

Teaching sabbatical 2023 – Final report

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Introduction: application, acceptance, and information meeting

Early in the autumn term of 2022, with the required formal and practical support of my home university, MDU, I applied for a STINT-funded teaching sabbatical to take place in the second half of 2023. I had been made aware of the opportunity through an e-mail sent on 1 August by my institution's coordinator for internationalization. In fact, this e-mail contained links to information already published before the summer break, but which I had missed at the time, leaving me with rather few days for compiling an application before the first deadline on 11 August. However, my strong interest in the opportunity, as well as support from dedicated key individuals at my university, for which I am very grateful, contributed to a timely submission.

Considering myself primarily an English teacher (specializing in the proficiency, linguistics, as well as teaching and learning aspects of the subject), I early on dismissed as potential host institutions the US-American universities that STINT had agreements with for teaching sabbaticals, since I assumed that these universities and their students would not be interested in a non-native speaker of English to teach the language or aspects thereof. Instead, I focused on the Asian universities in my search for possible hosts, arguing that the linguistic and academic preconditions and settings might be more similar to the Swedish context than in a native-English-speaking country. That said, I had my doubts regarding Hong Kong due to the political developments in that city in recent years, and I eventually gained the impression that Tokyo would not be a good match for me (or I for them) in terms of their course offerings in English. Thus remained the two universities in Singapore, which I also perceived to be a very interesting destination as a country.

On 21 November, the head of my division at MDU and myself were interviewed, online, by two representatives of STINT, to assess my suitability for a teaching placement and to ascertain my university's endorsement of my plans. While I had, in my application, mentioned subdivisions of both Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) as potentially suitable institutions for me to contribute to and learn from, it emerged during the interview that the Department of English, Linguistics and Theatre Studies (ELTS) at NUS had expressed an interest in my joining them. In fact, another senior lecturer in English studies from Sweden spent his teaching sabbatical there at the time, which would make me his successor. My hopes of being accepted by STINT and NUS thus increased during the interview, though the formal confirmation only came on 21 December.

On 1 February 2023, an information meeting arranged by STINT took place in Stockholm, where we who had been accepted for the 2023 sabbatical met for the first time and received

information on what to expect and how to prepare. Partly because I was the first representative ever from MDU in the program, two colleagues in charge of international relations at my university also joined the meeting. We got useful insights not least from the ‘Stintonians’ who had recently returned from their 2022 sabbaticals, through both formal presentations and informal talks. I made an effort to mingle not least with those who had been to Singapore before, including my predecessor at the English department at NUS, Christopher (Chris) Allen from Linnæus University, and those who would be in Singapore at the same time as myself. I learned, among other things, that Chris had not gone to NUS in person before the actual sabbatical and relied on e-mail communication and video meetings during the planning phase – a solution that was probably partly due to covid and that nevertheless seemed to work well for him. However, it proved to be a particularly useful piece of advice from the STINT organizers, given at the meeting in response to a question of mine, to go on a planning trip to the host university during the spring, which is what I did.

Preparation and planning

On 23 December 2022, a couple of days after the message from STINT about my having been accepted for a sabbatical, I e-mailed the persons that had been listed as my contacts at NUS to start discussing the practicalities of my engagement, such as a suitable time for a preparatory trip to Singapore, and I received an answer on the same day, leading to further mails back and forth during the weeks to come. By the middle of February, I had booked tickets for a trip in April, and by 23 February, it was settled what courses I would teach. Throughout the Swedish spring term, various documents and pieces of information of a bureaucratic nature were sent to or requested from me, by various administrators, mostly regarding my employment at NUS and my and my wife’s permission to stay in Singapore during the sabbatical. (See below for more details regarding the different aspects of the planning phase.)

Choosing my courses

Chris Allen, my predecessor as a STINT fellow at the ELTS department at NUS, had taught two MA-level, graduate courses (which have a 5 as the first of their four-digit course numbers, indicating the fifth term of English/linguistics studies for the students): *Explorations in Applied Linguistics* and *Second Language Writing*. For a while, I assumed I would (have to) teach the exact same courses, but then it turned out that only my taking over the applied-linguistics course was taken for granted by ELTS, with *Second Language Writing* apparently no longer an option. Instead, I was sent a list of no fewer than thirteen honours, i.e. 4000-level, linguistics courses by department head Michelle Lazar, from which I could choose a second course to teach. (No alternatives to me teaching two whole courses on my own were ever discussed.) After shortlisting five of those courses as suitable and interesting from my perspective, I eventually settled on *Pragmatics*, partly because I found it an engaging topic (pragmatics is concerned with meaning and meaning-making *in context*, notably in conversations), partly because it had a final exam as an assessment component, in contrast to *Explorations in Applied Linguistics*, which was based on so-called continuous assessment only. I thought that having both types of courses in Singapore would help broaden my perspectives and experiences further, and so it proved to be.

The planning trip

It had been agreed that the second week of April 2023 would be a suitable time for my planning trip to Singapore and NUS, so that is when I went. Luckily, I was able to secure an apartment for that period at Kent Vale close to the main campus, i.e. the same residential area for NUS faculty where I would stay during the actual sabbatical. This in itself made me feel somewhat better prepared for the things to come, as I thus knew beforehand how I would live,

how I would get to the university, etc. (Renting a place to live on a private basis is prohibitively expensive in Singapore, so gaining access to a two-room (one-bedroom) apartment in a high-rise close to the university, for ‘only’ the equivalent of 20,000 kronor, was a good solution.)



Two of the residential tower blocks at Kent Vale



The living-room-cum-kitchen part of a Kent Vale apartment

I made it one of my aims for the trip to prepare as much as I could not only for my teaching work but also for my life in Singapore more generally. Among other things, I endeavoured to learn to use public transport – and to *actually* use it as much as possible, too. This led me to download a public transport app and get a refillable travel card already at Changi Airport, upon my hassle-free arrival, and to use MRT (Mass Rapid Transit, i.e. metro) and bus to get to my Kent Vale abode. This worked reasonably well, except for some sweaty detours on foot (with a cumbersome trolley bag) at the end, due to my having no internet connection out of doors in Singapore yet. While I accepted this experience as an ‘adventurous’ part of arriving at a new place, I also resolved to invest in mobile internet connection for my sabbatical, to facilitate finding my way around town.



MRT passengers of various ethnicities, staring at their phones



A meal at a hawker centre

On the way to Kent Vale, and then again in the evening, I had my first ‘exotic’ meals at local eateries, and I had learned the first few facts about my neighbourhood (e.g. that there are warning signs for crocodiles in the most jungle-like corner of West Coast Park, a recreational area not far from Kent Vale) and how things are working in Singapore more generally (e.g. that food and drinks are ordered at different stalls at the so-called hawker centres, and that far from everyone speaks fluent English). The trip thus felt like a good decision and an achievement already on the first day, before I had even set foot on the NUS campus.



Multilingual signs showing the way to NUS



A small part of the expansive, modern and green NUS campus, seen from Kent Vale



Entrance to the building where the ELTS department is located

On Tuesday, I met one of my main contact persons at ELTS at the time, associate linguistics professor Rebecca Lurie Starr, whom I had also corresponded with by e-mail repeatedly, and who now told me plenty of practical as well as ‘merely’ interesting things about Singapore in general and teaching at NUS in particular. Upon my expressing an interest in sitting in on some lessons during my planning trip, to see what teaching is like at the university, she also contacted some of her colleagues to see whether I could do just that with them, and two of them gracefully agreed.

The day after, I attended the weekly meeting of the department’s sociolinguistics reading group, following an invitation by Rebecca, who could not attend herself, however. The meeting was chaired by associate professor Mie Hiramoto instead, and also attended by some graduate and doctoral students, apart from ELTS faculty, and even a lecturer from anthropology who had seen the invitation. The research article to be discussed this time was about a qualitative study on Singlish by an American anthropologist, and it received rather a lot of critical comments by the participants. I thus gained a first glimpse of the research-related activities at the department.

I had met with Mie already an hour before the reading group session, and it emerged during my talks with her that she was involved in an NGO assisting female home helps from the Philippines, Myanmar, as well as other South and South-East Asian countries, with a focus on yoga, health, general well-being and socializing. Upon learning that my wife, who’d accompany me in the autumn, is a nurse, Mie thought that there might be opportunities for her to get engaged with the NGO on Sunday afternoons, as a way of making her stay in Singapore more active, social and meaningful.

After the reading group session, I had a brief meeting with department head Michelle Lazar, who, like Rebecca, told me a few things about teaching at NUS, which would be good to be aware of. She also arranged for administrator Audrey Lee, who would be one of my primary contacts for teaching-related issues (though I didn’t meet her during the planning trip), to send me documentation about the *Pragmatics* course I was going to teach. (In due time, I thus received a syllabus and an exam from 15 years earlier, which, it was eventually confirmed, was the last time the course had been offered, presumably because no teacher had been available for it in the meantime.) Furthermore, Michelle introduced me to administrator Angeline Ang, who would assist me with some practical matters, especially in the early phase of my sabbatical. Already now, however, as previously agreed by e-mail, I paid Angeline 2 x 105 Singapore dollars (about 2 x 900 kronor) for the application fees for my work pass and my wife’s dependant’s pass, which Angeline had initially paid out of her own pocket to the Ministry of Manpower, the authority in charge of work permits and the like.

The next day, Thursday, I had a short meeting with Vijayalakshmi w/o Rehunathan, called Jaya, an administrator at the faculty dean’s office in another building, to sign my work pass

application form. Afterwards, following a tip by Rebecca, I did some sightseeing at Haw Par Villa and Hell's Museum, intriguing places a couple of kilometres from the university that are not on every tourist's itinerary, but that I can recommend for a visit.



Entrance to Haw Par Villa



Some of the thousands of statues there

In the afternoon, it was time for me to meet associate professor Nicholas (Nick) Huang, prior to me sitting in on his final class in his “4k”-level course *Grammar and language processing*. About a dozen Singaporean students were present (though the normal group size was larger, as I understood it), and the interaction was based on two research articles on resumptive pronouns and their impact on sentence processing, with some lecturing and some brief discussions among the students. The lesson seemed to work well enough, considering its advanced content, and was in fact similar to what I would have done in terms of teaching methods. I made a note of the lecture slides having been published on NUS's learning management platform Canvas beforehand, and I would later adopt the same principle for one of my two courses during the sabbatical, as some students seemed to appreciate that. (Canvas has also been used by MDU for some years, so here was at least one aspect of my upcoming teaching engagements where no steep learning curve was required on my part.) After class, I got a chance to interview Nick and his research assistant Lily Li about some aspects of teaching at NUS.

On Friday, I could sit in on associate professor Nala Lee's final class in her “5k” (graduate) course *Typology*, based on the reading of one research article, and otherwise similar in structure to Nick's class, except that it concluded with the viewing of a very interesting 45-minute film about famous linguist Dan Everett and the (equally famous, among linguists) Pirahã people and language from the Amazon rainforest. I wondered why watching the film was not assigned as homework, instead of dedicating lesson time to it, but reasoned with myself that it might in fact be a good way of rounding off a presumably demanding course, especially since the students present at the last class might, in this course too, have constituted only a small share of the total number of students enrolled in it. Overall, the impression gained from the two lessons observed by me was that things were not done in a drastically different manner from what I was used to, and this contributed to my feeling relatively relaxed and well-prepared in relation to the things to come a few months later.

Paperwork

I shall not give a detailed account of the more bureaucratic aspect of the preparation and planning phase in the first half of 2023, but only confirm what was to be expected, namely that there was indeed quite some back and forth between various administrators at NUS and myself, notably regarding my employment pass and the so-called dependant's pass for my wife, which required various documents from Swedish authorities, including my regular employer MDU, and also STINT. Furthermore, as had already been explained to us at the information meeting in Stockholm in February, special arrangements needed to be made to avoid taxation of the grant money in Singapore, plus that NUS asked me to confirm my

acceptance of various policy documents beforehand, with my signature being a prerequisite for my employment.

Even though a) the process of applying for an employment and a dependant's pass was initiated early on, b) the NUS administrators seemed to know what they were doing, and c) the completed application forms were submitted to the Ministry of Manpower in May, well ahead of my planned arrival for the sabbatical in July, the confirmation that the passes had been granted did not arrive before the first week of July. (Fortunately, issues with misspelled versions of my wife's name in the confirmation documents could be solved quite quickly, by comparison.) Only after the receipt of that confirmation did we dare to book a flight to Singapore, for us to arrive there on 21 July, more or less as planned from the outset.

Tasks, responsibilities and activities during the teaching sabbatical

In this section, I shall first introduce the structure of the academic semester during which I was at NUS, followed by some remarks regarding my overall workload during the sabbatical and what this entailed for me. After that, I will say a few words about the first three weeks before the teaching began, and then provide more in-depth descriptions of the two courses I taught. I shall conclude with some of the additional activities I managed to engage in during the term.

Overview over the term

To give readers a better idea of the general structure of the term I spent at NUS (roughly corresponding to the autumn semester in Sweden, though it wouldn't make sense to call it that in tropical Singapore), here is a schematic representation offered and used by the university:

ACADEMIC CALENDAR AY2023/2024			SEMESTER 1		Public Holidays	
Regular Semester	Mini Semester	Week	Dates			
Regular Semester: 18 weeks	Orientation	0	Mon, 7 Aug 2023 ~ Sat, 12 Aug 2023		<p>The following dates will be observed as University holidays during the academic year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Day 9 Aug 2023 (Wed) Presidential Election 1 Sep 2023 (Fri) NUS Well-Being Day 10 Nov 2023 (Fri) Deepavali 12 Nov 2023 (Sun)* Christmas Day 25 Dec 2023 (Mon) New Year's Day 1 Jan 2024 (Mon) Chinese New Year 10 Feb 2024 (Sat) 11 Feb 2024 (Sun) * NUS Well-Being Day 28 Mar 2024 (Thu) 	
	Instructional Period (6 weeks)	Mini Sem 1A: 8 weeks Instructional Period (6 weeks)	1	Mon, 14 Aug 2023 ~ Fri, 18 Aug 2023		
			2	Mon, 21 Aug 2023 ~ Fri, 25 Aug 2023		
			3	Mon, 28 Aug 2023 ~ Fri, 1 Sep 2023		
			4	Mon, 4 Sep 2023 ~ Fri, 8 Sep 2023		
			5	Mon, 11 Sep 2023 ~ Fri, 15 Sep 2023		
			6	Mon, 18 Sep 2023 ~ Fri, 22 Sep 2023		
	Recess	Reading	Sat, 23 Sep 2023 ~ Sun, 1 Oct 2023			
	Instructional Period (7 weeks)	Mini Sem 1B: 9 weeks Instructional Period (6 weeks)	7	Mon, 2 Oct 2023 ~ Sat, 7 Oct 2023		
			8	Mon, 9 Oct 2023 ~ Fri, 13 Oct 2023		
			9	Mon, 16 Oct 2023 ~ Fri, 20 Oct 2023		
			10	Mon, 23 Oct 2023 ~ Fri, 27 Oct 2023		
			11	Mon, 30 Oct 2023 ~ Fri, 3 Nov 2023		
12			Mon, 6 Nov 2023 ~ Fri, 10 Nov 2023			
Reading	Reading	Sat, 18 Nov 2023 ~ Fri, 24 Nov 2023				
Examination	Examination	Sat, 25 Nov 2023 ~ Sat, 9 Dec 2023				
Vacation: 5 weeks		Sun, 10 Dec 2023 ~ Sun, 14 Jan 2024				

As can be seen in the column for the "regular semester", which is what I needed to relate to, and perhaps most interestingly from a teacher's perspective, there are two instructional periods comprising six and seven weeks respectively, with a recess week in between. Courses like mine, extending over the entire semester but corresponding only to 25% workload apiece for the students, would normally entail 13 weekly lectures or seminars (or possibly other

forms of instruction), interrupted about halfway by the teaching-free week and followed by reading and examination weeks.

My physical encounters with students started with a first seminar of *Explorations in Applied Linguistics* on 15 August, i.e. the second day of the first instructional week (on 6 pm, as it was an evening course), and ended three and a half months later with an exam-hall examination for *Pragmatics*, proctored by myself in the early afternoon of 30 November. For my part, however, this period was preceded by three weeks of preparation and followed by two weeks of marking. (See below for more details.)

Overall workload and its effects

Contrary to my expectations before being accepted for the sabbatical, and contrary also to hopes I still entertained after it was settled which courses I would teach at NUS, I had barely a chance to engage in professional activities other than those directly related to my teaching duties, due to the latter requiring an unforeseen amount of time. There was no opportunity, for example, to dedicate time to my own research projects, application writing, or other career-boosting activities, not to mention any vague plans I may have had of leisure trips to neighbouring countries during less intense work periods. (We did manage one trip to Bintan, an Indonesian island on the other side of the Singapore Strait, during the teaching-free week in the middle of the term, and while this was enjoyable and perhaps even 'necessary' from a recuperation point of view, it also added to a further increased work pace afterwards.) There was thus very little room, too, for engaging in professional activities not immediately related to my teaching duties (at NUS or, for that matter, elsewhere in Singapore), but the few things I did manage in this regard will be listed below.

During most weeks of my sabbatical, I may have worked 130-150 percent of what I would have done during a normal full-time work week in Sweden. To some extent, this was my own fault (see below), but it was also what I felt to be required from me as a conscientious teacher for the success of two extensive, advanced-level courses designed from scratch in an unfamiliar setting. On the one hand, the circumstances thus entailed an unusually long period with an elevated workload on my part; on the other hand, I also knew that this demanding situation would remain an exception in my life, and I could always 'see the light at the end of the tunnel', which helped me to carry on. (Then again, I'm not sure what the comparative lack of free time might ultimately have done to my health, had it continued for another few weeks.) In any case, I repeatedly told myself and others, truthfully, how much I was learning and experiencing during that intense semester (much more than I would have done while fulfilling my usual duties at MDU), which provided some compensation for all the effort invested, and I could feel the satisfaction, furthermore, of proving to myself that I was still capable of working uncommonly hard, despite having reached 'middle age' a long time ago, and of doing a reasonable job on challenging and cognitively advanced topics and tasks, over a period of several months.

The first weeks before instruction began

As mentioned, we arrived in Singapore on Friday, 21 July, after a rather short summer vacation compared to what I would have had if I had stayed in Sweden, and I began preparing my courses on the following Monday, i.e. roughly three weeks before my first scheduled seminar. During those weeks, 'only' working close to 100 percent of a normal work week back home, I partly tried to prepare myself by reading up on meaning-related (i.e. semantic and pragmatic) issues in linguistics textbooks I had brought along, as I thought I'd need a better grounding in that area before I could teach *Pragmatics* with confidence. While I had a basic understanding of some of the pertinent concepts and theories, due to my having taught and supervised a little in the area, and even having written a research article based on so-

called Gricean pragmatics (i.e. the influential approach developed by philosopher Paul Grice from the 1970s), teaching an entire course on the subject, on an advanced level to boot, was something else.



My office on the 5th floor of the AS5 building

Eventually, however, I realized that my general reading in the field was a rather ineffectual way to prepare a specific course, and it also entailed a comparative neglect of my other course, *Explorations in Applied Linguistics*, so towards the end of those first weeks, I focused more on the actual reading and writing assignments of those two courses instead. Not having done so early on meant a constant struggle, during the subsequent instructional periods, to prepare my lessons and stay at least one step ahead of my students. While I may ultimately have achieved *that*, I nevertheless felt constantly behind in relation to where I would have liked to be. (On the other hand, as we had occasionally discussed among colleagues at MDU in previous years, a course doesn't normally work really well until the third time or so it is offered anyway, so a pervasive sense of insufficiency and struggle is perhaps the normal state of affairs for a teacher of a new course. I certainly feel, in any case, that already the next edition of the same NUS courses would be much more settled – and thus smoother and more relaxed for me – than was the case on this first (and probably only) occasion.)

Designing my two courses in more detail became possible once I was in the NUS 'system', for this entailed access, as the course coordinator, to the Canvas websites that had been centrally created for my courses, as well as to digital books and journals subscribed to by the university library. The latter was important, for I had been given to understand that students would not *buy* books and that it would be better to assign reading available for free via the library. Only when I could access and assess potential sources via the library myself could I make an informed decision as to which books to use as core textbooks and what research articles to assign each week.

Shortly before the start of the actual teaching, I could thus publish study guides with more detailed information regarding the courses, even though, due to lack of time and to my regret, some important information, regarding the required reading for the latter parts of the courses and, not least, regarding the hand-in assignments and other forms of examination, could only be added by and by. As I came to realize, this was an issue for students who are concerned about their performance and perhaps especially their grades (the Singaporean education system, like its counterparts in much of Asia, being very competitive) and who expect everything, notably the assessment criteria, to be clearly described early on, so as to facilitate the planning of their studies.

Structure and examination of the courses

For both courses, I had identified a suitable book, available in electronic form via the university library, to function as the main course book:

- for *Pragmatics*: the recently published *Pragmatics of English* by Kate Scott (2022),
- for *Explorations in Applied Linguistics*: the somewhat less up-to-date *Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, edited by James Simpson (2011).

The assigned reading for most seminars included one or more chapters from the respective book as well as one or two recent research articles on topics related to the content of the corresponding book chapter(s). The articles provided insights into current research concerns, methodologies and findings, to complement the more general, introductory reading in the books. (I limited my searches for suitable articles to publications from 2018 or later.) Unfortunately, for reasons explained above, I did not have the time to read the articles in detail myself before I needed to include them as assigned reading in the respective course syllabuses, and it turned out later that a few of them were of a rather poorer quality than I would have liked them to be, while one or two of those chosen for *Pragmatics* proved rather more demanding for non-specialists than would have been desirable. The choice of articles thus emerged as one of the aspects that would deserve a review prior to (currently purely hypothetical) subsequent editions of the courses.

As mentioned, both courses comprised one lecture or seminar per week. These meetings had been scheduled, without my involvement, at 6-9 pm on Tuesdays (for *Applied Linguistics*) and at 9-12 am on Fridays (for *Pragmatics*). This distribution in time proved rather fortunate, considering my usually last-minute preparations for my classes, as I had always a couple of working days before each. I was told repeatedly that I should stop about 25 minutes before the official end time of a seminar (and of course I did so), to give students a chance to be punctual for lessons they might have right after mine, possibly at far-away venues requiring a ride with one or more of the campus buses. While this was hardly an issue for the evening course (no classes would start at 9 pm), I followed the same principle even there.

Also, while the *Applied Linguistics* course got the full 13 seminars corresponding to the 13 instructional weeks, the *Pragmatics* course only got 11. I mention this because the reasons may be of some interest: 1) As I had known beforehand, the Friday in instructional week 12 was designated as *NUS Wellbeing Day*, with no teaching to take place then (and seminars that would fall on that day not to be re-scheduled on alternative days). This was related to the Hindu holiday Deepavali the following weekend, which is a public holiday for all of Singapore, in honour of the officially recognized Tamil/Indian minority in the country. 2) The second day off came at much shorter notice, necessitating a quick adjustment of the schedule, since a Friday in instructional period 1 was designated a public holiday only a week or so in advance, due to presidential elections to take place then. While it was half-expected that any cancelled seminars that day be re-scheduled, I chose not to do so, because I assessed the remaining seminars to be sufficient for covering the course content (considering also that a corresponding course in Sweden might only have comprised 9-10, or perhaps even fewer, seminars).

At each seminar, I presented some core content with the help of PowerPoint slides, but most seminars also featured one or two student presentations, in pairs, of the assigned research articles (except at the end of the term, when all the 30 or so students in each course had done their presentations and there were a few articles left). If I were to give the courses again, I would reduce the amount of my own talk and assign more group exercises or discussions instead (though I did include such elements to some extent).

Apart from mandatory attendance, active participation and the spoken presentations, both courses obviously comprised additional forms of examination, as already hinted above. For example, both courses included one written hand-in assignment that covered the first half of the course and that was due during or shortly after the recess week, as well as another assignment due at the end, covering the second half of the course and its contents. However, for reasons that never became entirely clear to me (it was related to an administrative change that affected some student cohorts), only about half of the *Pragmatics* students needed to do the second hand-in assignment, as these students were expected to complete an official workload of 125 percent in the course.

For both courses, I had, furthermore, included regular activities to be done on the learning management platform Canvas, corresponding to 10 percent of the final grade: mostly contributions to discussion forums for *Applied Linguistics* and self-correcting quizzes for *Pragmatics*. These weekly tasks were based on content taken up at the preceding seminar.

In *Pragmatics*, there was, lastly, the final exam, which I opted to make a digital one. This I did partly because I wanted to enhance my pedagogical experiences as much as possible during what was, after all, a sabbatical with a focus on teaching, partly because I wasn't very afraid (at the time I was offered the choice and a decision needed to be made) of the extra work that a (to me) new form of examination might entail. While digital exams are gradually being introduced at MDU, I hadn't jumped onto the bandwagon there yet, but I thought that Singapore might be as good an opportunity as any to do so. Unfortunately, it turned out, the system used for digital exams in Singapore is not the same as at home, meaning that I would have to go through a similar learning process once again upon my return. Even so, I came to share a perception I had previously been told of by colleagues at MDU, namely that digital exams require rather more work from the teacher in the preparation phase than old-fashioned pen-and-paper exams, yet they are smoother in the marking phase. Of course, digital exams are likely to be perceived as smoother by most students too, as writing by hand comes less and less naturally to most of us.

Be that as it may, the exam was scheduled almost two weeks after the final seminar with the students, i.e. after a longer interval than I was used to, but this gave me the time to design it well (in my own opinion) despite the unfamiliar format. What was perhaps most intriguing, and a cause for some additional concern on my part until it was over, was the fact that I was to function as the "chief invigilator" of my own exam. (At MDU, teachers are not even allowed into the exam hall while exams are in progress, and proctoring is done by dedicated staff.) Among other things, there was an issue with my not being able to access the system used to mark and report attendance digitally, though that could be solved in other ways. At the lecture theatre functioning as the exam venue, it turned out that not only was an IT expert present during the entire duration of the exam (who could assist the one student who experienced problems with the required exam software, by providing her with a university laptop instead), but also a very helpful and competent PhD student, who had been assigned as an assistant invigilator, without my previous knowledge. Furthermore, an ELTS administrator contributed to a smooth procedure during the critical phases before, at the beginning of, and at the end of, the actual writing period.



*After the last seminar of Applied Linguistics:
some seemingly happy students and a stiff teacher*

Grading and its implications

Perhaps a word or two about grading is in order, as the system employed in Singapore is rather different from what I am used to in Sweden. In fact, most of my insights in this regard I only gained at the very end of my stay, when it was time for me to grade my own students.

To start with, an A-F scale applies, though it is not possible to give or receive an E. F is a fail, but in practice, anything below a certain grade (even below an A, depending on the

individual) can be experienced as a failure by students, as it might negatively affect their future study or career opportunities. My general impression, as mentioned earlier, was that grades are very important to most students, and I was in fact advised by one colleague not to give any student a grade lower than B, so as not to cause substantial distress (though this was subsequently challenged by another colleague, who even remembered having awarded a D once!). On the other hand, at least on the undergraduate level, it would not have been considered OK either to give all students in a class an A. While I had no quarrel with this latter rule, I did end up giving a small number of students what I perceived to be justifiable grades below B, and I felt that I was somehow challenging the system in doing so. I also learned, in connection with this, that it seemed to be standard practice, at least at the ELTS department, but possibly the entire faculty or university, that low grades need to be accompanied by an explanation from the examiner, in case some dean or other person of authority develops an interest in such an unusual and undesirable occurrence.

From a Swedish perspective, it is noteworthy, too, that students can do very poorly indeed on one or even several of the minor forms of examination (e.g. those contributing only 10 percent to the final grade) and still get a good overall grade if they do well on the weightier examination components. Furthermore, while the students can get various marks or comments on their submissions throughout the course (according to scales, procedures and principles that teachers are free to devise themselves), they won't generally get A-F grades for such submissions, but only a grade for the course as a whole. In fact, it is *not even supposed to be possible* for students to calculate their final grades (with certainty) on the basis of the feedback and marks received for the individual forms of assessment.

What I found most surprising, however, and also questionable from an educational perspective, is that students not only won't get to know the overall score achieved on a final exam, but they won't get the exam returned at all. In other words, they cannot see their own answers again (or even the questions, for that matter, unless they go to the trouble of accessing them at the university library, once the questions have been archived there), not to mention any feedback the teacher might want to provide on individual answers. (While marking the *Pragmatics* exam, I wrote some feedback which I only afterwards understood I couldn't share with the students.) This strikes me not only as a purely summative form of examination, but as a lost learning opportunity altogether.

Finally, it deserves to be pointed out that the common Swedish problem with students failing examinations and having to come back (often repeatedly) to pass them doesn't exist in Singapore, partly due to the policies outlined above. A course is over when it's over, and the grade received is what it is. This, of course, frees instructors from the need to schedule and design re-examination opportunities, and it gives them the choice to make substantial changes from one year to the next. In fact, it makes possible a system where teachers can come in and take over courses without having to bother about what may have been done in them in the past. Thus, while I as a guest lecturer did receive some information about previous editions of my courses, I was also at liberty to ignore it, and in the end I did create my own versions from scratch. While this came at the cost of additional planning work, it also gave me the satisfaction of knowing that the courses had become 'mine'. (That said, as hinted before, I would want to make them even more 'mine', in the sense of 'well-functioning and generally satisfactory in my own perception', if I were given a chance to teach them again.)

Additional activities

As mentioned, my teaching duties left me only little room to engage in additional professional activities, but some of what I did do I shall present here in list form:

- During the preparatory weeks, guided tours were offered by the Central Library, which I thought was a good idea for me to participate in. It turned out that nobody else had opted

for the specific time slot I had signed up for, but the two very competent and friendly student guides assured me it was fine, so they introduced the library's very modern facilities in a one-hour tour for just me. While the physical features of the library were impressive and interesting, I ultimately only made use of its services via the internet, notably the very large range of electronic books and journals it provided access to.

- Shortly before my first class, I attended an open seminar at the library, about dyslexia and its surprising prevalence, even among the student population (with, reportedly, three dyslectic students in a class on average). Inspired by what I had learned at that event, I brought the issue up at the respective first seminar of my two courses, to encourage students to let me know if they required special support. None came forward, however.
- I can also mention a self-study program, essentially in the form of animated slide shows to be watched, that every new employee at NUS was supposed to go through within a given time frame. For each completed module, an electronic certificate would be awarded. To my regret, however, I could only do one of those modules, called *A Culture of Respect and Consent*, before I ran into technical problems that prevented me from accessing the others. These problems could never be resolved, not even with a prolonged last-ditch effort at the central IT support towards the end of my stay. Even so, the little I did manage to see of this introductory program struck me as very professionally done, and as a good idea for any large institution having to introduce, on a regular basis, new employees to rules, policies and other aspects of their new workplace.
- After having joined in once during my planning trip, I had counted on attending the weekly sociolinguistics reading group meetings, but in the end I could 'afford' to do so only a couple of times during the term, as I usually needed to prioritize my next lesson. It was the same with the regularly occurring research seminars at the ELTS department, only two of which I could participate in (not to speak of all the other events at NUS as a whole, whether research-related or not, for which I as a staff member received e-mail invitations but which I lacked the time for).
- However, I was asked, early in the term, whether I could speak about my research at one of the department's research seminars myself, and of course I agreed, not least because it would be an opportunity to introduce myself to some colleagues. After some negotiations with the organizer about possible topics, I chose to focus on English for young learners in Sweden, which I had done some studies on and also talked about at a seminar at Karlstad University earlier that year, though at NUS I began with a substantial introduction to the Swedish education system, including many of the challenges it is currently struggling with, for the benefit of an audience who would likely know rather little about far-away Sweden.



The poster for my talk



The poster on one of the old notice boards at the department, featuring its previous name

- There was exactly one department meeting during the term, which I attended. (This can be compared to the four workplace meetings per term for the Division of Language and Literature at MDU, which roughly corresponds in size to ELTS, and the additional three or four meetings of the English subject within that division.) Chaired by the new department head Graham Wolfe, the meeting was very structured and efficient, with little opportunity for discussion or off-topic talk, which seemed to suit everybody just fine. It was there and then, long after the start of the term, that I met some of the members of the department for the first time.
- Interestingly, there also was a fire drill, which members of the department had been urged to participate in (i.e. to be in or close to their offices at the time it was scheduled and to then follow the instructions given). Dutifully attending myself, I helped boost attendance beyond the minimum required to avoid a repetition of the drill later in the term.
- For completeness' sake, I want to point out that, despite officially being 100 percent off-duty from MDU, I did in fact keep in touch with some of my colleagues there, on occasion providing feedback or helping to resolve various issues. I continued to read all the many e-mails coming to my MDU account, and that too, of course, contributed to my overall workload, yet it also allowed me to have some idea of what was going on at home before I would get more involved there again upon my return.
- Finally, it is worth pointing out that I received several offers from students in the graduate course *Explorations in Applied Linguistics* to function as my research assistant, presumably as a way of gaining experiences and merits prior to applications for doctoral studies. I clarified that I would not be conducting any research in Singapore and thus not be in need of research assistants (something I had never had anyway), but then I was individually approached by three students in the same course with requests to support their applications for doctoral positions in Hong Kong and/or Singapore. (In contrast to the *Pragmatics* course, where most students were Singaporean, most of the participants in *Applied Linguistics*, including the three individuals mentioned, were from mainland China.) Though I pointed out to them that I had known them for only a short while, in a limited context, and couldn't provide a well-founded assessment of them before the application deadlines they had mentioned, they still considered me a suitable reference for them, so I did spend the time necessary to write professional-looking letters of support, partly based on input provided by the students themselves, and to fill in the online assessment forms by the universities they had applied to, once they got to that stage of the process. The students were all highly motivated, gifted, as well as pleasant personalities, and while they may have struggled more with the English language than the best Singaporean students, I hope they have found – or will find – the kinds of research positions they were aspiring to.

Insights, lessons and recommendations

I have already introduced various perceptions, challenges and insights regarding my experiences in Singapore, but shall summarize some of them – and some additional ones – here.

To begin with, I would like to emphasize that I never even for a moment regretted going on this teaching sabbatical. On the contrary, I consider it the possibly best decision I could have taken at this point of my life and career, as it gave me very valuable experiences and – dare I say it? – contributed to my growth as a person and teacher, despite, and partly because of, the challenges, the occasional nervousness, the long work days, and even the mistakes I made and the (temporary and moderate) feelings of insufficiency they may have triggered. Being at NUS and in Singapore was also simply more fun than not having a break from the kind of 'regular' life I had before and that I have now returned to, and this is due in about equal

measures to the professional development I underwent and the thrill of experiencing and gradually becoming part of a new country and culture. My first recommendation to others is thus to dare take the step and leave one's comfort zone. Chances are that the gains outweigh any trouble and setbacks.

However, in contrast to what is ultimately a sense of satisfaction over, and even pride of, what I managed to achieve in Singapore under the circumstances, and the many experiences and insights gained on the personal level, there is not that much I can say with regard to the Swedish education system and how it could be improved, now that I have seen facets of another system. In fact, while teaching practices in the classroom may actually be quite similar, some systemic differences are so fundamental that, even if I were to consider the Singaporean model superior, it would hardly be a single lecturer's mission to instigate changes on such a general level in Sweden. Then again, I do not necessarily find the Singaporean system better, at least when it comes to tertiary education, even though I was thoroughly impressed by the performances of the top students in both of my courses – performances that were partly beyond what I have seen from established researchers elsewhere. On the other hand, my courses in Singapore were on the advanced “4k” and “5k” levels, i.e. well above my average courses in Sweden, yet even so, far from all participants were brilliant. My point is that some of the students were very good indeed, and that must at least partly be the result of the education system they had passed through, whether it was in Singapore or in China, but I'm not sure whether the constant pressure, from the early school or even kindergarten years all the way up to the competition for positions as research assistants and doctoral students (and beyond), is something to be envious of. This pressure, apart from having a potentially negative impact on students' well-being and general quality of life, may also lead to rather superficial approaches to learning and passing courses, with grades rather than intellectual growth in focus. That said, it's not as if all Swedish students prioritized insights over passing courses either.

What did strike me as somewhat enviable was some of the approaches, offerings and practices by NUS as a whole, e.g. at and through the library, or the introductory program for new employees mentioned above, or the electric buses plying the campus streets, or the access to wi-fi anywhere on campus, including parking lots, but these things also have to do with the sheer size of the university (about 50,000 students) and its apparently ample funding. If I were to give a comparatively concrete piece of advice to Swedish universities, it would be to keep the English versions of their websites in the best possible shape (or to create good-quality English versions in the first place). While NUS and the Singaporean education system may have an advantage in that almost everything is in English (only) to begin with, which renders communication policies and the production of quality information rather more straightforward than in a bilingual system, I was still rather impressed by the university's resources and outcomes when it comes to online information. On the other hand, the quality of my home university's websites and other information in English has been a concern of mine for a long time, so my first-hand experience of NUS communication practices only confirmed that more could be done in that realm.

Professionally, I have probably learned the most when it comes to my own teaching and the practices surrounding it, or perhaps I just got things confirmed that I had more or less known already, notably that *concrete* planning and decisions in relation to the requirements of an upcoming course are more efficient as preparation than general reading on the topics to be covered. Having settled on, and being able to explain, the structure and the details of a course at its outset is better than developing some of those aspects after it has started, even though the latter is sometimes unavoidable and one should remain flexible as a teacher. Also, more student-centred activities, possibly with the inclusion of modern digital tools (Socrative and Mentimeter come to mind), as well as more multimedia elements in general, are likely to

contribute to more active participation, no matter how great one's lecturing skills may be, so that is something for me to develop further.

A piece of advice to future 'Stintonians' is to come as prepared as life and work in the preparation phase will permit. This goes both for the teaching duties taken on and for the practical and bureaucratic aspects of the sabbatical. If possible, agree early on with the host university on what duties to fulfil and then dedicate some time to prepare exactly those. Of course, taking on tasks that are similar to what one normally does at home will help with the workload and allow one to focus on the pedagogical differences rather than having to master new content. In terms of administrative and practical issues, initiate application processes for work permits, a place to live, and whatever else may be needed, as soon as possible, so as to reduce the risk of uncertainty close to the start of the sabbatical.

Finally, make sure to get to know your host country, whether your teaching and other duties leave you little or a lot of free time. There are always ways to make your Sundays and/or other free moments more exciting by doing things you wouldn't even have the chance to experience at home. Possibly, it is the cultural knowledge and insights you gain during your stay abroad, as well as the intercultural communication skills and practical experiences from living in a new place, that are among the most valuable things you are taking home with you.



Panoramic view from the English department towards the harbour and potential adventures beyond the campus

Västerås, 31 January 2024