

# Language Skills in a Multilingual Society

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## Abstract

*Singapore is a multilingual and multicultural society where English Language is predominantly used in school and work. Besides English, which is taught in Singapore schools as a first language, Chinese, Malay and Tamil are also taught at a second language level. These four languages are Singapore's official languages. Chinese, Malay and Tamil are also referred to as Mother Tongue languages. Generally, the main medium of instruction in Singapore schools is English apart from the learning of the Mother Tongue Languages. In general, every student in Singapore is required to learn English and his or her Mother Tongue. This paper presents a preliminary exploration of the relationship between students' performance in speaking and writing in English. Some questions to be explored include: Do students in Singapore who perform well in oral English test also perform well in written English test? Is there a variation in students' performance in these skills among students whose home language is English or one of the Mother Tongue Languages - Chinese, Malay or Tamil? Findings from this study could be useful in some ways to test developers, curriculum developers and the wider community of educators looking for ways to improve the teaching and learning of language skills in a multilingual society such as Singapore.*

## Focus of Paper

This paper presents the findings of a preliminary study aimed at finding out if Singapore's primary school students who perform well in writing skills also show good performance in oral skills and vice-versa. The study also seeks to find out if there is a difference in performance in these two language skills among students whose home language is English, or one of the Mother Tongue Languages – Chinese, Tamil or Malay.

## Background

It will be useful to provide some pertinent aspects of the Singapore Education System in order to understand the educational and multilingual contexts in which this study has been done.

### *The Education Path in Singapore*

In Singapore, every student has the opportunity to undergo at least ten years of general education. Almost all children start their formal education from age 6 or 7, spending six years in primary schools, at the end of which they will sit their first major national examination (at Grade 6), the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). The primary purpose of this examination is to ascertain the readiness of students to move on to a suitable course in secondary schools. Based on the PSLE results, the more able students will move on to the 4-year express course at the end of which they will sit the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level examination. Students who qualify may proceed to a 2-year course in junior colleges and thereafter to the universities. The next group of students will be placed in the four- or five-year normal (academic) course. At the end of four years, these students will sit the General Certificate of Education Normal (Academic) Level examination. Each year more than 75% of these students qualify for the fifth year of study at the end of which they sit the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level examination. These students will have the opportunity to proceed to the universities or to the polytechnics. The less academically inclined students will proceed to the normal (technical) course. At the end of the fourth year they will sit the General Certificate of Education Normal (Technical) Level examination. Most of these students will then embark on a technical education in Institutes of Technical Education in Singapore with opportunities to further their education in a polytechnic.

### *Bilingualism in Singapore Schools*

Singapore is a multilingual and multicultural society of 4.6 million people whose ancestry can be traced back to migrants who came largely from China and India in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century

and the indigenous Malay population. With a multilingual population, the education system has evolved over the years and today a “cornerstone of Singapore’s education system is the bilingual policy which allows each child to learn English and his Mother Tongue, which could be Malay, Chinese or Tamil, to the best of his abilities. This enables children to be proficient in English, which is the language of commerce, technology and administration, and their Mother Tongue, the language of their cultural heritage” (Education Statistics Digest 2007). As a result of Singapore’s bilingual education policy, “more Singapore residents had become literate in multiple languages (Census of Population 2000 Education, Language and Religion, p.10). Besides providing opportunities for students to be bilingual, those who have the interest and the ability are also encouraged to learn a third language such as Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, French, German or Japanese.

#### *Multilingual Setting in Singapore*

Over the years, since independence in 1965, English language has become the working language across all public services and most private sectors. However, in the social domain, verbal interactions within the family tend to be more through the Mother Tongue Languages (MTL). The statistics in the Census of Population 2000 Education, Language and Religion suggests that the majority of the population, including the young, is more likely to communicate with their family members using one of the MTLs. However, the use of English has also been on the rise and more Singaporeans are becoming comfortable in using both English and their Mother Tongue Language, switching from one to the other as they see appropriate. For example, in a school setting, students could be doing Mathematics or Science in English and switch to their MTLs during the MTL lessons.

#### *English Language from Grades 1 to 6*

English Language is one of the subjects examined at Grade 6 national examination among others such as Mathematics, Science and the Mother Tongue Languages (Chinese, Malay and Tamil). The English Language examination tests language skills given in the teaching syllabus, *English Language Syllabus 2001* developed by the Ministry of Education. The four main language skills, writing, reading, speaking, and listening are tested at Grade 6 national examination and these tests are developed, administered, marked, graded and reported by the Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board (SEAB). The reporting is by subjects, which means students are given a grade for English Language and not for the individual papers in the English Language examination. SEAB has in place a rigorous system to ensure that all processes leading to the reporting of Grade 6 national examination results are carried out with high level of integrity. For example, in developing test papers to assess writing and oral skills, there are two separate panels to ensure the tests are valid, reliable and fair and the tests have to go through several layers of approval before they are print-ready. Another example of the rigorous process, very similar to some of the recommendations made by White (1984), is that during the marking stage markers assessing writing and examiners assessing oral skills are carefully selected based on their experience and require them to undergo standardisation exercise where sample writing scripts/oral recordings are discussed to reach a consensus of the standards so that they can apply the marking criteria and band descriptors more confidently. Independent double marking is adopted for marking writing and third marking is done by an experienced marker should there be a wide difference between the marks awarded by the two independent markers. As for assessing oral skills, two examiners assess each student independently after which they discuss the marks they have awarded and reach a consensus on the final mark to be awarded to a student based on the marking criteria and the band descriptors. The marking criteria and the band descriptors for assessing writing and oral skills are given in the **Annex**.

#### **The Writing and Oral Communication Examinations at Grade 6**

The English Language examination at Grade 6 comprises four papers – Paper 1 (Writing), Paper 2 (Language Use and Comprehension), Paper 3 (Listening Comprehension) and

Paper 4 (Oral Communication). The focus of this study is students' performance in Papers 1 and 4. Brief descriptions of these papers are given below.

#### *Paper 1 (Writing)*

This paper consists of two sections – Situational Writing and Continuous Writing. For Situational Writing, a single task is set and all students are required to attempt this task by writing a short piece such as a note, a report, an email or a letter in about 80 words based on a picture-cum-textual stimulus. For Continuous Writing, two tasks are set and students choose one of the tasks and write a story of at least a 150 words based on the given setting. For the first task, a picture with three pointers is given and the second comes with a 2-3 line setting with three pointers. For the purpose of this study, only performance in the Continuous Writing part of Paper 1 was taken into consideration.

#### *Paper 4 (Oral Communication)*

The Oral Communication paper consists of three sections – Reading Aloud, Picture Discussion and Conversation. For Reading Aloud, students are required to read a passage of about 120 words and they are assessed on three criteria – pronunciation and articulation, rhythm and fluency and expressiveness. For Picture Discussion, students talk about a picture, with prompts given to lead them to interpret and explain the situation depicted in the picture. They are assessed on their ability to support their interpretations using a range of vocabulary and accurate language. For Conversation, students talk on a topic given by the examiner and they are assessed on their ability to give personal responses to the topic; their ability to speak clearly and confidently using appropriate vocabulary and accurate language; and their ability to interact during the conversation.

### **The Study**

The purpose of this study is to find out Singapore primary school students' performance in writing skills vis-à-vis oral skills and their performance in oral skills vis-à-vis writing skills in English Language given that all students in Singapore are required to use the English Language in the classrooms most of the time but many switch to their MTLs outside the classrooms, with their friends and family members. The study is based on data from Grade 6 English Language examination over the last three years. The subjects, whose performance in writing and oral skills is studied, are 11-12 year old students who sat the Grade 6 examinations in the last three years. Specifically, the study aims to find out the following:

- (1) Do students who perform well in writing also perform well in oral?
- (2) Do students who perform well in oral also perform well in writing?
- (3) Do home language make a difference to their performance in writing and oral skills?

The findings will provide test developers and examination syllabus developers with an understanding of students' performance in two important productive language skills. The writer believes this will be of some help to improve item writing, rubric writing and help standard setting for the national examinations in Singapore. Curriculum developers and teachers will also stand to gain a better understanding of how students fare in the assessment of the two language skills which are the focus of the study.

#### *Defining Student Performance*

With reference to the criteria and the band descriptors used in the assessment of writing and oral skills at Grade 6, 'good performance' and 'weak performance' are defined in the following manner for the purpose of this study:

#### *Performance in Writing*

A student whose score is at least 29 out of a total of 40 marks for the Continuous Writing section of Paper 1 is taken to be good in writing while a student whose score is below 16 out of a total of 40 marks is taken to be weak in writing. Those whose scores fall in between these two scores are taken to be average performers in the writing examination.

*Performance in Oral*

A student whose score is at least 23 out of a total of 30 marks is taken to be good in the oral skills. A student whose score is 13 or below out of a total of 30 marks is taken to be weak in oral skills and those whose scores fall in between these two scores are taken to be average performers in the Oral Communication paper.

*Grouping of Students*

For each of the three cohorts, the students are divided into two groups – the Writing Group (WG) and the Oral Group (OG). WG will consist of three sub-groups of students whose performance in the writing examination is determined as good, average or weak as defined above. Similarly, OG will consist of another three sub-groups of students whose performances in oral examination have been defined as good, average or weak.

For WG, their performance in writing is compared with their performance in oral to see the relationship between the two performances and similarly, for the OG, their performance in oral skill is compared with their performance in writing skill. Next, each cohort is then grouped based on their home language which could be English or one of the three Mother Tongue Languages (MTL) - Chinese, Malay or Tamil. Students whose home language is English is then divided into two groups, the Writing Group – EL (WG-EL) and the Oral Group – EL (OG-EL). Similarly, students whose home language is an MTL is divided into two groups, the Writing Group – MTL (WG-MTL) and the Oral Group – MTL (OG-MTL).

**The Findings and Discussion**

The findings revealed by analysing the data are presented next. First, let us look at how the students in the writing group performed in the oral examination.

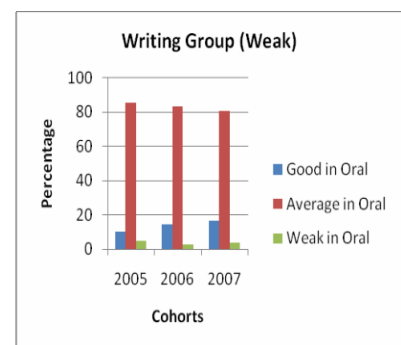
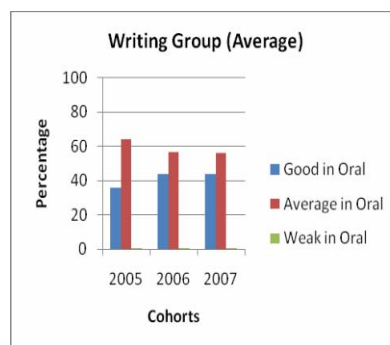
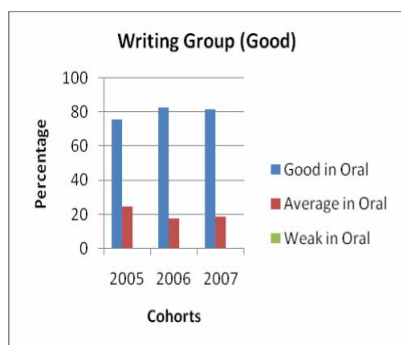
**Performance of the Writing Group in Oral Skills**

When WG students with good performance in the writing examination are compared with their performance in the oral examination across the three cohorts, between 75% and 82% had performed well in the oral examination [Figure 1(a)]. The majority of those with weak performance in writing had shown average performance in oral [Figure 1(c)]. Students with average performance in writing had shown either good or average performance in oral [Figure 1(b)]. Almost none who were good in writing were weak in oral.

(a)

(b)

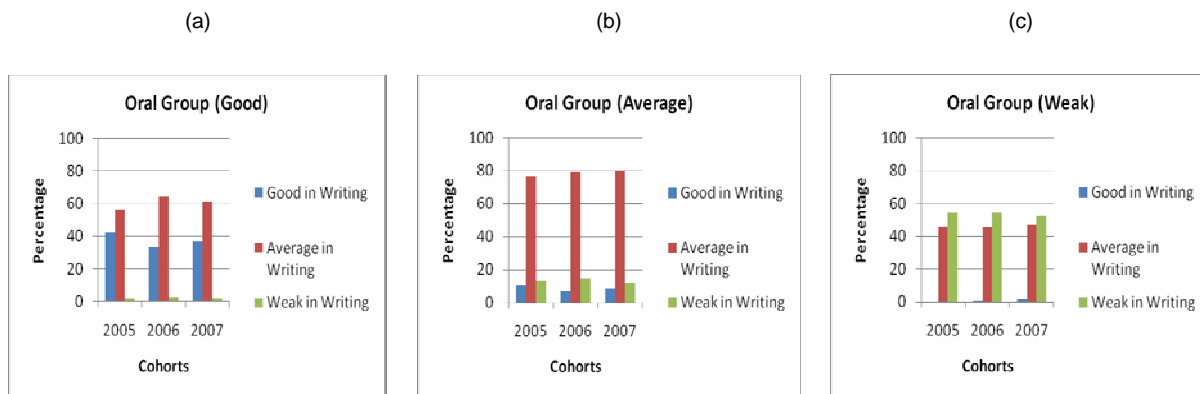
(c)



Figures 1(a)-(c) Writing Group and their performance in Oral Examination

**Performance of the Oral Group in Writing Skills**

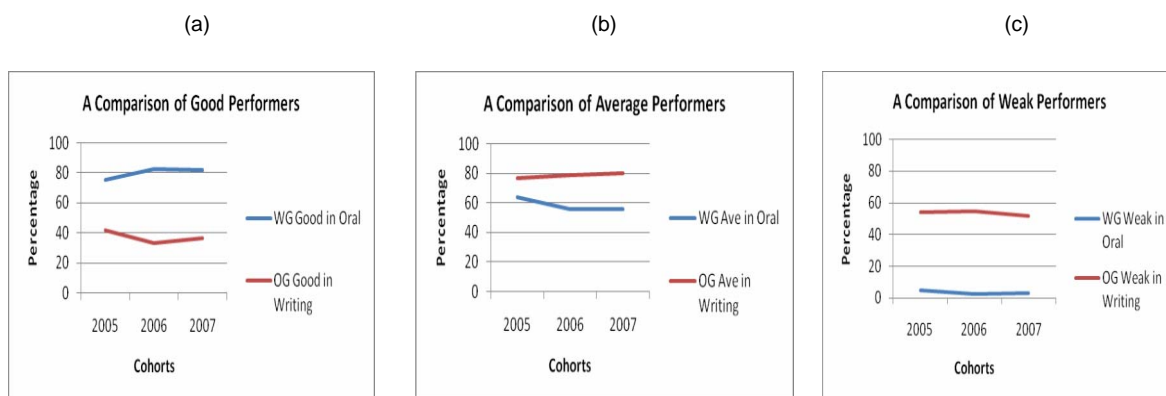
With the students in the Oral Group, students with good performance in the oral examination between 33% and 42% were good in writing [Figure 2(a)]. The majority of average performers in oral also managed average performance in writing [Figure 2(b)]. Among the weak performers in oral, a good proportion of students had also shown weak performance in writing and about 45% of these students had managed average performance in writing as shown in [Figure 2(c)].



Figures 2(a)-(c) Oral Group and their performance in Writing Examination

### A Comparison of Performance between the Writing and Oral Groups

Figures 3(a)-(c) below show how the good, average and weak performers in the WG and OG performed in the oral and writing examinations respectively.



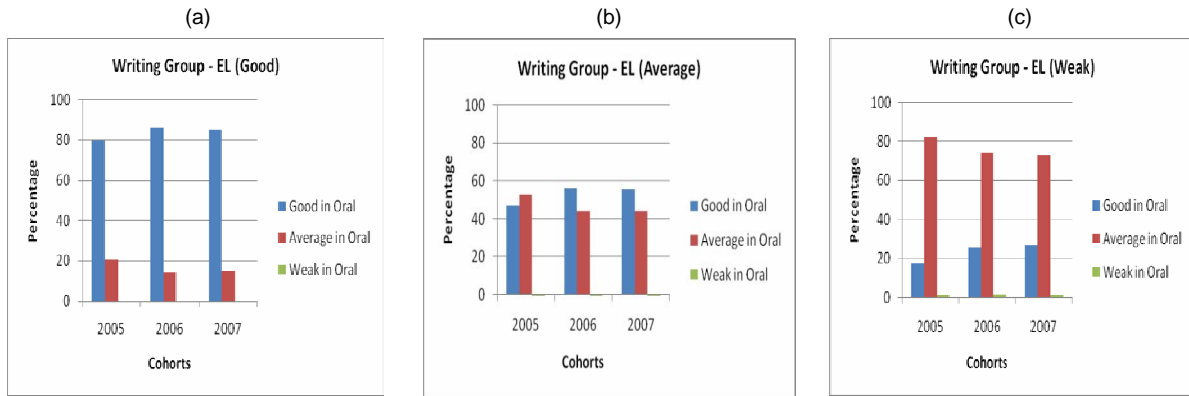
Figures 3(a)-(c) A Comparison of Performance between the Writing and Oral Groups

As can be seen from Figure 3(a), a high proportion of students in the WG who were good in writing, close to 80%, did well in the oral examination whereas among the students in the OG who were good in oral, less than 40% did as well in the writing examination. Among the average performers in the WG, more than 56% were average performers in the oral examination and close to 80% of the average performers in the OG had shown average performance in writing [Figure 3 (b)]. It should also be mentioned here that 35% or more of these average students did well in the oral examination [Figure 1(b)]. As shown by Figure 3(c), among the weak performers in writing only a negligible percentage were weak in oral but a much higher percentage, close to 60%, of those weak in oral had shown to be weak in writing. In summary,

- (1) a high proportion of students good in writing were also good in oral but this was not so with students good in oral;
- (2) a good proportion of the students average in writing were average performers in the oral examination, while a much higher proportion of those average in oral were average performers in the writing examination; and
- (3) weak performers in writing had not shown weak performance in oral but a considerably higher proportion of weak performers in oral had shown poor performance in writing.

### Performance of the Writing Group (EL) in Oral Skills

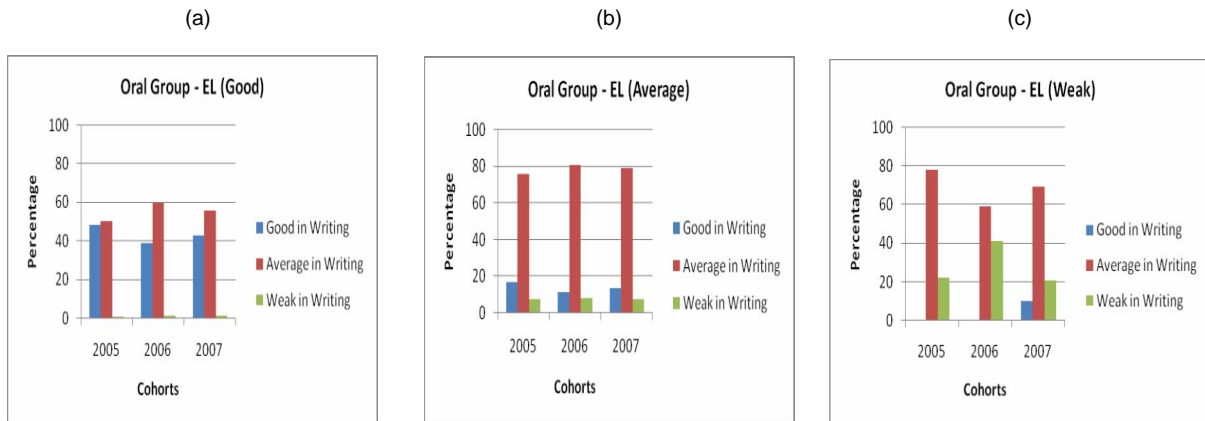
This group of students in WG-EL are students whose home language is English. Among those whose performance in writing is good, 80% or more were also good in their oral. [Figure 4 (a)] Among the weak performers in this group, 70% or more have shown to be average performers in the oral examination [Figure 4 (c)]. As for the average performers, they have either done well or had shown to be average performers in the oral examination.



Figures 4(a)-(c) Writing Group with English as Home Language and their performance in Oral Examination

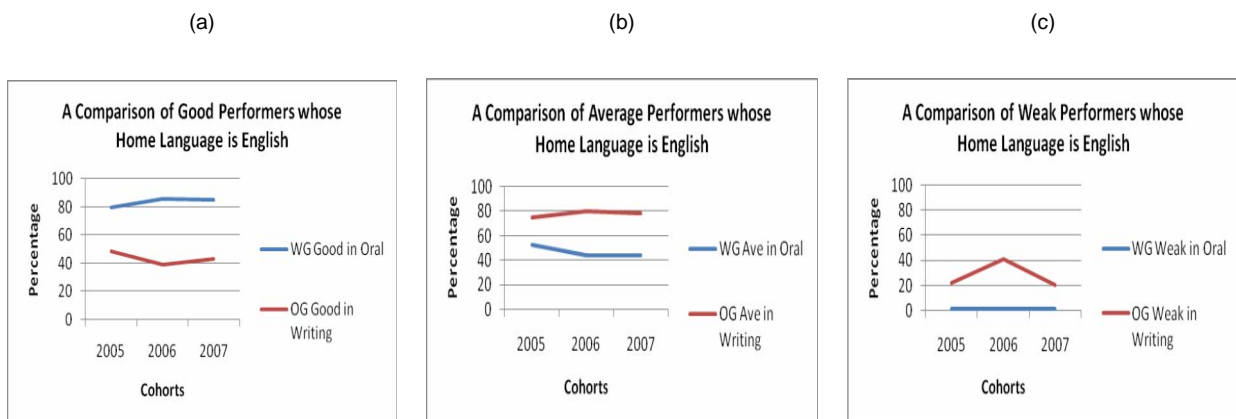
### Performance of the Oral Group (EL) in Writing Skills

Less than 49% of the students in OG-EL group whose home language is English and who had performed well in oral did well in writing [Figure 5 (a)]. Between 75% and 80% of students in this group whose performance in oral is average had also shown an average performance in writing [Figure 5 (b)] and between 20% and 40% of the weak performers in oral were also weak in writing [Figure 5 (c)].



Figures 5(a)-(c) Oral Group with English as Home Language and their performance in Writing Examination

### A Comparison of Performance between the Writing and Oral Groups where English is the Home Language



Figures 6(a)-(c) A Comparison of Performance between the Writing and Oral Groups where English is the Home Language

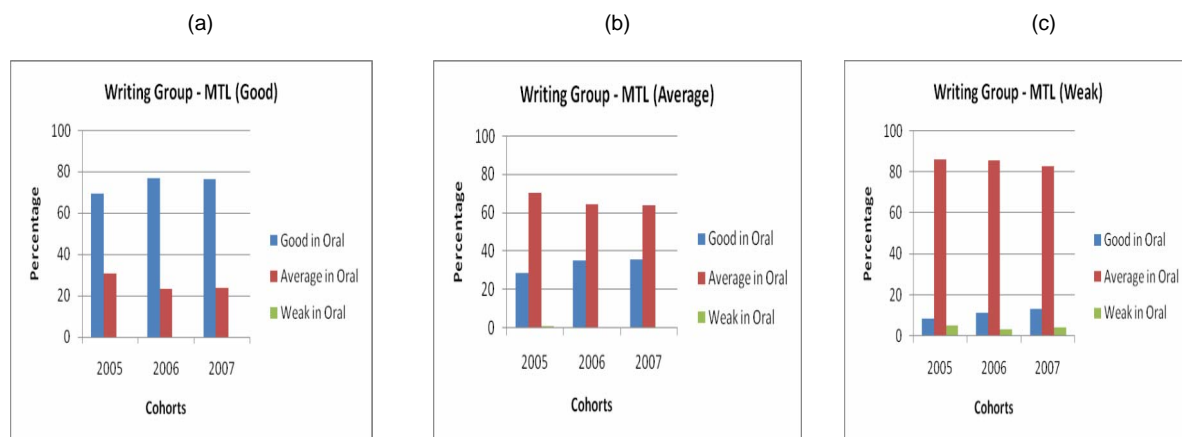
Figures 6(a)-(c) above show how the good, average and weak performers in the WG and the OG whose home language is English performed in the oral and the writing examinations respectively. Figure 6(a) shows that close to 80% or more of the students across the 3 years

who had shown good performance in writing were good in oral whereas less than 50% of the students good in oral had done well in writing. Among the average performers in the WG less than 53% were average performers in the oral examination. However, in the OG among the average performers in oral, a much higher percentage, more than 75%, had shown average performance in writing [Figure 6(b)]. As Figure 6(c) shows, the majority of the weak performers in the writing examination have been better than weak in the oral examination. However, among the weak performers in the oral examination, between 20% and 40% of them were weak in writing. In summary,

- (1) a high proportion of students good in writing were also good in oral but this was not so with students good in oral;
- (2) approximately half the proportion of students average in writing were average performers in the oral examination, but a much higher proportion of those average in oral had shown average performance in the writing examination; and
- (3) while very low proportion of the weak performers in writing were weak in oral, a significantly higher proportion of the students weak in oral were weak in writing.

### **Performance of the Writing Group-MTL in Oral Skills**

Figures 7(a)-(c) show the performance of the students in the WG-MTL whose home language is one of the MTLs and their performance in the oral examination across the three years. Generally, more than 70% in the three cohorts whose performance in writing was good had shown good performance in the oral examination. However, among the average performers in the WG-MTL, 70% or less of students had shown average performance in the oral examination. More than 82% of the students weak in writing had shown average performance on the oral examination.



Figures 7(a)-(c) Writing Group with a Mother Tongue Language as Home Language and their performance in Oral Examination

### **Performance of the Oral Group (MTL) in Writing Skills**

The performance, across the three years, in the writing examination of the students in the OG-MTL whose home language is one of the MTLs is shown in Figures 8(a)-(c) below. Less than 35% in the 2005 cohort and less than 30% in the 2006 and 2007 cohorts among the students good in writing had performed well in the oral examination. Between 70% and 62% in the three cohorts whose performance in the oral examination was good had shown only average performance in the writing examination [Figure 8(a)]. However, among the average performers in this group, more than 77% of students had also shown average performance in the writing examination [Figure 8(b)]. Between 55% and 58% of the weak performers in this group had shown to be weak in writing and between 42% and 45% had shown average performance in writing [Figure 8(c)].

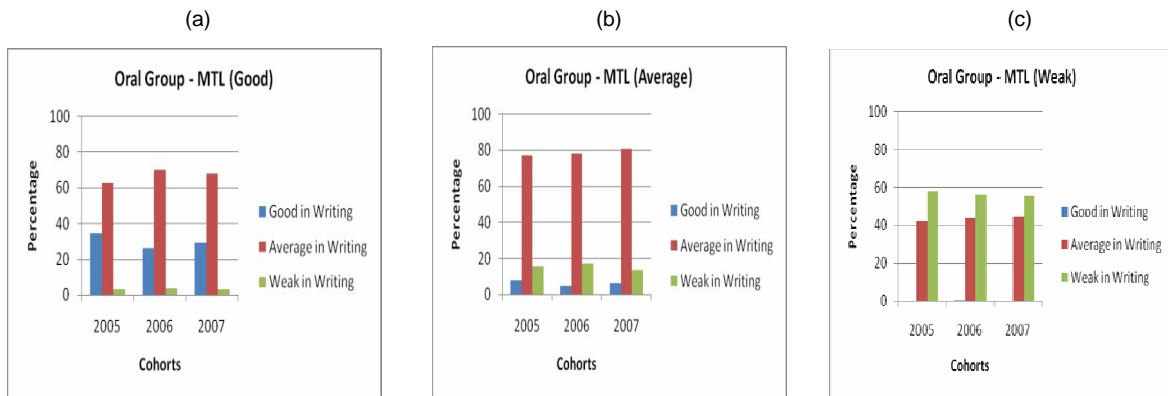
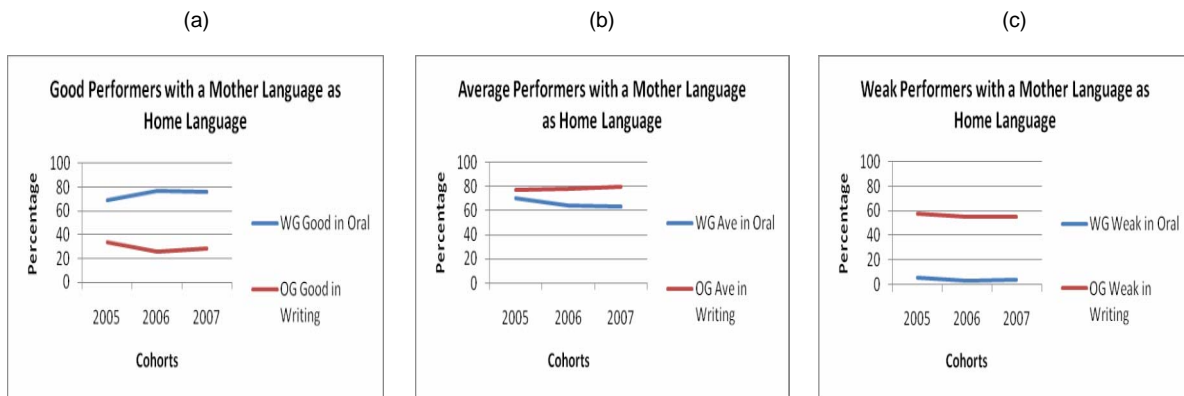


Figure 8(a)-(c) Oral Group with a Mother Tongue Language as Home Language and their performance in Writing Examination

### **A Comparison of Performance between the Writing and Oral Groups where a Mother Tongue Language is the Home Language**

Figures 9(a)-(c) below show how the good, average and weak performers in the WG-MTL and OG-MTL, where the home language is a Mother Tongue Language, performed in the oral and the writing examinations respectively. Figure 9(a) shows that a high proportion of students (more than 70%) good in writing were also good in oral whereas not as high a proportion of students (only less than 35%) good in oral did well in writing. Among the average performers, between 63% and 71% in the WG-MTL had shown average performance in oral. A slightly higher proportion of average performers in the OG-MTL (over 77%) had shown average performance in writing [Figure 9(b)]. The majority of the weak performers in WG-MTL had shown better than weak performance in the oral examination as shown by the very low proportion of students with weak performance in oral. However, with the weak performers in the OG-MTL a significantly higher proportion of students (close to 60%) had shown weak performance in writing [Figure 9(c)].



Figures 9(a)-(c) A Comparison of Performance between the Writing and Oral Groups where a Mother Tongue Language is the Home Language

In summary,

- (1) while a high proportion of students good in writing were good in oral, a much lower proportion of students good in oral were good in writing;
- (2) for students average in writing, again a good proportion of students were average in oral while for students average in oral, a very high proportion were average in writing; and
- (3) among the weak performers in writing a very low proportion of students had been weak in oral but among those who had shown weak performance in oral, a high proportion had shown weak performance in writing.



## **Discussion**

A high percentage of the Grade 6 students in the three cohorts who did well in the writing examination also did well in the oral examination. Xinhua (2008) who did a study with 40 mainly Asian students enrolled in a college-level ESL composition course at Oklahoma State University concluded that students who were ranked highly in the spoken samples will be those who were ranked highly in the written samples and vice versa. However, the Grade 6 students in Singapore who did well in the oral examination did not do as well in the writing examination. In general, this appears to be the case whether one's home language is English or a Mother Tongue Language. A good percentage of students whose performance in writing is average had shown average performance in the oral examination but a much higher proportion of average performers in the oral examination had shown average performance in writing. This general trend seems to apply to the students whose performance is average regardless of their home language. Only a very low percentage of students with weak performance in writing had shown weak performance in oral. In contrast, a much higher percentage of weak performers in the oral examination had shown weak performance in the writing examination. The weak performers' data is of interest for mention. Students who were weak in writing did much better in the oral examination. One reason for this could be some of the differences between the writing and the oral examination. Producing a piece of writing under examination conditions is a solitary activity. As such students weak in writing skills will only have the text and/or the visual stimulus in the question paper to interact with. However, in the oral examination, where speaking is a large component besides reading aloud, there are examiners to interact with and to prompt the students to respond and this may be a good encouragement for the weak students to do much better in the oral examination. However, it must be mentioned that the use of MTL in the wider community, outside the classroom/examination room, is likely to have an impact on the students' performance in examinations and could be significant factor that perhaps need to be studied.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the preliminary findings, the trend shown by Grade 6 students could, perhaps, be generalised for the primary school population in Singapore. In general, students who were good in writing skills have been seen to be highly likely to be good in the oral skills tested in the examination. Students with average performance in writing have been seen to be highly likely to be average performers in the oral examination but students weak in writing have not necessarily shown weak performance in the oral examination. However, whether this trend will continue with future generations of students sitting the primary school English Language Grade 6 examinations is not certain given that the use of languages in the home and in society at large have been changing over the last few decades and will continue to change in the years ahead. Despite the many assumptions and limitations in this study, it is hoped that this preliminary findings will lead to further studies on language skills among students in Singapore, particularly on the influence of home and society in general and the impact on learning and testing. This will hopefully bring about improvement in the testing and teaching of languages.

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A Writing skills are assessed under the following criteria:

|                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <b><i>Situational Writing</i></b> |  |
| • language                        | the ability to write grammatically, spell, punctuate correctly   |
| • organisation                    | the ability to sequence and link ideas so as to present the information clearly                            |
| • context                         | the ability to demonstrate, through writing, understanding and awareness of purpose, audience and context  |
| <b><i>Continuous Writing</i></b>  |  |
| • content                         | the ability to write relevant and sufficient ideas and to develop the ideas                                |
| • language                        | the ability to write grammatically, spell, punctuate correctly and use a range of vocabulary appropriately |
| • organisation                    | the ability to sequence/link ideas and facts and use paragraphs  |

B The criteria for assessing oral skills include the following:

|                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <b><i>Reading Aloud</i></b>      |  |
| • pronunciation & articulation   | reading with clear and consistent pronunciation fluently using appropriate pauses without hesitations with variations in pitch and tone                                    |
| • rhythm & fluency               |  |
| • expressiveness                 |  |
| <b><i>Picture Discussion</i></b> |  |
| • interpretation & explanation   | explaining to support interpretations using a range of vocabulary and accurate structures  |
| • use of language                |  |
| <b><i>Conversation</i></b>       |  |
| • personal response              | giving and developing personal responses; speaking clearly with confidence, using appropriate vocabulary and accurate structures; interacting well during the conversation |
| • clarity of expression          |  |
| • engagement in conversation     |  |