CONTENTS

REPORT on the 1 st SAAL Graduate Seminar Series	2
On choosing a research topic	5
A Survey of the Current Research on Language Norming in Singapore	8
Abstracts (Plenary keynote addresses)	12
Conferences	14

SAAL Quarterly is under the editorship of Dr. T. Ruanni F. Tupas, Dr. Lawrence Jun Zhang and Mr. Arzami Salim. Please address your correspondence and contributions to: Dr. T. Ruanni F. Tupas (elctr@nus.edu.sg) Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore: 10 Kent Ridge Crescent Singapore 119260.

The first of the SAAL Graduate Seminar Series: '**For Postgraduate Students by Postgraduate Students**' was launched on Friday 10 November 2006, attended by 14 post-graduate students and some of their supervisors. Prof. Anne Pakir and Dr Lubna Alsagoff were also present during the start of the seminar to show their support and encouragement. In keeping with the idea that this should be a student-initiated series, four panelists came forward to share their personal journeys on, 'Deciding on your research topic and design'. They were Aileen Salonga, Rachel Tan, Christine Xavier and Bai Rui.

After brief introductions, Dr Ee Ling Low highlighted the main aims of SAAL in introducing this new Seminar Series for our young researchers, an initiative generated by a request found in the recent questionnaire survey conducted by SAAL.

Each of the panelists touched on aspects relating to concerns that motivated them in deciding on a research topic from their own particular perspective, followed by a general discussion among the audience of the main issues that emerged. These are summarized below:

Aileen Salonga was the first panelist to kick-start the seminar. She shared her experience about how she changed topics because of her own academic development (i.e. in the process of attending particular modules, reading influential research such as Deborah Cameron's work, and also her discussions with her supervisor). In adopting a discourse analysis framework to investigate 'call centre discourses', her final choice of topic, she expressed her intention to use an interdisciplinary approach to her research.

Discussion points that emerged:

- Change in topic is a normal part of the research process and can be viewed positively.
- To start with, students are often inclined to come up with grandiose plans that may eventually need to be tempered by reference to what is feasible, given the realities on the ground.

Next, **Rachel Tan** described how her research was a case of first coming up with a rather broad focus, which was subsequently narrowed down through discussions with her supervisor, and then broadened again to embrace a 'pet' research area of hers, i.e. intelligibility. In her case, this would take the form of a comparison between the accents of Malaysian and Singaporean undergraduate students. She mentioned how important it is to be able to obtain easy access to diverse subjects in gathering suitable data. She also shared her personal journey of juggling between having a family with two kids and traveling weekly down to NIE from Kuala Lumpur to complete her modules.

Discussion points that emerged

- A major concern that supervisors have, has to do with the feasibility of the topic and whether it would enable students to complete the study in a timely fashion.
- The benefits and disadvantages of reading modules as part of the PhD requirement: A general consensus was that modules are useful for those with an academic 'gap' in their career and those who were out to work, start families, etc. before returning to do their PhD.
- The concept of academic gap was also discussed and the struggles faced therein, as also the flip side of the coin - i.e. how tired and burnt out one can be in studying non-stop from Primary One to PhD, the lived experience of Dr Ee Ling Low, as it turned out to be.

Christine Xavier followed by sharing her experience about her choice of topic: 'Looking at how Universities Brand Themselves Globally'. She raised the issue of how, as in her own experience, returning to the academic world after a long gap of about 10 years could pose its own challenges. In her case, she had experienced a slackening of interest in her initial choice of topic: 'the construction of female offenders in local crime reports', an interest which her brief stint in journalism had created, but which she found she was unable to sustain. In researching her current topic, although ideally she would like to make a comparison between universities in the 'core' and 'periphery' countries in relation to their discourses of 'branding', she is also aware of the constraints in gaining access to the diverse and multiple sources of data required for such an investigation. She is therefore cautious not to be too ambitious in terms of the scope of her topic, and the need to take into account aspects such as the manageability of field work and easy access to data. Christine's mention of having written two papers on the subject of her thesis

brought to the fore the importance of publishing – both during and after one's PhD studies.

Discussion points that emerged

- The possibility of writing and publishing papers in tandem with conducting one's research study was discussed, as a means of providing useful training in writing the research report as well as increasing confidence in one's research capabilities.
- The advantage of publishing immediately after completion of the PhD was also pointed out. This would guarantee a steady stream of publications at the start of one's career in teaching, which may involve a lot of preparation time in the initial years.
- The significance of publication as a requirement for new appointments as Assistant Professors was also underlined.

Finally, **Bai Rui** emphasized the need to recognize the many steps and strategies that need to be adopted in deciding on one's thesis topic and how they often form a kind of cycle. He provided a systematic outline of these steps and discussed how they helped him in narrowing down his research topic:

- (i) Checking out your supervisor's research areas
- (ii) Matching your own interests with that of your supervisor
- (iii) Surveying the literature and establishing a research gap / niche
- (iv) Contextualizing the research gap (e.g. in his case, research on writing instruction in Singapore)
- (v) Refining your topic

At the end of the seminar, participants agreed that the organization of a seminar for graduate students by SAAL such as this is useful and serves a felt need. They highlighted the fact that since there are many different areas of specialisation within NUS/ELL (i.e. Theatre and Literature Studies, Language and Discourse) a wider support system such as this one was felt to be a useful platform. It was agreed that the participants continue to meet once in a quarter, with the intent of forming a lively, enthusiastic and actively supportive 'community of practice' for novice researchers in Singapore.

As a follow-up to this seminar, the topic identified for the next session was, '**Sharing your research proposal**', with NUS as the proposed venue.

Note: The topics referred to here are broad areas of study and not to be taken as formal titles of theses

SAAL Graduate Seminar Series

On Choosing a Research Topic

Aileen O. Salonga
National University of Singapore

I would like to start off by saying that the research topic I am working on now is actually different from what I started with when I applied to the PhD program in NUS. My previous topic centred on the notion of agency as it manifested in the narratives of female sex workers or prostituted women in the Philippines. The topic I have right now deals with call centre discourse in the Philippines. In a sense, I am still dealing with the notion of agency, because part of what I want to explore in this new topic is whether or not call centre agents or customer centre representatives have agency over their linguistic performance of the so-called call centre script and style. I started off with this information because, for the most part, I will be talking about the reasons for why I changed my research topic, and consequently, how this has impacted the design of my research. In the end, I hope to show that the factors that influenced my decision to change topics are also the same factors that I believe need to be considered when one is in the process of deciding on a research topic and design.

The first thing I took into consideration when I decided on my research topic was whether or not I could sustain interest in it. I know that ‘interest in a topic’ is not generally viewed as an academic reason, nor is it a specific requirement, but I think it is very important that one be interested enough in one’s topic, especially on the PhD level, because one will be spending a huge chunk of one’s life with it—at the very least, three years, at the most, who knows? I remember what my MA independent study advisor told me before when I could not decide on which topic to do. He said, “You should choose a topic to which you could commit; if you can’t commit to it, then it’s not going to work.” Another teacher told me, “Your topic should be one you can sleep with night after night. You may think of kicking it out from time to time, but you never do, because deep inside, you can’t really part with it.” It is perhaps kind of scary to start thinking of one’s PhD topic as a living, breathing entity with which one has a relationship, but then again, after all the stories I have heard from people in varying stages of their postgraduate work, I think there is some, if not, a lot, of truth to this.

For my part then, I have chosen to be in the field of language and gender, because ultimately, this is where my heart, my academic heart, that is, lies. My interest is especially in representations of gender and the notion of agency—that is, how femininity and masculinity are constructed and negotiated in discourse, and what kind/s of and how much agency individuals, especially women, have in view of societal structures and institutional constraints. In a sense, this means that even if I have changed topics, my new topic is still within the same range as the old one, because even if the data I am examining has changed, I am still concerned with the same issues of agency and structure. What I am saying is that while I can change the specific details of my research topic, I would still find myself within the field of language and gender studies. I cannot imagine, at this point, positioning myself anywhere else.

Then again, interest in one’s topic is never really enough, so while it is an important consideration for me, I know that other things have to be taken into account as well. Of course, I am not saying that I am no longer interested in my original topic; however, I realized that pursuing this topic poses a number of problems which I may not be able to overcome given the time within which I have to finish the study. The first issue concerns access to data. As I mentioned earlier, I was supposed to examine narratives of female sex workers or prostituted women in the Philippines. Earlier on, I was given access to a database of interviews with these women conducted by a Philippine NGO. Upon examining the database, however, I found that the interviews were rather outdated as they were conducted in the mid- to late-1980s. The background information on the informants and on the nature of the interviews was also very minimal, which would make it very difficult for me to contextualize the interviews. Without enough contextualization, my analysis would be severely limited. I thought of doing my own interviews, but I was not sure where to find my informants, and if I did manage to find them, I was afraid they would not want to be interviewed. Moreover, my contact person in the NGO that allowed me access to the database had also resigned, so it became even more difficult to get access to the data I needed. Given how prostitution is such a delicate topic, NGOs working with women in this line of work are often wary and suspicious of academics who want to research on the topic. Not having a contact was therefore an additional concern.

While I still have data issues in my new topic, they can be worked out. Given the rise of the call centre industry in the Philippines in the last few years, there is a wide range of discourses available on it. There are also a greater

number of people willing to be interviewed, and they are easy to find, because, many of them I already know—friends, former colleagues, former students—and they are also able to refer other call centre agents or call centre representatives. Given the buzz on the call centre industry in the Philippines today and the industry's situatedness within globalization processes, this topic also has currency. I feel it is easier for me to show its relevance to the work being done in the various fields of discourse and globalization studies, women and work, and critical analysis of discourse, other fields besides language and gender studies which fuel my research interests.

From the very beginning, I have been told that PhD work should be creative and original, that it should offer something new to the academic disciplines with which it aligns itself. Since not a lot has been written on call centres and call centre discourse, both in general and in the Philippines in particular, these phenomena being rather new, I believe this topic will allow me to position my work as groundbreaking—at least, in the context of Philippine sociolinguistic and feminist linguistic research. The second issue for me then is currency and significance, which I have to say I also found rather difficult to establish in the case of my previous topic.

Finally, I think the works that I have been reading over the past two years, the modules I have taken, and the discussions that I have had with my professors have also influenced my decision to change topics. An article on the feminized style of call centre talk written by Deborah Cameron was largely responsible for how I conceptualized my new research topic. The module on discourse and globalization I took last semester gave me a better grasp of globalization and its impact on discourse and vice versa, which then gave me a framework for situating call centre discourse, specifically its supposed feminized style, within more global arrangements of discourse and gender. My supervisor has helped me quite a lot in defining the notion of agency in the context of the feminized style used in call centres. What all these mean, I suppose, is that my own academic growth as brought on by my interactions and experiences within the university has also helped me in figuring out my new research topic

In the end, I think that choosing a research topic is affected by different factors. While interest in the topic is a major concern for me, I know that other factors need to be considered as well. In my case, access to data, the significance of the study and my own learning in the process of reading and writing have been the more crucial ones.

A Survey of the Current Research on Language Norming in Singapore

Organized by: Singapore Child Language Special Interest Group

Date: 14 October 2006 (Saturday)

Time: 9.00am – 11.30am

Venue: NUS, AS5/02-02 (Video Room 1)

Opening of the 2nd SCLSIG Meeting:

The second meeting of the Singapore Child Language Special Interest Group (SIG) was convened by Dr. Madalena Cruz-Ferreira in October this year. Its 25 participants come from diverse backgrounds but share a common interest in child language research. Among the participants were teachers, researchers, students and speech-language therapists.

The meeting commenced with a welcome address by Dr. Cruz-Ferreira. The first meeting had taken place one year ago, and the theme for this year's meeting was decided upon then. While the past year's meeting had offered an outline of child language research in Singapore, the second meeting related more specifically to the issues surrounding current language norming efforts in Singapore. Language norming is particularly crucial with the new Masters of Arts degree in Speech Language Pathology jointly offered by NUS' Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine set to take off in January next year. In her opening address, Dr. Cruz-Ferreira also suggested a couple of themes that can possibly be taken up at the next meeting. The first of these is child multilingualism, which is especially important in light of Singapore's language environment. The second is school language or languages, those spoken by children and those taught by teachers. Feedback and other suggestions are welcome on this matter.

Dr. Cruz-Ferreira continued to highlight the recent activities of the SIG, which now comprises 80 members. An online network (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sclsig>) has been created in a bid to keep most of the SIG's activities online and accessible. This network will also allow members of the SIG to stay connected and engage in online discussion on issues of child language research. Members are to feel free to propose discussion topics or request for information on the network.

Other than the online network that has been set up, the *Bibliography of Child Language Research in Singapore* (Cruz-Ferreira, 2006) was updated recently in August. It has been made available on the website of the SAAL (<http://www.saal.org.sg/sigsmadalena1.html>), an organization which has been exceptionally supportive of the SIG and its activities. In addition, it is now accessible internationally, through incorporation in the CHILDES bibliography (<http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/bibs/singapore.html>). There are plans to update the *Bibliography* annually and Dr Cruz-Ferreira requested that researchers, project supervisors and students alike, keep her updated on their research efforts where child language is concerned. Besides current research, past research in other languages such as Malay, Mandarin or Tamil are also welcome. All notices of research should include English abstracts.

The meeting then proceeded with presentations by Dr Cruz-Ferreira and invited speakers.

Presentations

1. “Current Research on Language Norming in Singapore” by Dr. Madalena Cruz-Ferreira, Department of English Language and Literature, NUS

Dr. Cruz-Ferreira highlighted that the theme of the meeting was “language norming” and not “child language norming”. As reason stands, it does not make sense to research child language without knowing the target language(s) to which children are exposed. Norming will allow researchers to understand how children develop in the context of the local language environment.

The main thrust of this presentation concerned data, method and purpose. Where data is concerned, norms can be descriptive or prescriptive. At present, research is being produced from both the National Institute of Education and the National University of Singapore, with the former churning out the bulk of research. The problem however lies with the fact that most available research is concerned with the prescriptive sense of norming, because it has been produced for pedagogical reasons. There is thus impetus for the study of data to establish how people actually speak and not just how they are taught to speak. Dr. Cruz-Ferreira then postulated that there might be a wealth of invisible data for norming from the experiences of speech-language therapists who have to assess for errors. However, relevant publications cannot be found and Dr. Cruz-Ferreira hopes that speech-language therapists will come forward to share their data.

Next, methodology is also an issue for norming. Sometimes, language assessment models are imported in order to define norms. Problems can arise from importing these models across the board. For example, it is often difficult and inaccurate to translate assessment tools. Thus, models which have to be imported must be developed in actual practice, and not in theory only.

Finally, to consolidate the purpose of finding out more about child language in Singapore, Dr. Cruz-Ferreira proposed to set up a collection of publications or an online newsletter for members to share short articles, so that everyone could be kept informed of current trends.

The audience then raised points about the feasibility of certain assessment tools being translated across different languages and the vast potential in child language research, considering the diverse language environments children in Singapore are exposed to. The issue of importing assessment tools across different languages and cultures was to be brought up again in later presentations.

2. “Infant Vocabulary Norms in Singapore” by Dr. Tan Seok Hui, Department of Psychology, NUS

In the second presentation, Dr. Tan Seok Hui shared with the audience her ongoing study that aims to establish vocabulary norms for Singaporean infants and toddlers who are acquiring English, Malay and/ or Mandarin.

Dr. Tan’s study makes use mainly of the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventories (MCDI) (Fenson et al., 1993). The MCDI is a parental report checklist that is useful in measuring vocabulary in infants and toddlers. The version that is used for 8 to 16 month-old infants is different from the one used for toddlers who are 16 to 30 months old. Both have been adapted for use in Singapore. The study also tries to incorporate the investigation of speech samples based on observations of the children at play with their caregiver(s), so as to test the validity and reliability of these parental report checklists. Data obtained from the MCDI will then be used to examine theoretical issues. Among these are whether infants exhibit noun bias in their development (cf. Choi & Gopnik, 1995; Tardif, Shatz & Naigles, 1997) and whether they have a similar proportion of translation equivalents in their vocabularies that are similar to those that have been reported in earlier studies (e.g. Pearson, Fernandez & Oller, 1995).

Thus far, Dr. Tan's study aims to investigate trends among the local languages of English, Malay and Mandarin. There is currently not enough data for it to incorporate Tamil. There are plans to collect data from 80 monolingual children and 80 multilingual children. However, Dr. Tan reported that there are not enough informants to make up that number. This is especially so in the 8 to 16 months-old range. Dr Tan consequently appealed to the audience who may have very young children or who may be in contact with people who have very young children to aid her in recruitment efforts.

From the data that have been collected up to now, more than 90 percent of the children come from homes that speak English predominantly. Bilingual children do not appear to have smaller productive MCDI vocabulary than their monolingual counterparts. Other than that, among children whose caregivers' predominant language is English, a higher production of nouns by the caregiver corresponds to a higher production of nouns by the child, and a higher production of verbs by the caregiver corresponds to a higher production of verbs by the child. However, when all data are considered together, there does not seem to be a distinct noun bias observed.

Several issues were raised in the course of the presentation. The role of diary studies was discussed and Dr Tan expressed that the MCDI and diary studies can be complementary. The MCDI is a snapshot of children's development, albeit an accurate one, while diary studies might be more comprehensive but tedious and unrealistic to carry out for a large number of children. Dr. Susan Rickard Liow and Dr. Cruz-Ferreira also communicated their individual stances on translation equivalence. The general notion was that the concept of translation equivalence is worth considering but has to be taken with a pinch of salt. The third issue that was then brought up was that of whether nouns and verbs are indeed conceptually different to children. Dr. Steven Graham conveyed that they may not be that different because children also use nouns to communicate actions. Finally, Ms. Joyce Lew and Ms. Alison Cannon stated that the type of caregiver-child interaction has bearings on the way children develop linguistically. The factors that they put forth separately were cultural background and maternal age. These are matters that can possibly be taken into consideration in this study and future ones.

For the complete report, please go to <http://www.saal.org.sg/sigs.html>.

Lee Huiying Nala
Department of English Language and Literature
National University of Singapore

ABSTRACTS (Plenary Keynote Addresses)

The 15th International Symposium and Book Fair on English Teaching
Taipei, Taiwan, 10-12 November 2006

Border Crossing: Challenging and Transcending Boundaries in Teaching

Chng Huang Hoon
Department of English Language & Literature
National University of Singapore

I was schooled in the old ways—the teacher taught and I learnt, by paying attention, by rote, by hook *and* by crook. I now teach in a vastly different way—through negotiation, collaboration and empowerment. In the old days, learning used to be confined within classroom walls. Today, learning, and teaching have become increasingly borderless.

This paper seeks to explain the various senses in which my own teaching has crossed borders, and the efforts I have made to challenge and transcend institutional boundaries. First, in challenging and redefining classroom space, I will explain how my teaching has overcome to a large extent the physical constraints of four-walled classrooms and moved into the virtual spaces of electronic forum and chatrooms. Second, in transcending the rigidity of time-tabling schedules dictated by a 12-hour clock, I will detail how my teaching has evolved into teaching not just anywhere, but has also made real the possibility of teaching anytime.

Third, border crossing also happens as we increasingly find ourselves navigating national borders and time zones in our teaching. In my work, I have crossed over from Singapore to The Netherlands (via video-conferencing), and more recently to Australia (through online interactional student exchange), all with the help of electronic resources.

While all of the above deal with physical barriers imposed by space and time, a fourth kind of border—an ideological and mental border—may prove more of a challenge. This more formidable border crossing involves overcoming age-old power structures that depicted the teacher's position as unchallengeable and the student as necessarily accepting what is taught. In

explaining these different senses of border crossing, the underlying message I want to impart involves the idea that crossing borders requires not just resources but creativity, willingness, and commitment on the part of teachers to break down various kinds of barriers we encounter in our classrooms.

In speaking about the fourth type of border crossing above, I will briefly introduce my approach to teaching—collaborative teaching and learning—an approach I have developed and fine-tuned over the years. In a nutshell, collaborative teaching and learning dictates that rote learning has to give way to teacher-student negotiation; mere student attentiveness in classroom has to be coupled with a form of mutual respect for one another.

In today's world of constant change, my claim is that as we deal increasingly with students who think nothing of crossing spatial and temporal borders, as teachers, it is incumbent upon us not only to be innovative teachers who are well-versed in our own disciplines, but also to show ourselves equally at ease in crossing borders, and to challenge, transcend, innovate, and ultimately transform various kinds of boundaries that place restrictions on our teaching and on our students' learning.

*The Annual CELEA (China English Language Education Association)
International Conference: Innovating English Teaching:
Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Other Approaches*
Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou City, Guangdong
Province, China, 11-13 November 2006

The Ecology of Communicative Language Teaching: Reflecting on the Singapore Experience

Lawrence Jun Zhang
National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

In this paper I will address the ecology of communicative language teaching (CLT) by reflecting on the Singapore experience. I will review how CLT was conceptualized, advocated and implemented in stages/phases as reflected in the different English Language syllabuses in Singapore. In anchoring the discussion against a historical backdrop and examining the ecology and evolution of English language teaching in Singapore, I will focus on two English Language syllabuses published in 1991 and 2001 respectively. I will

then illustrate the operational issues in reference to the two syllabuses, with a focus on the ecology of such pedagogical innovations and how the ecological nature of CLT is mirrored in the syllabuses. I will highlight issues such as mismatches between what the syllabus documents stipulate and what practitioners bring into English language classrooms and how successful implementation can be achieved when staff development is provided timely.

By redefining CLT and dispelling misconceptions of it, I will reiterate what CLT is and what CLT is not. I will also discuss theory-practice connection and the integration issue that is most often debated in the teacher-education literature. I will conclude with a discussion of possible implications of the Singapore CLT experience for ELT in China.

CONFERENCES

The Teaching and Learning Of English In Asia: Exploring New Frontiers

Holiday Villa, Langkawi, Malaysia, 14 - 16 June 2007

The Faculty of Communication and Modern Languages, Universiti Utara Malaysia is pleased to announce and invite all scholars to participate in its 2nd International Conference. Aptly themed The 2nd Biennial International Conference on the Teaching and The Learning of English: Exploring New Frontiers, the thrust among others is to sustain the enthusiasm and popularity that English is currently enjoying. In short the aims of the conference are to enable you:

1. To share experiences and develop scholarship on English language education besides forming educational partnership, in the teaching and learning of English.
2. To establish collaboration in research on the teaching and learning of English.
3. To establish a global network of scholars and managers of English language education in Asia.

Website: <http://staf.uum.edu.my/tleia2/index.html>

**Thailand TESOL/Pan-Asian Consortium
International Conference 2007**

*Beyond Boundaries:
Teaching English for Global Communication in Asia*
Thailand TESOL, Bangkok, 26-28 January 2007

With the increasing pressures on Asian countries to participate in global economic, social, educational and recreational activities, English has become a truly international tool of communication. In most, if not all countries across the Asian region, the importance of English has grown considerably, and the traditional view of English as a foreign Language (EFL) is being replaced with a more functional and often critical view of English as an international language.

This view of English as a global language for citizens from a myriad of cultures, continents, countries and communities carries with it some core assumptions and questions about just what it is that English language teachers are teaching in Asia, and for what purposes, and what it is their learners need to learn to do in English on a more global level. These assumptions and questions centre on core issues such as:

- the relationship between culture and English as a global language, and therefore the role of culture in ELT
- the uses of English within a country and among countries, and therefore the kinds of curriculum and syllabus designs appropriate for developing language proficiency
- the accepted varieties and standards of English in particular contexts, and therefore the models of language brought to the learning contexts

Website: <http://conf2007.thaitesol.org/>

PALA 2007 Annual Conference in Japan

Style and Communication

Kansai Gaidai University, Hirakata, Osaka, Japan, 31 July - 4 August 2007

How does language vary between different types of discourse or different contexts? How do writers or speakers exploit language variation to communicate their intended messages? What contribution do linguistic forms or stylistic variation make in interaction? The Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA) looks forward to receiving proposals considering the multi-dimensional relationship between style and communication in all domains of language, as well as proposals which reflect the established range of approaches to stylistic research.

Website: <http://www.pala2007.com>