

EXCERPTS OF A TALK GIVEN BY
THE PRIME MINISTER MR LEE KUAN YEW ON
“THE JOINT CAMPUS : THE IMPORTANCE AND
THE LIMITS OF BILINGUALISM” ORGANISED BY
THE JOINT CAMPUS STUDENTS ASSOCIATION,
AT THE JOINT CAMPUS, BUKIT TIMAH, ON 5 JANUARY 1979

Note: Summaries of two studies by the Ministry of Education and Mindef were given to the audience. (See attached)

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

The agenda this evening is “The Importance and the Limits of Bilingualism”. I want to hear your views, because they can help me translate long-term possible ideals into the transitional realities.

I now have a much clearer picture of what is possible in a multilingual society: How people can master one, two or more languages. How people have to blend two or more cultures. It is the nub of our problem.

Learning a language is like learning any other discipline. The only special difficulties are hearing, to understand, and speaking, to be understood.

Otherwise your capacity to use words as they are commonly understood in any given society is simply another manifestation of your intelligence.

The current state of research indicates that a part of the brain in the left lobe has the special function for speech, and that it atrophies after you pass the age of twenty. Hence adult language learning is much more difficult for hearing and speaking, than for reading and writing. Now I understand how it was that one of my law professors at university, who was German-speaking and educated, could not speak fluent English, but could write elegant English.

It is not difficult to speak two or more languages for ordinary daily purposes. What is difficult is to maintain two languages at a high level of competence, for example, at 'O' levels and 'A' levels.

I have circulated two studies. The results of the first study, on first and second language proficiency, are plotted out in two graphs. They are the results of written, not oral, tests. The same paper was done by Chinese-stream students, who took Chinese as a first language, CL1, and by English-stream students, who took Chinese as a second language, CL2. The difference in standards widened

as the years went by. A similar pattern showed for English as a first language, EL1, and English as a second language, EL2.

Because dialect is the language of the home, the difference is zero for Chinese language at Primary 1, whether in the English or the Chinese-stream. Then it begins to widen in the primary stage until, in Primary 6, it shows a one-class difference. A paper done at Primary 5 at CL1 level can be done by a student at Primary 6 in the English-stream. But in the secondary stage the difference widens to a 3.2-class difference at Pre-U 2.

For the English language, the difference begins from Primary 1, because there is no support at home. But in the secondary stage, the limits of learning more and more words, and ordering your thoughts in accordance with two different rules of grammar, end up with Pre-U 2 showing the same 3.2-class difference between EL1 and EL2, as between CL1 and CL2. If an oral test were administered, my guess is there would be a four-class difference.

This means the average Chinese-educated student at 1st year in university, compared to an average English-educated, is at a 3.2 to 4-class gap. You can close this gap over three years. I do not believe you can bridge it in one year.

The table shows the results for National Servicemen who took the test carried out by the University on the English language proficiency of new students. The grades 1 to 9 in the left hand vertical column are for General Paper, GP, in the English-stream, and for English as a second language, EL2, in the non-English-stream. In the English-stream, GP 1 to 4 were exempted from the test; GP 5 - 78% passed; GP 6 - 59% passed; going down to 42% for those with GP 9. In the right-hand column, nobody had a P1 in EL2; P2 - 4 students or 44% passed, which meant 5 % failed. Out of a total of 371 non-English-stream students only 16 passed.

Those of you from the Chinese-stream have been facing the painful business of beginning to think and to express yourself in what was your second language. The more powerful the mind, the quicker you will catch up. Both SU and NU staff know this empirically. For admission, the universities had for years ignored the results in English as a second language. They admitted students on the basis of the 'A' level results, knowing from experience that the brighter the student, whatever his EL2, the quicker he will learn EL1.

If I can use a broader metaphor, the more powerful the mind, the greater will be its storage capacity, the better its retrieval capacity, and the more permutations and combinations it can do using words according to accepted rules of grammar. If you have two pocket calculators - one with a seven-digit capacity, the other eight-digit - you know that on the seven-digit calculator, if you put in eight digits, it will blink. That is for just pure storage and retrieval. If you have to programme rules of grammar, you know that some mini-calculators can take more programming than others.

With bilingualism, we are putting into one calculator, two language systems - FORTRAN, COBOL. However, assuming you have done this early, it can be done.

Why inspite of this devastating evidence, do I say we continue with bilingualism? Of course, monolingualism is so much easier. But it is not an option open to us. And even if it were it is a very dangerous option for us. It means a very serious risk of cutting ourselves from our past.

Let me explain the implications broadly. If you decide to emigrate and be an American or a Canadian, then you plug into a whole culture system. With the

language is a whole set of values. It is part of the software that is put into the computer, because with language goes the thoughts, ideas, philosophy, that generations of people speaking that language have refined, distilled and preserved. Then you become an American or a Canadian. But I am not sure what we will become if we decide to use only English. It is a big risk I am not prepared to run.

Language means culture and culture is not static. We have decided to let time and circumstances decide what are the values that will prove valid and relevant to our future, a future that we, as a different group of people of different races constituted as a nation, will find useful and relevant for adaptation and survival.

With the facts about the difference between EL1 and EL2 standards staring us in the face, the problem that we must solve is how to help those of you from the Chinese-stream to close the 3.2 to 4-year gap in three years, and to make it easier each year for new students who come after you from the Chinese-stream. By the third or the fourth subsequent intake to this Joint Campus, the problem should have been resolved in the schools.

However, a more difficult problem is arising in the schools. As we move into more English language at the secondary stage, the more will be the influence of the Western ideas and Western values carried in English-language publications. A child does not grow up in isolation. His views, his attitudes, are shaped by his family, his teachers, his friends, by what he reads. The more his friends absorb of Western values, the more these Western values will influence him.

Somehow we must abstract and distil the essence of our Asian culture and values so that English may be used for supplementary instruction in moral education. This is more important for the secondary stage of schooling, for the gap between the first and second language increases appreciably in the secondary stage. It is at that stage that the vocabulary begins to expand, and more and more data has to be absorbed in the first language.

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You may not be so interested in this problem because it does not affect you. But one day you will have children to educate. Then you may remember this discussion for you will be confronted with this dilemma. It is not peculiar to Singapore. It is a dilemma faced by all developing countries.

I have just been on a visit to India. The Indian Prime Minister, Mr Desai, explained India's three-language policy: An Indian learns his native or regional language, then he learns Hindi and then English.

Later I had a discussion with someone from the South. He said Mr Desai's mother tongue, Gujarati, was very close to Hindi, so in fact for the Northerners it was only bilingualism. I put this to a Northerner whom I met in the South. He replied, "We in the North are prepared to learn Tamil or a Southern Dravidian language to make it fair." So the problem is not new.

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We must be practical in seeking the answer for our problems.

We all know the importance of bilingualism. We also know the limits or levels of competence that the average person can achieve in two languages. I now want you to tell me how you believe it can be made easier for you to bridge

the 3.2 to 4-class gap, and out of your experience in the past six months at university, we can help those who will come in next year.

I have actually come tonight to find out how to do my job better.

Convention requires that I speak to you first.

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ATTAINMENT OF AVERAGE PUPILS
IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

The Ministry of Education has completed studies on how average pupils in the Chinese-stream and English-stream compare in their standards of Chinese Language and English Language.

2 17,000 pupils from Primary 1 (P1) to Pre-University (PU2) in average schools were tested. The tests were on composition, comprehension, and grammar and usage. There were no oral tests.

3 Figure 1 shows graphically the standard achieved by English-stream pupils taking Chinese as a second language (CL2) against that of Chinese-stream pupils taking Chinese as a first language (CL1). Thus the Primary 6 CL2 standard corresponds to the Primary 5 CL1 standard, 1 grade lower.

4 Figure 2 shows graphically the standard achieved by Chinese-stream pupils taking English as a second language (EL2) against that of English-stream pupils taking English as a first language (EL1). The Primary 6 EL2 standard, for example, is 2 grades lower, being equivalent to the Primary 4 EL1 standard.

5 For both languages, the differences between the first and second language standards increased year by year.

6 At the primary levels, the difference between the CL1 and CL2 standards increased from zero at Primary 1 to 1 grade at Primary 4, and remained at 1 grade until Primary 6; the difference between EL1 and EL2 increased from 0.5 grade at Primary 1 to 2 grades at Primary 4, and remained at 2 grades until Primary 6. The significantly poorer performance in EL2 compared to CL2 shows that English-stream pupils cope better with Mandarin than Chinese-stream pupils do with English. This suggests how difficult it is for pupils from dialect-speaking homes to cope with English: Mandarin is akin to dialect whereas English is quite a foreign language. Interestingly, there was no significant difference between CL1 and CL2 at Primary 1 whereas there was straightway a significant difference between EL1 and EL2.

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7 At the secondary levels, the difference between CL1 and CL2 increased from 2 grades at Secondary 1 to 2.8 grades at Secondary 4; that between EL1 and EL2 increased from 2.2 grades at Secondary 1 to 2.8 grades at Secondary 4.

8 At the pre-university levels, the grade differences between CL1 and CL2, and EL1 and EL2, were the same: 3 grades for Pre-University 1 and 3.2 grades

for Pre-University 2. But Pre-University students are in fact the above average in the total pupil population. If the really average pupils from Secondary 4 were to go on to pre-university classes, the CL1/CL2 and EL1/EL2 difference in standards would probably be more than 4 grades.

9 The studies did not assess abilities in hearing and speaking. Since Chinese-stream pupils are generally less able in oral than in written skills, it means that the difference in standard found between EL1 and EL2 does not correctly reflect their oral competency: increasing the difference by half a grade at primary levels to 1 grade at secondary levels would probably give a truer picture.

10 The studies indicate that average pupils cannot cope with two languages at the L1 level: the average pupil cannot maintain CL1 standard if he wants to achieve EL1 level in the Chinese-stream.

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11 The studies also show that Chinese-stream pre-university students must bridge a 3-4 grade gap if they want to be at par with English-stream students on entering university.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY
OF NATIONAL SERVICEMEN
ENTERING THE LOCAL UNIVERSITIES

All students entering the local universities have to take an English Proficiency Test, except for those who scored grades of 4 or above in the English General Paper at the GCE 'A' level examination. Mindef has carried out a study on how full-time National Servicemen performed in the 1978 Test.

2 The Test results are given in Table 1. Of the 745 National Servicemen who sat for the Test, 256 (or 34%) passed and 489 (or 66%) failed. English-stream students, with a pass rate of 64%, performed very much better than the non-English-stream students, whose pass rate was only 4%. Among non-English-stream students, significant passes occurred only with those who scored P2 in their English as a second language (EL2) paper; even then the pass rate was only 44%.

3 The average marks scored in the Test are given in Table 2. The average score of English-stream students was greater than 50%, even for those who scored grade 9 in the General Paper. Of the non-English-stream students, only those who scored grade 2 in the EL2 Paper attained an average score of more than 50%.

4 142 of the non-English-stream students attended an intensive English Language Course at the Nanyang University Language Centre from March to June 1978. Table 2 shows that these students did consistently better than those who had the same EL2 grades but who did not attend the Course. However, only one of them managed to pass the Test. Even though the Course was definitely helpful, it could not overcome the big deficiency in English.

5 The study showed the level of English proficiency of the non-English-stream students to be very low. A Ministry of Education study suggests that the standard was on average lower than that of Secondary 3 in English-stream schools.

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TABLE 1

RESULTS OF REMEDIAL ENGLISH PRE-COURSE TEST BY LANGUAGE STREAM
AND GRADE IN ENGLISH IN THE GCE 'A' LEVEL EXAMINATIONS

Grade in English in the GCE 'A' level Examinations *	English-stream Students			Non-English-stream Students		
	Passed	Failed	Total	Passed	Failed	Total
1	Exempted from Remedial English Pre-Course Test			0	0	0
2				4 (44%)	5 (56%)	9
3				2 (7%)	25 (93%)	27
4				5 (7%)	70 (93%)	75
5	89 (78%)	25 (22%)	114	3 (3%)	108 (97%)	111
6	107 (59%)	75 (41%)	182	2 (2%)	93 (98%)	95
7	24 (60%)	16 (40%)	40	0 (0%)	17 (100%)	17
8	10 (71%)	4 (29%)	14	0 (0%)	18 (100%)	18
9	10 (42%)	14 (58%)	24	0 (0%)	19 (100%)	19
Total	240 (64%)	134 (36%)	374	16 (4%)	355 (96%)	371

* This is the grade for General Paper in the case of English-stream students, and for English as a Second Language (EL2) in the case of non-English-stream students.

TABLE 2

AVERAGE SCORES IN THE REMEDIAL ENGLISH PRE-COURSE TEST BY
LANGUAGE STREAM AND GRADE IN ENGLISH IN THE GCE 'A' LEVEL
EXAMINATION

Grade in English in the GCE 'A' Level Examinations *	English-stream Students		Non-English-stream Students					
			Overall		Attended Intensive English Course		Did not Attend Intensive English Course	
					No.	Average Score	No.	Average Score
			No.	Average Score	No.	Average Score	No.	Average Score
1	Exempted from		0	-	0	-	0	-
2	Remedial		9	54.11%	0	-	9	54.11%
3	English Pre-		27	45.69%	0	-	27	45.69%
4	Course Test		75	41.03%	5	44.25%	70	40.85%
5	114	61.91%	111	37.10%	16	37.38%	95	37.18%
6	182	57.91%	95	35.46%	76	35.74%	19	32.00%
7	40	57.66%	17	28.80%	12	30.67%	5	26.25%
8	14	58.50%	18	28.28%	14	29.00%	4	26.60%
9	24	54.71%	19	28.35%	19	28.35%	0	-
Overall	374	58.93%	371	37.26%	142	34.22%	229	39.12%

* This is the grade for General Paper in the case of English-stream students, and for English as a Second Language (EL2) in the case of non-English-stream students.

GRADE LEVEL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CL1 AND CL2

华文作为第一及第二语文之间的不同等级

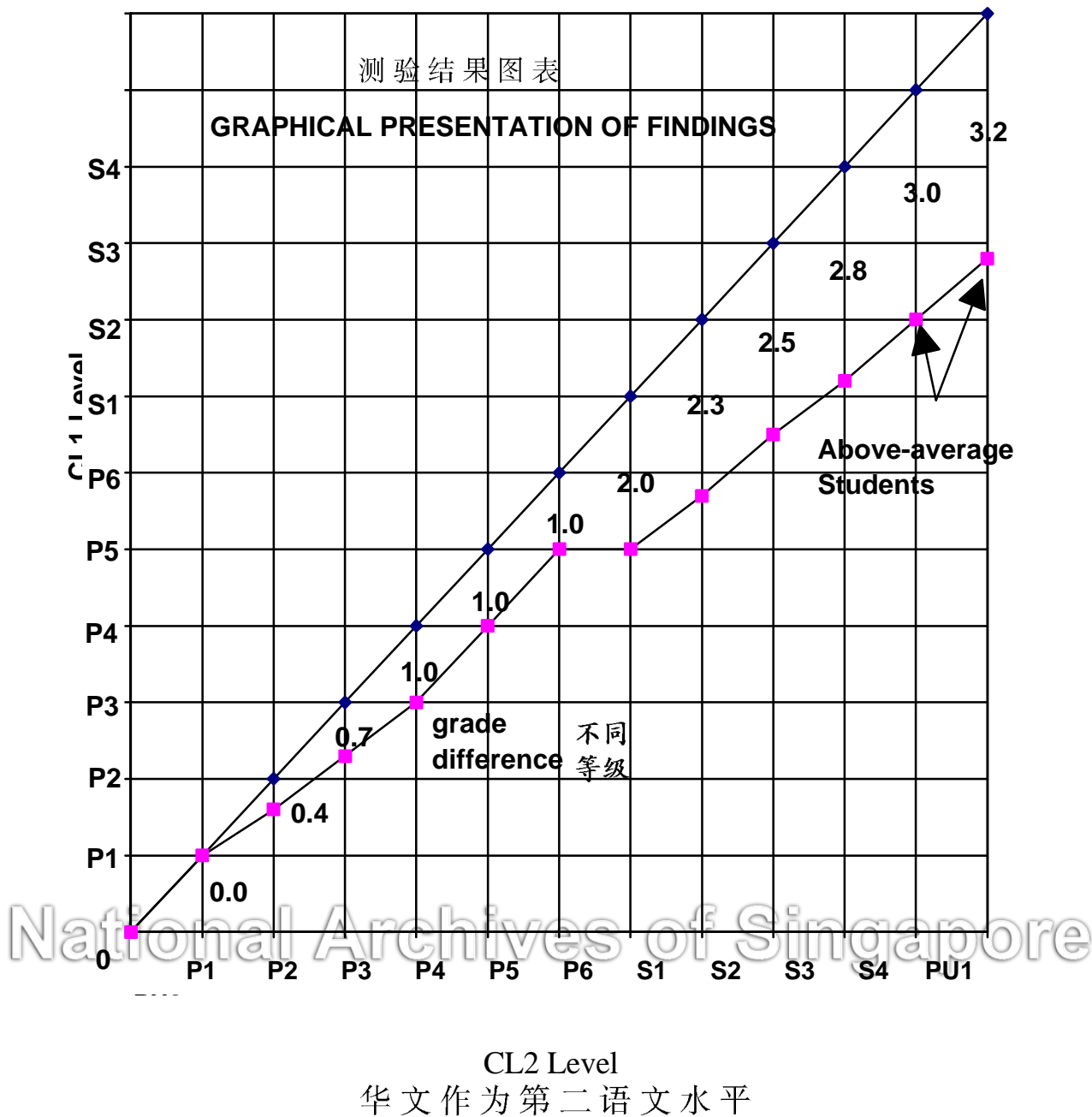
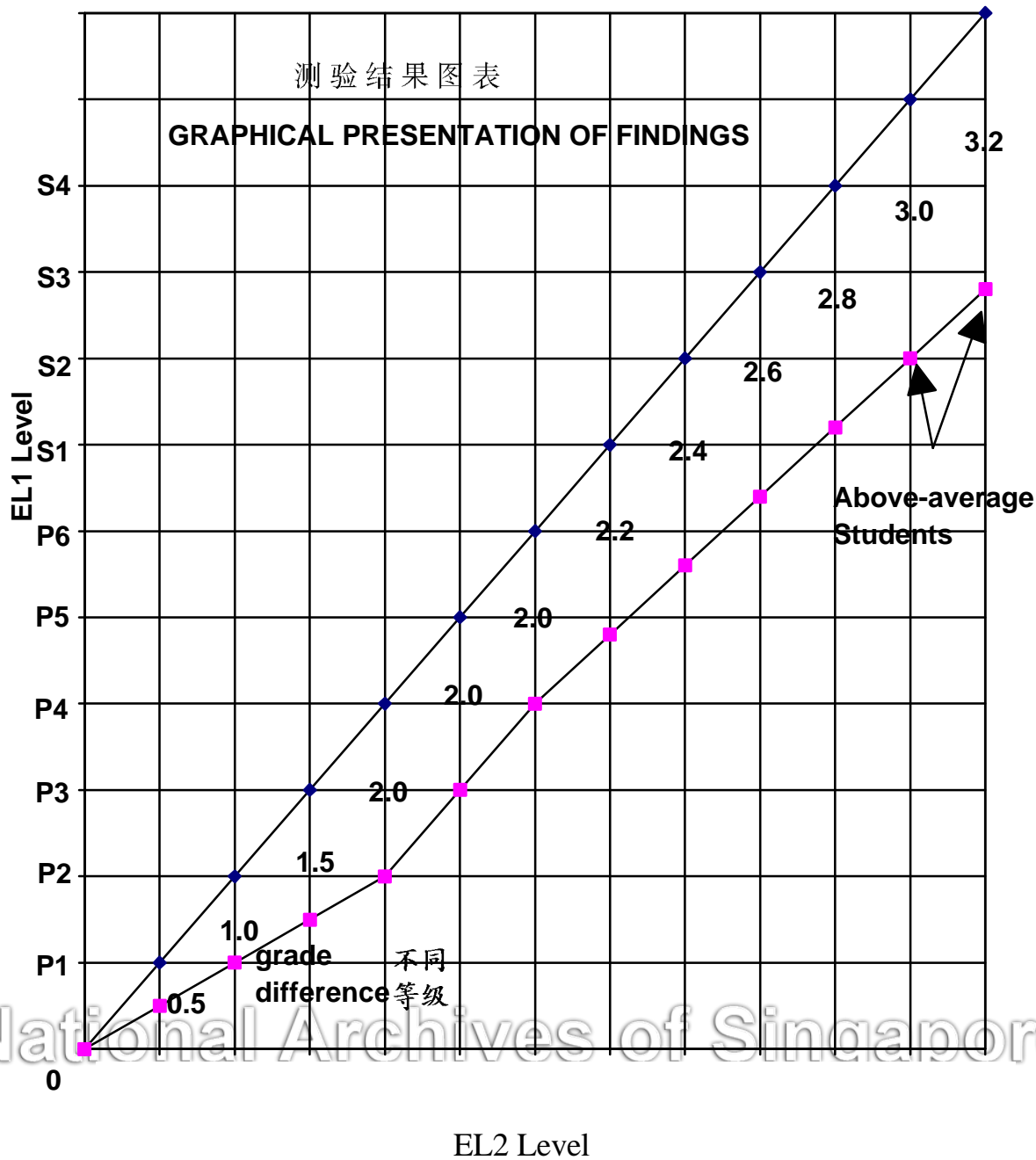


FIGURE 1

数字 1

GRADE LEVEL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EL1 AND EL2

英文作为第一及第二语文之间的不同等级



英文作为第二语文水平

FIGURE 2

数字 2