Effectiveness of Non-Standard Variety of Language in Classroom Teaching

Guiling Niu
Nanyang Technological University, mayerniu@gmail.com

Paul Grahame Doyle

Huaqing Hong

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Effectiveness of Non-standard Variety of language in Classroom Teaching

Guiling NIU, Paul Grahame DOYLE and Huaqing HONG

A great many studies concerning Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) have been conducted, most of which are concerned with pronunciation, intonation and particles or some grammatical aspects (Deterding 2005; Gut 2007; Gupta 1998; Lim 2004 & 2007; Lubna & Ho 1998; Schneider 2007; Kachru 2008). However, the prior studies are mainly performed from typological or sociological perspectives while the investigation on the distribution patterns of SCE in classroom discourse, with sound statistical evidence, is rarely seen.

Although Singapore Government has been advocating Singaporeans to speak Standard English and initiated the ‘Speak Good English Movement’ in 2000, SCE is still ubiquitous in Singapore classroom and many teachers regard it as a means to facilitate students’ acquisition of Standard English (Rubdy 2007). The present study investigates one aspect of SCE, verb use, in Singapore classroom discourse by using the Singapore Corpus of Research in Education (SCoRE) (Hong, 2005), which covers the annotated data of 120 Singapore classroom lessons concerning four curriculum disciplines (English, Mathematics, Social Studies and Science). The study will involve such salient features, with regard to verbs, as unconjugated verb use and omission of copula verbs and auxiliary verbs. With large quantities of cases extracted from the corpus, this research accounts for the systematic patterns in terms of the typical verb use in Singapore classroom. Statistical analysis is adopted to identify the patterns of informal verb use, to classify the cases, and to investigate their distributive properties (1) between teachers and students (2) across respective school subjects, and the effectiveness of this non-standard form of language will be explored on the basis of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. This study will help to raise teachers’ awareness of their classroom interaction patterns and re-assess the impact these patterns have on classroom teaching.
**Introduction**

**SSE vs. SCE**

Singapore English, one variety of the New Englishes of the post-colonial world, has been the research interest to many studies in the literature (Deterding 2007, Lubna 1998, Rubdy 2001 & 2007, Low 2005). However, most prior studies on SCE have only made qualitative analysis on the use of SCE or provided detailed descriptions of the use of SCE among ordinary English-speaking Singaporeans but failed to offer a distribution of the use of SCE. In the present study a quantitative method is used to illustrate the use of SCE by teachers in Singapore schools to fill the gap.

Singapore Standard English (SSE) is locally established, and is not significantly different from other standard Englishes. The most informal variety of Singapore English, Singapore Colloquial English, however is a variety of English so different from Standard English (StdE), especially in syntax, that it must be analyzed entirely on its own terms (Gupta 1998).

Classroom is a special place because teachers play a key role in reinforcing the correct usage of English (ST, July 16, 2003). What the teachers should do is, by speaking and teaching good English, to create an environment in which speaking good English is the norm.

Good English is defined as grammatically correct, with ‘rules for constructing sentences---strictly adhered to and avoiding words and words from local dialects and Malay’ (Today, July 3, 2003). The clarion call of the Speak Good English Movement alone is not enough to effect positive change, without people first being made aware of pervasive mistakes that have become second nature (Today, 26 April 2004). Therefore, it is of great necessity to find, classify and analyze the norms of the mistakes in SCE.

SSE has been acknowledged as one of the varieties of world Englishes, however, the discussion on SCE has never stopped. It is inevitable to mention the discussion on what variety should be used in Singapore school classrooms, Singlish or Standard English, or a mixed one between SSE and SCE by code-switching? Many teachers, even educators are at a loss on where to go and the discussion has remained unsettled in spite of the government’s and experts’ call and effort to encourage Singaporeans use Standard English. However, SCE is still ubiquitous in Singapore classrooms, and the present study
gives a detailed description of the non-standard use of verbs employed by teachers in classes.

Like the discussion on whether Singaporeans should ‘Speak Good English’ or Singlish, the debate on whether SCE should be forbidden in classroom has lasted for years in media, academic publications but still remain unsettled.

As Rubdy (2007) points out, on the one hand, the use of SCE is viewed as an obstacle to the development of students’ literacy skills in Singapore standard English (SSE) and a national campaign, known as the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), was launched in 2000 to promote the use of standard English and stem the spread of Singlish among Singaporeans (Rubdy, 2001). On the one hand, Gupta (1998) describes Singapore as a diglossic society and believes that the school can be a place where Standard English is learnt alongside SCE; the practice of classroom code-switching between the two varieties (SCE and SSE, also called high variety and low variety) is strongly discouraged and Rubdy (2007) also suggests exploring the possibility of considering the use of Singlish as a pedagogical resource rather than an impediment. To date, there is little research on teachers’ and students’ code-switching behavior in Singapore schools to help determine whether mixed code language use is truly detrimental to the acquisition of the standard as believed by the authorities (Rubdy 2007). Therefore, SCE is still pervasive in Singapore school classrooms. The present paper will show a clear picture of verb forms teachers use in Singapore primary school classes.

**Background**

Over the past years, a large amount of research regarding Singlish, Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), has been conducted, most of which is concerned with pronunciation, intonation and particles (Deterding 2005; Gut 2007; Lim 2004 & 2007; Schneider 2007; Rubdy 2001 & 2007; Alsagoff 1998; Low 2003 & 2005; Bao & Hong 2006). As for research into the grammatical aspects of SCE, Lim (2004) gives a grammatical description of SCE concerning the misuse of nouns, verbal cluster, reduplication and discourse particles. Bao and Wee (1999) analyses two forms of passive found in Singapore English: the *kena* passive that is derived from Malay, and the *give* passive that comes from Chinese. Kachru (2008) revisits issues in linguistic description, language variation, lexicography, and language education.

However, most of these prior studies put the focus on the analysis of SCE used by Singaporeans of all professions (Lim 2004) rather than on that of SCE used in schools.
used by teachers and students. Furthermore, most of these studies mainly deal with the
descriptive or typological analysis of SCE, and most of them employ qualitative analysis,
and quantitative analysis is seldom utilized.

Lim, Lisa’s (2004) corpus recordings are made of spontaneous speech in the speakers’
natural environments, where interlocutors are all Singaporeans and have close network
ties with each other, being family or friends while the natural conversations of the present
study all occur between teachers and students in the Singapore classrooms. Lim provides
the description of a corpus of Singapore English in combination with an insightful
diachronic perspective, which clearly illustrate significant shifts in language use from a
longitudinal perspective and departs in the extent and depth of structural analysis from
previous accounts that mostly focus on issues of sociolinguistic nature.

In addition, prior studies tend to collect teachers’ and students’ responses to classroom
Singlish who are Singapore-born and Singapore-grown-up, and more work should be
done to examine those teachers’ and students’ opinions towards classroom Singlish who
are not born in Singapore or transfer to Singapore schools from other countries because
there are more and more foreign students in Singapore schools and this factor cannot be
ignored.

**Research Objectives**

A general description on the incorrect verb forms of SCE is always given in prior studies
while a detailed depiction based on sufficient transcripts, a corpus-based look at the
non-standard use of verbs, is needed and the present study will fill this gap. With large
quantities of cases extracted from a large-scale corpus SCoRE, this research accounts for
the systematic patterns in terms of the non-standard use of verbs in SCE. Statistical
analysis is adopted to identify the patterns of the incorrect verb use, to classify the cases,
and to investigate their distributive properties across respective school disciplines. This
quantitative study is an effective supplement to the previous studies with regard to SCE
and will facilitate researcher to make further studies regarding SCE.

To supplement the previous studies of SCE, this paper explores the frequently-occurring
non-standard use of verbs in Singapore classroom discourse by using the Singapore
Corpus of Research in Education (SCoRE: Hong, 2005), which covers the annotated data
of 92 Singapore classroom lessons concerning four curriculum disciplines (English,
Mathematics, Social Studies and Science).
Why Teacher Talk?

Generally, it is still the teacher who orchestrates the talk in the classroom thus controlling
the interaction patterns therein, independently of the methodological approach she/he
may adopt. By analyzing teacher talk in class, researchers can find the interaction
patterns between teachers and students.

Like the discussion on whether Singaporeans should ‘Speak Good English’ or Singlish,
the debate on whether SCE should be forbidden in classroom has also lasted for years in
media, academic publications but still remain the hot topic for many researchers. What
variety should be used in Singapore school classrooms, SCE or SSE, or a mixed one
between SSE and SCE by code-switching. Does SCE have a negative effect on Students’
acquisition of StdE? Many teachers, even educators are at a loss facing these questions
and the discussion has remained unsettled.

The purpose of this study is to provide an explicit description on how SCE is adopted by
teachers with regard to verb forms. As for the strengths and weaknesses of SCE or the
issue on whether the high or low variety of English (Gupta 1998) should be used in class,
they are not the foci of this paper and will not be discussed. The present study will put its
focus on the use of incorrect verb forms in Singapore primary school classes and its focus
will be put on teachers’ non-standard use of verbs in Singapore primary and secondary
school classes and the findings will help teachers reconsider what they say in class.

Data Source and Methodology

The corpus used for this research

100 transcripts primary (p5) and secondary (S2) classroom interactions were taken from
the corpus SCoRE, Singapore Corpus of Research in Education, under a research
program with the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP), Nanyang
Technological university, with a total of about 5 million running words and about
340,000 running words were involved in the present study.

The SCoRE corpus radio/video recordings were taped and collected at more than 350
primary and secondary schools across Singapore. All class sessions were
audio/video-recorded and transcribed, converted to some target formats and all texts were
tagged and annotated into multilayered features. One of the main foci of the corpus is to
provide a holistic description of what happens in about 900 classroom lessons in the core
curriculum areas of English, mathematics, science and Social Studies and mother tongues
(Luke et al., 2005).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column1</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Science</th>
<th>Social Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Transcripts</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Running Words</td>
<td>119283</td>
<td>75042</td>
<td>99846</td>
<td>74202</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1 Transcripts Used for Analysis**

Although the introspective and retrospective qualitative analysis can provide good
explanations and descriptions of the developing process and functionality of the
structures, a quantitative analysis could supplement it with a better view of how these
forms are distributed in today’s usage and what patterns they have created in natural text.

**Feature Selection**

This part will describe the features of the non-standard use of verbs of SCE used by
primary and secondary teachers, with all examples being extracted from the SCoRE
database.

A salient feature of the verb in SCE is the apparent optionality of tense, number and
person marking on the verb (Lim, 2004). In this paper, unconjugated verb use is the most
salient feature which characterizes SCE in terms of the use of verb forms, and besides
unconjugated verb use, other features such as omission of some verb forms and the
relationship between some adverbial words and certain verbal forms are also taken into
consideration in this paper.

Teachers’ non-standard use of verbs are classified into four main groups and further
subclassified into nine specific categories for more detailed and close investigation.

**Omission**

*Omission of Copula ‘Be’*
Corpular verbs (or corpula) are used to associate some attribute, expressed by the subject predicative following the verb, with the subject of the clauses (SVPs pattern).

The copula *be* is found in equative and attributive clauses, and in existential clauses. The copula *be* is not obligatory in these existential and equative constructions in SCE (Lim 2004: 82), e.g.

This one not applicable to Antarctica.
they opposite.
All right, this one also a circle because she is a female.
And your number of marbles still only three.

**Omission of Progressive Auxiliary ‘Be’**

As an auxiliary verb, *be* has two distinct functions: marking progressive aspect and passive voice (Biber, et al 1999). Auxiliaries are the verbs that occur before the main verb in the verbal cluster. The auxiliary *be* can be omitted in both declarative and interrogative sentences in SCE (Lim 2004:84). The examples are as follows:

Why still dreaming?
You still doing this basic stage.
Your English, you still doing or not?

**Omission of Passive ‘Be’**

you suppose to be discussing.
That means you got bored easily.
Oh these two not counted.
Series one done already or not?

**Omission of Other Auxiliary Verbs**

The omission of other auxiliary verbs are not as salient as the omission of auxiliary “*be*” and will not be discussed in detail in this paper.

Okay. You already found out who discovered electricity, correct?
Because I already told you, if you can not behave, you will not learn
I already do it on the board.
Why you bring this?
How you do your work.
Understand how it is done now?
Lack of morphological marking

It has been pointed out by many researchers that SCE verbs often appear in an uninfected form (Platt & Weber 1980; Tay 1979).

Semantically, both tense and aspect relate primarily to time distinctions in the verb phrase. Tense refers primarily to past and present time orientation, whereas aspect relates to consideration such as the completion or lack of completion of events or states described by a verb (Biber, 1999 Longman Grammar). However in SCE, the use of time adverbials is preferred over the morphological marking of perfective aspect (Lubna & Ho 1998), e.g. ‘already’; However, as for the marking of progressive aspect, ‘-ing’ is seldom omitted, what is always omitted in progress aspect is auxiliary ‘be’ which is replaced by an adverbial ‘still’. For example:

**Lack of Past Tense Marking**

In SCE, the verbs always appear in their uninflected form. The time or aspectual information that the verbal inflection in StdE carries, is instead often borne a time adverbial, e.g. yesterday (Alsagoff 1998) in past tense, for example,

1a  An the dinosaurs are born.                      Score_Eng_001
1b  And the dinosaurs were born.                   Standard English
2a  Maths, you **finish** most of it in class yesterday, right? Score_Soc_020
2b  Maths, you **finished** most of it in class yesterday, right? Standard English

**Lack of Perfective Aspect Marking**

You have already discuss about the story.                                          Score_Eng_013
you have finish already ah?                                                 Score_Math_100
Okay, so um, until we have develop solar energy                                    Score_Soc_016

**Lack of Passive Marking**

The eggs need to be hatch                                                     Score_Eng_004
Okay, this one is stack diagonally.                                            Score_Math_086
What is the physical differences you can see, base on the diagram,             Score_Sci_039
Circle the appliances that should be switch off to save energy.                Score_Soc_021
SV Agreement

While the phenomenon of number agreement in English ostensibly involves both nouns and verbs, it is more typologically useful, as Anderson (1985: 188) points out, “rules of agreement in most languages function to copy inherent or relational features from nouns onto other parts of the structure, rather than the other way around, and it is thus quite rare to find a situation in which nouns are marked for some features to agree with something else.” So we group Agreement into Verbal clusters. The examples are as follows:

There is some changes ah, in Maths
I think Ms Lim really need the visualizer.
Now, your two tunnels down here, is where your electric come out.

Other Forms of Non-standard Use of Verbs

The features that belong to verbal clusters, e.g. redublication, but can’t be included in any subcategory of verbal clusters above will be classified into this type.

Okay go go go.
wait wait wait wait wait.
You either want do it on Monday.
I say you follow instruction,
Aye, I say the group leaders keep it already, right?

Findings and Discussion

Variations across Disciplines

The two tables below can help understand the variations across the four disciplines in terms of Singapore teachers’ non-standard use of verbs in class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Maths</th>
<th>Science</th>
<th>Social Studies</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Omission of Copula ‘Be’</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission of Present Progressive Aspect ‘Be’</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission of Passive ‘Be’</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission of other auxiliaries except ‘Be’</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>497</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Lack of Passive Markers
69 61 175 39 344

## Lack of Past Tense Markers
796 167 177 362 1502

## Lack of Perfective Aspect Markers
105 36 70 49 260

## SV_Disagreement
95 109 140 81 425

## Other Non-standard Verbs
36 44 48 37 165

| Total | 1290 | 713 | 845 | 37 | 3585 |

### Table 2 Raw Frequency and Distribution of Teachers’ Non-standard Use of Verbs of all categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>Science</th>
<th>Social Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15.85</td>
<td>39.45</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81.32</td>
<td>35.18</td>
<td>42.27</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.96</td>
<td>14.53</td>
<td>14.02</td>
<td>10.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>4.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>108.15</td>
<td>95.01</td>
<td>84.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3 Normalized Frequency and Distribution of Teachers’ Non-standard Use of Verbs (per 10,000 running words)

A statistical difference test is conducted based on the data above and the result is that there is no significant difference in the teachers’ non-standard use of verbs across the four disciplines of English, mathematics, science and social studies. This result reflects that teachers universally employ SCE in their teaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1  English - Maths</td>
<td>3.26000</td>
<td>29.99353</td>
<td>14.99677</td>
<td>-44.46640</td>
<td>50.98640</td>
<td>.217</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 4  Social_studies - English</td>
<td>-.47500</td>
<td>14.47278</td>
<td>7.23639</td>
<td>-23.50442</td>
<td>22.55442</td>
<td>-.066</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 5  Science - English</td>
<td>-3.69000</td>
<td>24.15974</td>
<td>12.07987</td>
<td>-42.13353</td>
<td>34.75353</td>
<td>-.305</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 6  Maths - Social_studies</td>
<td>-2.78500</td>
<td>15.59254</td>
<td>7.79627</td>
<td>-27.59621</td>
<td>22.02621</td>
<td>-.357</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4  Paired Samples Test

Here the descriptive statistics for the difference between each pair of disciplines is given. According to t-score or p value in the output, we can be more than 95 percent confident that there is no significant difference between each two disciplines for teachers to use non-standard verbs, although there is little difference. That is to say, non-standard use of verbs is pervasive in teachers’ classroom discourse of all subjects.

Discussion

The above data clearly tell that SCE is pervasive in Singapore schools. These teachers do so on account of several reasons and they can refer to much support from academic experts to common Singaporeans. According to them, SCE serves the following functions: to create a feeling of solidarity (Richard and Tay 1977). Rani Rubdy sums up students’ and teachers’ perceptions towards the use of Singlish, based on the findings of a questionnaire survey and interviews. She concludes that students of weak and average ability were more accepting of Singlish, due mainly to their close familiarity with the Singlish language environment, and perhaps, because it provides a sort of comfort zone for them. As for teachers, when they resort to Singlish it is usually because they believe circumstances (students’ ability, to aid comprehension, to explain difficult points, to establish rapport or inject humour, to concentrate on the message that is to be conveyed, to get the message across faster, ). She concludes that the use of Singlish in the classroom can facilitate students’ acquisition of Standard English instead of adversely affecting students' literacy practices.

However, to date, there isn’t an agreement on Whether SCE facilitates or impedes Students’ acquisition of English although the discussion has lasted for years.

Concluding Remarks and Future Work

Non-standard use of Verbs is ubiquitous in Singapore teachers’ daily teaching discourse and it bears certain distribution patterns. And there is no significant difference between each two disciplines in terms of teachers’ non-standard use of verbs, although there is little difference.

In this paper, we present a quantitative analysis of Singapore teachers’ non-standard use of verbs of SCE in school classrooms. This quantitative analysis complements the qualitative analyses that dominate the current literature on Singapore English, and indeed
the contact linguistics literature generally (Thomason 2001; Bao & Hong 2006). It provides an explicit description on Singapore teachers’ non-standard use of verbs in class. It will help other teachers and ourselves to become aware of what we believe about teaching and how our beliefs permeate our practice and it will facilitate the researchers and educators as well as teachers to reconsider what variety of language should be used in class.

Something should also be done to analyse actual code-switching in classrooms and a comparison study is needed to test the effect of code-switching classes and of sole Standard English classes and factors associated with code choice should be investigated. A comparison between teachers and students in the use of verbs as well as the effect of teachers’ non-standard use of English verbs on students’ language development is supposed to be involved on as the extension of this research.

References: