

The Use of English Textbooks for Teaching English in Upper Secondary Normal (Technical) Class in Singapore: A Survey of Teachers' Beliefs

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Abstract: This paper explores an insider perspective on teachers' beliefs in the use of English textbooks for teaching English in the upper secondary Normal (Technical) (henceforth NT) classroom in Singapore using Burns' (1996) model of contextual levels of influences. The NT stream in Singapore is a form of 'vocational' pathway; pupils streamed into the NT classes are considered to be academically 'weakest' amongst all three streams in the secondary level. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, it identifies factors influencing teachers' perceptions toward the roles textbook plays in language teaching and learning. The findings are further used to infer the relationship between teachers' use of textbooks and their attitudes towards the less 'academically-inclined' NT pupils. The results show that teachers' beliefs are related to factors that exist within and beyond the classroom. Among the factors identified, those related to the institution and classroom tended to have a greater influence in the way teachers used their textbooks.

Besides pointing to the need for further research, the discussion brings out implications for curriculum and assessment review in NT stream in Singapore. In view of this, there remains a need for the NT English curriculum developers to further review the current English syllabus, teaching and assessment methods in order to help NT students achieve proper qualifications in English.

Introduction

How teachers' theoretical beliefs influence instructional practices is a repeated theme in English Language Teaching (ELT) (Burns, 1992; Pennington et al, 1996; Lockhart, 1996; Yim, 1993). Unlike traditional perspectives which regard teaching as the mastery of skills prescribed by models of educational theory, research into teachers' theoretical beliefs views teaching as a cognitive activity (Lockhart, 1996) in which teachers actively construct a personal theory, based on their professional and practical knowledge as well as their values and decision making abilities, that works for them in teaching. In the words of Prabhu, these personal theories are

....a significant factor at play in the classroom - a factor more powerful than the need to conform to a prescribed curriculum or prescribed method because it is a personal, intellectual stake for the teacher, comparable to a sense of security, which is personal, affective... (1988: 230)

Zeichner and Liston (1996:5) have argued that such 'voices and insights' of teachers should be acknowledged by the educational establishment for contributing to the knowledge base in areas of educational innovation. In view of this, studies of teachers' theoretical beliefs in classroom practices can certainly contribute to a wider process of reflection and discussion

¹ A note on the authors: Rachel Lee carried out the research for this paper. She has first hand experience of English language teaching in Singapore secondary schools. Rachel and Ann-Marie worked together closely on the development of the analysis and the writing of the paper.

about how the teaching and learning of English is constructed in different education systems and cultures.

This paper explores the perceptions of English teachers towards the use of textbook in teaching English to their NT students and infers a relationship between their opinions towards students and their use of textbook. The paper first sets the context for the study by reviewing recent studies on teachers' theoretical beliefs in the area of classroom instruction. This is followed by a brief description of the education system in Singapore, particularly focusing on the technical-vocational pathway, known as the Normal Technical (NT) stream, which constitutes the immediate working environment of the subjects of the study. The findings of the study are then presented, discussed and interpreted using Burn's (1992) model of intercontextual levels of influences. In conclusion, it is argued that the textbook cannot dictate the role of the teacher. Rather the teacher, guided by his/her theoretical beliefs, decides the material which suits the needs of the learners.

The Teacher, Textbook and Learner: A Working Relationship

According to Richards (1998a), many textbooks used in the classroom embody the curriculum themselves. They reflect the objectives of the language programme, the kind of syllabus used, the skills being taught and the methodologies espoused, and might be seen to function as a 'mediating object' between the teacher and learner (Littlejohn and Windeatt, quoted in Johnson 1989:155). For teachers, they offer a framework of guidance and orientation (Hutchinson and Torres, 1994). For learners, they are perhaps the most important source of language input apart from contact with the teacher.

Brophy's (1982) research, which examined how teachers teach using textbooks in elementary schools in the United States, discovered that elementary school teachers did not teach strictly by their textbooks. Instead they adapted particular curriculum to the needs of their students. In particular, experienced teachers, who are comfortable in their knowledge of the subject matter may feel confident in treating textbooks 'merely as collections of topics from which to pick and choose' (1982:11). Such expertise will not be available to the less experienced teachers who may then depend heavily on the textbook for guidance.

In the English as a Second Language (ESL) context in Hong Kong, Richards and Mahoney (1996) have explored teachers' beliefs and practices in the use of textbooks with a survey of ESL teachers in secondary schools. Although their findings show that there was a high rate of textbook use as teachers believed that textbooks could help them to teach English efficiently, Richards and Mahoney found that none of the teachers observed taught exclusively from the textbook, and none devoted the entire lesson to material from one textbook. More importantly, Like Brophy (1982), Richards and Mahoney thought that teachers were looking at textbooks critically and maintaining a reasonable independence from them.

In Malaysia, Chandran (2003) has investigated teachers' feelings, beliefs, values and perceptions with regards to their use of newly prescribed textbooks using a communicative syllabus in English and Malay medium schools. Her study revealed that teachers did not really use the prescribed textbooks provided. Instead they preferred to use commercially published materials. This had to do with their concern that the textbooks did not expose the learners to examination-type questions. This shortcoming was overcome by the use of examination-type exercises in the commercially published materials.

Teachers' Beliefs and Levels of Contextual Influence

Burns (1992) has carried out research into the relationship between teachers' belief systems and the dynamics of classroom interactions. She found that teachers' beliefs are extremely complex and compounded by a series of different and inter-related levels of influence which go beyond the level of the classroom. She identifies three major contextual levels which operate interactively, both across and within levels, to influence teachers' beliefs (see figure 1). Burns' model is particularly useful for discussing the findings of this study in that it provides a framework for better understanding the influence of social norms existing in and beyond the micro-level of the NT classroom.

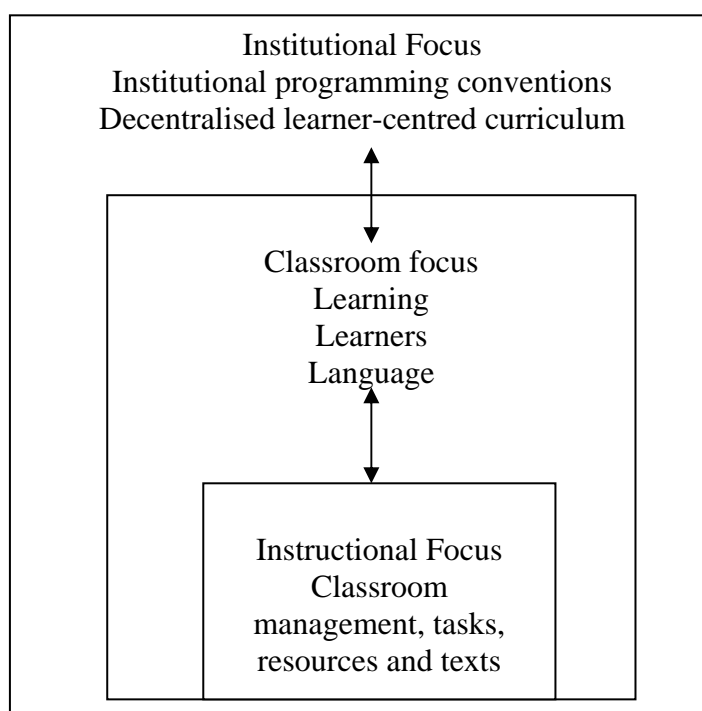


Figure 1: *Burns' Model of Contextual Levels of Influences*
(Source: Burns, 1992, cited in Prospect, 7(3), pp56-66)

As shown in figure 1, the first level is the institutional focus. This concerns the ideologies, norms and procedures of the organisational context within which teachers work. These ideologies and norms are usually expressed in terms of issues such as widely-accepted approaches towards curriculum development, the commonly adopted conventions or the thinking behind literacy practices. The second level focuses on the classroom and is embedded in the first. It includes beliefs about learners, learning, language and the role of the teacher. Finally, the third and most specific level is located within the other two contextual layers of the model and focuses on the specific content of instructional matters.

Burns goes on to say that the interaction of these three different contextual levels results in the formation of networks of an immensely complex system of interdependent operations which are set to work when teachers' beliefs at one level interact and are influenced by beliefs operating at another level. In essence, all the levels of beliefs are affected by the values and belief systems of the wider society. The tasks undertaken at the instructional level may also reinforce prevailing social norms that exist in the wider society.

In the next section, the place of English language teaching in the education system in Singapore is outlined briefly. Against this background, we examine how teachers use textbooks to teach English in upper secondary NT classroom.

The significance of English language learning in Singapore schools for NT students

As in other recently industrialised nations, education in Singapore has been crucial in promoting social change. From the 1980s onwards, the desire to maintain a competitive edge has been translated into an emphasis on academic achievement (Cheah, 1998). In particular, doing well in English Language examinations is used to sort students out into the various educational tracks which operate in Singapore.

At the primary school level, such ‘sorting’ takes place at the end of the foundation stage at Primary Four and again, at Primary Six. Until 2003², children were first tracked into one of the three language streams at Primary Four (Cheah, 1996:195):

English as a first language and mother tongue as first language (EM1)

English as a first language and mother tongue as second language (EM2)

English as a first language and mother tongue for oral proficiency (EM3)

The top 15% -20% of children are streamed into EM1 while the majority usually enters EM2. The least prestigious is the EM3 stream which takes in the bottom 15-20% of the children. At the end of primary school, based on the results of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), pupils move on to the Special, Express or Normal streams in secondary schools. The Normal stream is divided into the Normal Academic (NA) stream and Normal Technical (NT) stream for the bottom 15-20% of students. The NT students receive a basic secondary education in four core examination subjects - English language, Mother Tongue at the basic level, Mathematics and Computer Applications. At the end of four years, they sit the General Certificate in Education (GCE) Normal Syllabus Technical examinations. They then graduate from secondary school and may proceed to an Institute of Technical Education (ITE) for vocational training.

Research by Ng (1999) shows that most NT pupils come from low-income family backgrounds, and Moo (1997) states that they are generally considered to be less ‘academically-inclined’ in that they have low achievement in their academic studies, particularly in English, Mathematics and Science, and possibly have failed many times in their school career. As a result, the strong association of failing in studies with being streamed in the NT track has often created a stigma that results in NT students’ low self-esteem. This low self-esteem is often considered to be a cause of their lack of motivation to study, and as they move up the levels in secondary school, there indeed seems to be a general decline in self-esteem and achievement motivation.

The Study

The motivation to conduct this study stems from Lee’s experience of teaching English to NT classes for the past 7 years. Her personal experience and anecdotal accounts from other teachers revealed that the New CLUE textbooks, developed following the 1991 syllabus revision and which remained the prescribed textbook for the NT stream from 1994 to 2003, are basically ineffective in preparing NT pupils for their GCE Normal Syllabus Technical

² The EM3 stream has been abolished since 2004 to minimize the negative impact of streaming. Consequently, all average and low ability children are now streamed together in EM2.

English examinations. Instead of using textbooks in their teaching, some teachers teach using past examination papers. Her on-going discussions with other teachers also seemed to suggest that teachers perceived New CLUE to be too difficult for NT pupils. Their low regard for NT pupils was also made worse by the fact that these pupils are generally considered to have weak motivation to learn and have poor command of English.

The study initially intended to focus on how teachers of upper secondary (secondary 3 and 4) NT classes used New CLUE textbooks to teach English. In particular, the study sought to confirm whether teachers relied on textbooks to teach literacy skills or simply considered textbooks redundant since they did not help pupils in their examination preparations. However, a preliminary survey indicated that while NT teachers used textbooks, they did not necessarily use New CLUE. As a result, the focus was directed to the use of all textbooks.

The findings of the study are based on a survey of 23 teachers from 11 secondary schools, who all taught secondary Four NT classes. A semi-structured questionnaire (see appendix) was used for data gathering. It comprised 30 items, 11 of which were closed and 9 open-ended. The questionnaire focused on three areas: Attitudes and Perceptions towards Teaching NT Students, Use of Text Materials and Approaches to Teaching, and Opinions towards the Use of Text Materials in Teaching. All three parts of the questionnaire employed a Likert-type scale format. Six open-ended questions were also included in Part III for the purpose of further clarifying and elaborating responses to earlier questions. The responses to the closed questions were quantified using statistical formulae while responses of some of the subjects were followed up through telephone calls.

Attitudes and perceptions towards teaching NT pupils

Table 1: *Attitudes and Perceptions of Teachers Toward Teaching NT Students*

Statements	Rating Categories										Mean	Rank Order
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Not Sure		Disagree		Strongly Disagree			
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)			
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
Teachers should be suitably trained to teach NT classes (statement 24)	13	56.5	9	39.1	1	4.4	0	0	1	4.4	1.5	1
Happy teaching NT students (statement 23)	7	30.4	14	60.9	1	4.4	1	4.4	1	4.4	2	2
Helping students pass their exam is a prime concern in teaching (statement 21)	5	26.1	13	56.5	1	4.4	3	13.0	0	0	2.1	3
Students have difficulty in learning English (statement 20)	3	13.0	14	60.9	1	4.4	5	21.7	0	0	2.3	4
Students exhibit behavioural problems (statement 19)	1	4.4	11	47.8	2	8.7	7	30.4	2	8.7	2.5	5

Students feel positive toward learning English (statement 22)	3	21.7	16	69.6	1	4.4	2	8.7	0	0	2.5	6
Not concerned with evaluating teaching on students (statement 25)	1	4.4	6	26.1	3	13.0	13	56.5	0	0	3.2	7

From the results shown in table 1, 21 out of 23 indicated they were happy teaching their NT students (statement 23, mean = 2). 12 respondents also clearly expressed the view that they were confident teaching their NT students in the open-ended section of the questionnaire (question 10). For example, one teacher believed that with the practice of 'giving and taking', he/she was able to relate better to his/her students. Analysis of questions 8 and 9 in the open-ended section showed that the common problems lay in pupils' lack of interest in academic learning and short attention span. Pupils also created distraction by talking to friends during lessons and could be defiant towards authority at many times. In addition, teachers' reservation in teaching the NT pupils might have to do with NT students' cognitive weakness in learning English since 14 respondents acknowledged (statement 20, mean = 2.3) that their students had difficulties in coping with English to a certain extent. In short, it can be inferred from the data that most teachers had positive perceptions toward teaching the NT pupils though it cannot be denied that their perceptions were dependent on the conduct, attitude and language ability of their pupils.

Use of Text Materials and approaches to teaching

The frequency and manner in which the upper secondary English teachers of NT classes used their text materials was found using a mean score calculated according to a 4-point Likert scale. The textbooks included those specifically designed for the upper level NT classes as well as other supplementary sources. The term frequency refers to the number of occasions teachers used these materials in every single lesson. The frequency with which teachers used core text and supplementary materials is shown in tables 2 and 3 respectively below. A mean score of more than 1 but less than 2 indicates high frequency use. A mean score of more than 2 but less than 3 indicates average frequency, while a mean score of more than 3 but less than 4 represents low frequency use.

Table 2 *Types of Core Text Materials and Frequency of Use*

Core Text Materials	No. of Teachers	Percentage %	Mean Frequency of Text Material Use
Life Accents	2	8.7	1
Past Exam Papers	2	8.7	1
Kingsway Syllabus T Guide	1	4.4	2
Step Ahead	7	30.4	1.4
New CLUE	11	47.8	2.2

Nearly half of all the teachers in the survey (47.8%, $n = 11$) used New Clue. However, compared with other textbooks used, New CLUE had the lowest frequency of use (mean = 2.2). Thus, the findings of the questionnaire aligned with anecdotal accounts that teachers did not use New CLUE for all their teaching. Other than using these textbooks, the teachers also depended on other commercially produced or self-developed materials as supplementary teaching materials.

Table 3: *Types of Supplementary Materials and Frequency of Use*

Supp Materials	Rating Categories								Total No. of Teachers	Mean	Rank Order
	Always High (1)		Sometimes Average (2)		Seldom Low (3)		Never Nil (4)				
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%			
Self-developed materials	13	56.5	10	43.5	0	0	0	0	23	1.4	1
Past Examination papers	12	52.2	10	43.5	1	4.4	1	4.4	23	1.7	2
Other Alternatives	9	39.1	6	26.1	0	0	8	34.1	23	2.3	3

Table 3 shows that self-developed materials had the highest frequency of use (mean = 1.4) while past examination papers as a supplementary resource had a slightly lower frequency of use (mean = 1.7). Although two teachers indicated that they used past examination papers as a core teaching material, most teachers used them as a form of supplementary material. 13 respondents reported that they always used self-developed materials, while 12 of them indicated that they always used past examination papers. 9 of them occasionally (mean = 2.3) used other sources such as CD-ROMs, comics and examination papers from other schools. 4 out of 23 teachers mentioned that they used IT courseware or software to conduct group presentations and peer editing.

Table 4: *Teachers' Use of Core Textbook Materials*

Activities Conducted	Rating Categories								Total No. of Teachers	Mean	Rank Order
	High (1)		Average (2)		Low (3)		Nil (4)				
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%			
Vocabulary	10	43.5	9	39.1	1	4.4	3	13.0	23	1.9	1
Reading Comprehension	12	52.2	6	26.1	3	13.0	2	8.7	23	1.9	1

Functional Writing	9	39.1	7	30.4	5	21.7	2	8.7	23	2.0	2
Reading Aloud	9	39.1	8	34.8	3	13.0	3	13.0	23	2.1	3
Listening Comprehension	9	39.1	9	39.1	1	4.4	4	17.4	23	2.2	4
Directed Writing	5	21.7	8	34.8	5	21.7	3	13.0	23	2.3	5
Oral	5	21.7	9	39.1	5	21.7	4	17.4	23	2.4	6
Registers and style	8	34.1	6	26.1	4	17.4	5	21.7	23	2.5	7

Table 4 above shows how teachers used the textbooks. The most frequently conducted activities from textbooks were reading comprehension and vocabulary (both mean = 1.9). This is followed by functional writing (mean = 2.0) which is ranked second and is in turn, followed by reading aloud activities (mean = 2.1) which were conducted sometimes. The component teachers covered the least frequently was the teaching of styles and registers (mean = 2.5). On the whole, the mean ratings for all aspects of language teaching (reading, speaking, writing and listening) that were taught registered from 1 to 3. Therefore, it can be deduced that the frequency in which these aspects are taught is average. In particular, while there is emphasis on reading and writing, there is much less attention given to speaking or pronunciation. This might be due to the fact that the weighting of oral components in the examination is far less than that of reading comprehension and writing.

Table 5 below illustrates how teachers taught English. Majority of the respondents structured their teaching around pair work sometimes (mean = 1.8). Specifically where skill-teaching is concerned, the most frequently taught skill was the modelling of the writing styles of various text types (mean = 1.9). The second most frequently taught skill was comprehension skills (mean = 1.9) while the third most frequently taught skill was the application of study skills (mean = 2.0). Although the teaching of learner discovery strategies for reading and writing purposes has the third lowest frequency (mean = 2.6) as compared to the rest of the other skills and strategies, 11 out of 23 teachers claimed they sometimes taught such strategies. Interestingly, one teacher felt that it was not necessary to teach their pupils these skills as she was particularly doubtful if the teaching of such strategies were beneficial to students who "already have problems answering the obvious 'what', 'how' and 'where' questions". Another teacher also mentioned that he seldom conducted group discussions for fear that his pupils would be 'out of control'.

Table 5: *How English is Taught*

Teaching Methods and Tasks	Rating Categories								Total No. of teachers	Mean	Rank Order
	Always High		Sometimes Average		Seldom Low		Never Nil				
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)				
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%			

Pair Work	5	21.7	16	69.6	2	8.7	0	0	23	1.8	1
Model Text Types	10	43.5	8	34.8	4	17.4	1	4.5	23	1.9	1
Comprehension Skills	9	39.1	10	43.5	4	17.4	0	0	23	1.9	2
Study Skills	6	26.1	10	43.5	7	30.4	0	0	23	2.0	3
Thinking Skills	5	21.7	13	56.5	5	21.7	0	0	23	2.1	4
Group Discussion	3	13.0	14	60.9	6	26.1	0	0	23	2.1	5
Games	3	13.0	13	52.5	4	17.4	3	13.0	23	2.3	6
Emphasis of Styles and Registers	4	17.4	13	56.5	6	26.1	0	0	23	2.4	7
Initiate learner Discovery Strategies	3	13.0	11	47.8	6	26.1	3	2.6	23	2.6	8
Role Play	0	0	7	30.4	11	47.8	5	21.7	23	2.9	9
Others	2	8.7	4	17.4	5	21.7	12	52.2	23	3.2	10

In response to how else the teachers taught English (question 18), it is reported that the most common alternative tasks conducted were IT-related. It should however be noted that some teachers had used more than one of the alternative tasks reported. For example, the same teacher could have both used IT software and grammar drills.

In summary, the teachers taught a variety of language skills using the textbooks. They used the textbook frequently to teach vocabulary, reading comprehension and functional writing. What is fundamental is that they did not rely solely on textbooks in teaching. In particular, self-developed worksheets and past examination papers seemed to be the popular choice of supplementary material amongst the majority since the textbooks they were using were not structured to the examination format.

Opinions towards the Use of Text Materials

The final area addressed in the survey was teachers' opinions of the text materials. Table 6 below shows the responses given by teachers concerning their perceptions of the text materials they were using. 13 respondents seemed to think that the alternative sources of materials they used offered better flexibility in terms of the ease of adaptation (statement 17, mean = 2). Again, with a mean rating of 2.1, it is evident that they perceived other sources of materials than their textbooks as a better choice in helping their pupils pass the examinations. Although they seem to agree that the textbooks they were using provided a framework in guiding their teaching (mean = 2.8), they were not certain (mean = 3) if they actually had to change their teaching methods to accommodate the format and structure of their text materials. As much as the teachers expressed their doubts (mean = 3.0) about the content of the textbooks being interesting, a mean score of more than 3 also indicates that they were even less certain of how effective their text materials facilitated teaching (mean=3.1) and learning (mean =3.3).

Table 6: *Teachers' Opinion on the Use of Text Materials in Teaching*

Statements	Rating Categories										Mean
	Strongly Agree (1)		Agree (2)		Not Sure (3)		Disagree (4)		Strongly Disagree (5)		
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	
Other sources allows flexibility in teaching (Statement 17)	6	26.1	13	56.5	1	4.4	3	13.0	0	0	2.0
Other sources are more relevant to demands of exams (Statement 20)	4	17.4	13	56.5	1	4.4	4	17.4	1	4.4	2.1
Other sources of materials are better (statement 16)	6	26.1	9	39.1	4	17.4	4	17.4	0	0	2.3
Activities inappropriate for class (Statement 21)	6	26.1	7	30.4	4	17.4	6	26.1	0	0	2.4
Guidance in teaching for framework provided in text materials (Statement 5)	4	17.4	8	34.8	6	26.1	4	17.4	1	4.4	2.8
Need to change teaching method to suit the use of text materials (Statement 8)	3	13.0	5	21.7	3	13.0	12	52.2	0	0	3.0
Text materials are dated (Statement 9)	2	8.7	6	26.1	5	21.7	10	43.5	0	0	3.0
Text materials do not facilitate teaching (Statement 23)	4	17.4	6	26.1	1	4.4	13	56.5	0	0	3.1
Text materials do not facilitate learning (Statement 24)	1	4.4	6	26.1	2	8.7	14	60.9	0	0	3.3

On the other hand, data from the open-ended questions suggest that the respondents seem to share common preferences and dislikes for their textbooks (question 25). Most liked their textbooks due to the availability of practice exercise. Some thought that their textbooks contained a wide variety of text types which help to contribute to students' language learning. 6 of them believed that textbooks should focus more on traditional teaching of grammar while 4 of them suggested incorporating lesson plans or activities involving the use of IT tools since NT pupils are usually considered to be 'quite IT savvy' when it comes to working on computers. Finally, 2 of them also pointed out that textbooks should perhaps be closely reflect the format of the examinations.

In retrospect, the data do not give conclusive evidence of whether teachers' attitudes towards NT pupils affect the way they use textbooks in class. Nevertheless, it could be

inferred that teachers' attitudes towards their students' behaviour and language abilities do affect the way they used textbooks in class to certain extent. There are three instances which seem to suggest that NT students' behavioural problems and learning characteristics influenced the way teachers used their textbooks.

First, teachers omitted, modified or supplemented the contents of their textbooks with other materials to meet the learning needs of their students. In this aspect, this finding corresponds with Chandran's study on Malaysian ESL teachers' use of textbooks in which it is reported that teachers taught using workbooks or other commercially published materials available in the market instead in order to prepare pupils for the examinations. Unlike the Malaysian teachers who 'very rarely or did not at all' prepare their own materials (Chandran, 2003:164), a more critical finding indicates that most the teachers in this study made their decisions about omitting or modifying and supplementing what was already there in order to meet the learning needs of their NT pupils. In this sense, the findings concur with Richards and Mahoney's (1996) findings on ESL teachers' use of textbooks in Hong Kong in which they used different books for the teaching of particular skills and supplementary work. However, unlike Richards and Mahoney's study, there is not sufficient evidence to point to the fact that English teachers of upper secondary NT classes were looking at textbooks critically and that the decisions they made both before and during classroom teaching involved a 'high level of cognitive skills' (1996:60).

Second, teachers used the textbooks least for conducting group discussions and simulated conversation exercises in class for fear that their students would not cooperate or get too disruptive and noisy. Last, teachers also felt that it was not necessary to teach their pupils learning strategies required in reading and writing and the application of higher order skills promoted in the textbooks as they were particularly doubtful whether the teaching of these strategies and skills were beneficial to these low-ability students.

Discussion of Findings: An Analysis of Contextual Levels of Influences

The key findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Teachers generally have positive attitudes towards NT students but these seem to be dependent on students' conduct, attitude and language ability
2. Teachers depend on a number of supplementary sources other than textbooks in teaching, such as past examination papers
3. Teachers use a variety of techniques and activities in teaching
4. Teachers perceive IT tools as helpful in facilitating language learning for NT students

The findings were furthered analysed in relation to Burns' (1992) model of contextual levels of influences. Linking the findings to contextual levels of influences helps to identify some important factors of influence in teachers' beliefs in their use of textbooks and also helps to draw some tentative conclusions about these beliefs in the light of these influences.

The institutional level: An examination-oriented system

At the institutional level, it was found that teachers' beliefs are very much governed by the demands of the English examinations. The NT stream is not an accelerated track. Nonetheless, English teachers of NT classes are nonetheless accountable for meeting the expected pass rate stipulated by their Heads of Department for English. However the use of prescribed English textbooks in schools becomes questionable, as Cheah (2003) pointed out, when many of them do not match the requirements of examination. The reason for the mismatch of syllabus design and examination format is primarily due to the fact that while the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles of language teaching and learning

embodied in the 2001 syllabus have been incorporated into the textbooks, the examinations have remained 'fairly traditional and very much skills-and accuracy-based' (Cheah, 2003:360). Hence, in order to help pupils pass their English examinations, many teachers left the textbooks aside and provided students with the necessary examination practice using past examination and other assessment papers instead.

Indeed, the findings of this study have shown that self-developed worksheets and past examination papers remained a popular choice of supplementary material frequently used by most teachers. It suggests that teachers believed that by getting the NT pupils to prepare for examinations through the use of worksheets and examination papers, they hoped to improve students' test taking abilities and help them to achieve better pass rate for their classes.

The classroom level

1. Perceptions of and attitude toward NT students

Although the majority of the teachers in this study were positive towards teaching their NT students, several of them did share the view that how confident they were in teaching them depended on the students' conduct and cognitive ability. Thus, their responses also imply that their attitude and perception towards the NT students were dependent on the conditions of the pupils they were teaching. It suggests that they would be more positive towards a class that has better learning ability and fewer behavioural problems. That being the case, they would also be more willing to teach the better students higher order learning strategies.

2. View of Teachers' Role within the Classroom

Apart from the findings that teachers' decision-making is affected by the profiles and characteristics of their learners, it can also be inferred that teachers approached their teaching according to their perceptions of role-relations in class. According to the findings, there is no doubt that most teachers saw themselves as being responsible for providing useful learning experiences to meet the needs of their students. Such teachers believed that relating to and understanding the learning and behavioural characteristics of NT pupils were critical to building a good teacher-learner relationship which would in turn help to motivate pupils' learning. Hence they perceived their role to act as a motivator who seeks to improve students' confidence and interest in learning. There were also teachers who perceived themselves to be the authority figure in the classroom who should maintain classroom routines well. It suggests that for the latter, they believed that students learn best when the classroom atmosphere is focused and not disruptive.

3. Views of Language Teaching

Teachers' beliefs about the various approaches to language teaching and learning have also been identified with respect to the teaching approaches they adopted. From the findings, two groups of teachers can be identified with respect to the teaching approaches they adopted. There are those who adopted the functional approach and others who used a grammar-based approach to teaching.

Teachers taking the functional approach reported structuring their teaching around group and pair work. Thus the use of this method reflects teachers' view of language as a system for communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). This implies that these teachers believed that language is learned most effectively when it is used as a medium to convey informational content of interest to the students. This is the reason why they used a repertoire of techniques, such as games, poems and songs and watching videos to engage students in tasks.

On the other hand, those who adopted the grammar-based approach believed that textbooks should focus more on traditional teaching of grammar as opposed to teaching grammar at the text level since they thought that it was even more important to develop pupils' accuracy in language use. These teachers believed that the best way to learn the English language was to study the rules of the language and possibly memorise the forms and structures.

4. Perceptions of the Use of IT Tools

In this study, IT tools seem to be regarded as a solution for assisting NT pupils in their language learning. Most teachers were reported to have used IT tools to assign alternative tasks in an effort to engage NT pupils in their lessons. There is no doubt that teachers thought that incorporating IT activities or software will be particularly beneficial to NT pupils' language learning in future. However, it remains uncertain as to whether the use of IT tools had indeed helped their NT pupils to achieve better results in English since the teachers in this study did not offer any feedback or comments in relation to students' improvement.

The Instructional Level: Teachers' Use of Textbooks

Eventually, the prior two contextual levels interact to influence teachers' beliefs in the use of textbook at the instructional level. For example, although teachers are aware that language textbooks contain pedagogically useful materials designed to help learners adopt a broader orientation to language learning and use, their use of textbooks were often replaced by test format worksheets or other supplementary materials since using them might not necessarily produce tangible results. This implies that the pedagogical beliefs teachers hold about the use of textbooks had to contend with institutional and classroom factors. Based on this analysis, we would like to suggest that demands of examinations and teachers' perceptions towards NT pupils' cognitive weakness in English and their behavioural problems seem to exert an influence on how English teachers of upper secondary NT classes used their textbooks.

Conclusions

We wish to highlight three salient issues which have emerged from this study that carry implications for curriculum development and teacher education. These are: firstly the issue of 'teaching to the test'; secondly, teacher training and contribution as participating professionals and thirdly, the needs of unconventional learners.

Teaching to the Test

Pelly and Allison (2000) contend that current assessment practices in Singapore schools have a strong negative influence on teaching. This is because too much emphasis on tests and examinations can influence the content and methodology of curriculum programmes and attitudes towards the value of educational objectives. Indeed, the Singapore Education Ministry has commented that over-emphasis on examination performance in schools for so many years could have resulted in the decline of the teaching of critical literacy, logical reasoning, problem solving and flexible thinking (Straits Times, 2004, 18 March). Hence, a pertinent question that needs to be addressed is still about how teachers can teach English not just for the immediate goal of passing examinations but for wider purposes as well.

Teacher Involvement as Participating Professionals

The second issue that merits some discussion concerns teacher involvement in curriculum innovation. Zeichner and Liston (1996) comment that even today with all the talk about empowering teachers, there is still a general lack of respect for 'the craft knowledge of teachers' (1996:5) in the educational research establishment. Likewise, Cheah (1997) also

suggests that teachers are not very much regarded as important participants in the realm of educational initiatives. We argue that teaching and learning situations will not improve unless teachers play an active role in the development of their own knowledge base and assume ownership for contributing to areas for innovation. Perhaps it is time for policy makers to provide channels for the current education system to learn from English teachers of NT classes and for them to perceive that they can contributions have a direct effect on their current teaching situations.

The Needs of Unconventional Learners

Finally it is important to address the issue of meeting the different needs and interests of unconventional learners such as the NT students. In this regard, the Ministry and curriculum developers may need to take a step back and evaluate if the current NT English curriculum has helped the majority of the NT students learn English more effectively. A review of syllabus content, pedagogy and assessment structure could lead to changes that would have an important influence on students' motivation to learn and on the effectiveness of their learning.

Having highlighted these issues and their implications, we now offer some recommendations in the final section of this paper.

A Vocationally Oriented English Curriculum

The aim of training NT pupils to become 'communicatively competent in a wide range of social contexts' so they can use the language for a 'larger number of different purposes' (Lee and Davies, 1996:3) is in line with the Singapore government's intention for all workers to receive a broad-based education aimed to develop the 'whole person'. A well-educated and highly trained workforce will in turn help to maintain a competitive edge in the global economy (Yip and Yap, 1997). However, unlike working adults who are more certain of why they want to learn English, NT pupils have less motivation since they do not see the immediate utility of learning English for work purposes. Instead of 'forcing' a broad-based English learning experience on these less motivated and lower ability learners, perhaps a language curriculum similar to that of English as Specific Programmes (ESP) might serve to raise their motivation.

Alternative Methods of Language Assessment

Ng's (1999) research on the learning styles of NT pupils shows that reflective observation (RO) and active experimentation (AE) were ranked on the upper half of their preference scale whereas concrete experience (CE) and abstract conceptualisation (AC) were ranked in the lower half. This implies that NT pupils prefer to learn by 'watching' and 'doing'. They succeed at hands-on tasks. Conversely, they are less successful at handling learning that involves abstraction and memory.

In view of this, the Ministry may need to consider alternative modes of assessment such as the use of portfolios in which NT pupils can apply learning-by-doing strategies, into the overall assessment of English language learning. Most importantly, these different types of assessment should also ensure that NT students are assessed on tasks related to their real life needs so that they perceive the relevance of the assessments.

In conclusion, this study aimed to investigate how upper secondary English teachers of NT classes use textbooks to teach English in Singapore. The findings have been considered in relation to Burn's (1992) model of interconnecting and interacting contextual levels of

influences. They suggest that teachers' beliefs in the use of textbooks are influenced by the demands of examinations, along with their perceptions toward NT pupils' behavioural problems and cognitive weakness in English. Like other research, the findings confirm that teachers of upper secondary NT classes in Singapore have their own beliefs about the use of textbook for teaching English.

The findings are limited in scope to a sample of 23 upper secondary English teachers of NT classes. Hence, no firm generalisations can be made from the findings of this study. Research on a much larger sample of teachers would be needed to substantiate the findings of this study and more exhaustive and qualitative methods such as classroom observations, interviews and diary studies could be employed to obtain richer data. Yet, despite its small scale, we would like to suggest that the findings have provided insights into the ways English teachers of upper secondary NT classes use their textbooks to teach English in Singapore. It is also hoped that the findings from this study will provide an area for further research in the area of the NT English curriculum so that the use of textbook, classroom teaching and, in particular, assessment can be revised further to accommodate the needs of the NT pupils.

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Appendix: Questionnaire Survey

General Information:

1. Number of years teaching English: _____
2. Post you are currently holding (Please **tick**):
 _____ Head of English department
 _____ Senior Subject Teacher for English Language
 _____ English Language Co-ordinator
 _____ English Language Teacher
3. Number of Secondary 4 NT students in your class: _____
4. Title of text materials (if any) used for 4NT English : _____

Questions 1 to 2h apply to teachers who use text materials in teaching. If this is not applicable to you, ignore them and proceed to question 3.

Part I. Use of text materials

1=always	2=sometimes	3=seldom	4=never
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Tick the following boxes that best describe your use of textbook:		1	2	3	4
1. I use the text materials in my teaching.					
2. I carry out the following while using the textbook:					
a. reading					
b. oral activities					
c. comprehension					
d. vocabulary					
e. listening comprehension					
f. use of appropriate language styles and forms in speech situations					
g. functional writing					
h. directed writing					
3. Tick the following boxes that best describe your use of other sources of materials:		1	2	3	4
	Past year exam papers				
	Self-developed materials (specify: _____)				

Others (specify:_____)				
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4. Tick the following boxes that best describe how you teach English to your class:	1	2	3	4
a. group discussions				
b. pair work				
c. express appropriate language styles, structures and forms in speech situations				
d. demonstrate use of comprehension skills (e.g. skim and scan, use contextual clues etc)				
e. demonstrate the use of study skills (identify learning problems, make outline and notes etc)				
f. model different types of writing styles according to the text types provided. (e.g. letters, reports etc)				
g. promote thinking skills (e.g. making critical and rational judgements etc)				
h. initiate learner discovery strategies				
i. role play				
j. Games				
k. others (specify:_____)				

Part II. Opinion on the use of text materials in teaching

1=strongly agree	2=agree	3=not sure	4=disagree	5=strongly disagree
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Tick your response for the following statements:	1	2	3	4	5
5. The framework provided in the text materials guides my teaching.					
6. Other sources of materials are better than the text materials prescribed.					
7. I have more flexibility in acting upon other sources of materials than the text materials.					
8. I need to change my teaching method to suit the use of the text materials.					
9. The text materials are dated.					
10. Other sources of materials are more relevant to the demands of the exams.					
11. The activities in the textbook are inappropriate for my type of classes.					
12. On the whole, the development of language and language-related skills in the text materials are provided in an interesting manner.					
13. On the whole, the text materials do not facilitate my teaching.					
14. On the whole, the text materials do not facilitate students' learning.					

15(i). What do you most like about the text materials prescribed to you?

(ii). What do you least like about the text materials prescribed to you?

16. Other reasons for not using the text material prescribed in teaching:

17. What other kind of materials do you think are suitable for use in NT language teaching?

18. How else do you teach English in your NT classes?

Part III. Attitude and Perception Toward Teaching NT Students

1=strongly agree	2=agree	3=not sure	4=disagree	5=strongly disagree
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Tick your response for the following statements:	1	2	3	4	5
18. My students exhibit behavioural problems during my lessons.					
19. My students have difficulty in learning English.					
20. Helping my students pass their exam is a prime concern in my teaching.					
21. My students feel positive toward learning English.					
22. I have happy teaching my NT students.					
23. I think teachers should be suitably trained to teach NT classes.					
24. I am not concerned about evaluating my teaching on my NT students.					

25. What percentage of students in your classes has difficulty coping with English?

26. Please elaborate your response to question number 18.

27. How confident are you in teaching NT classes?

28. Is there any aspect of the NT teaching materials the curriculum developers and specialist writers can further improve in or modify?

29. Further comments:

Thank you