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## BILINGUALISM POLICY IN SINGAPORE ELITE SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

The Singapore government has been promoting the mastery of the English language as well as the mother tongue since 1987 in the hope that Singaporeans can be fluent in both the working language and one related to their native roots. From then on, all Chinese schools are required to teach in the English language, and English is officially known as the first language of all students. This paper aims to study the policy's background, specifically in the area of Mandarin, and find out whether this policy has managed to achieve its goals, how it has affected Singapore students' language development in elite schools, how to improve the policy to benefit students in the future as well as provide some implications for enhancing Chinese teaching pedagogy.

**Keywords:** Mother tongue, the English Language, elite school, Chinese teaching pedagogy.

### INTRODUCTION

In Singapore, bilingualism means proficiency in the English language and another official language – Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. In the past years, many language policies have been implemented by the Ministry of Education in a bid for Singaporeans to be bilinguals, fluent in both a working language as well as a Mother Tongue (Afendras, 1980). Decades ago, the majority of Singaporeans spoke native languages (such as Hokkien, Teochew, etc.) and few attended schools that educated students in the English language. However, in order to bridge the communication gap in a multiracial working society, a common working language was needed. With the support of the government, the English language was chosen as the medium of communication across different races and it has gained importance over the years because of its necessity in business and worldwide communication (Afendras, 1980; Richard, 1982). As of now,

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English is a global language and the majority of young Singaporeans often speak English instead of their native languages despite the initial intention for English to be only a working language.

This study aims to find out from students and teachers what they feel about the current language policies and how it has affected the language development of the students in comparison to the situation twenty years ago. Our hypothesis is that due to the increasing importance of the English language, Mother Tongues, in particular the Chinese language, are playing a much smaller role in Singaporeans' lives than they did before and the younger generation seemed to be losing interest in learning their Mother Tongues. If this has proved to be true, it can pose a major problem to Singapore. Initially, Singapore was merely a fishing village but when it became a trading port, many Chinese, Indians and Malays migrated to Singapore to benefit from Singapore's growing wealth. Eventually, those who decided to stay became Singaporeans. However, these Singaporeans cannot claim to be truly native as they have roots in other countries. Since developing a Singaporean culture will take generations, the government has sought to preserve the heritage and values of the different races through the teaching of their Mother Tongues as a second language (Richard, 1982). Thus the rationale of the bilingual policy is at the heart of Singaporean identity, ensuring that the next generation retains a sense of self and cultural identity. It also gives Singapore its distinctiveness as a society to stand out from other countries (Teo, 2004b).

This study hopes to find out whether the language policies have achieved the results intended, through interviews, surveys and literature reviews, and identify problems to be solved so that the policies can be better implemented. Bilingual education is not just "education for bilinguals", it is an education programme in which languages are used as a medium of instruction for school curricula.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There are a few factors that contribute to competent bilingualism and effective bilingual education. One of them is linguistic, which means the nature of the language, the structures of native or target languages in a bilingual programme. Another factor is the physiological, for example the socio-cultural settings, meaning the social influences and the background of the person on his or her bilingual behaviour, and whether he or she has had opportunities to access the different cultures of the two languages. Looking into this area will tell us what might influence the students' language development, mainly English and Mandarin.

It is said that not all students have the same learning ability, home language background and motivation (Lim, 2007). The Ministry of Education cannot force students to learn Chinese through policies that state that students must learn Chinese, as students will not be able to master the language that way. However, this is not the case with English as students willingly learn English due to the need of English in the society, as it is the main working language. Therefore, the Ministry of Education has adopted a more customized approach to tailoring the learning of Mother Tongue languages, in particular, Mandarin (Pang, 2004). Many refinements have been made to the Chinese language policy, and this policy gives Singapore its distinctiveness as a society, which would then lead to an interest in their Mother Tongues, and thus, their proficiency in their Mother Tongue (Tang, 2006).

The first refinement is the offering of the Chinese Language Syllabus B (CL B) from Secondary One since 2001 (Teo, 2004a). CL B emphasizes practical communication skills to facilitate the learning process. Far from lowering the standards of the Chinese language, this is in fact a salvage operation to help those students who cannot cope with Mandarin and encourage them to not give up totally on their Mother Tongue. Without CL B, the normal Chinese language standard may have to be lowered over the long term so as to cater to the slower learners. The CLB was implemented to help those with learning problems to at least have some proficiency in Chinese and is not there just to satisfy the demands of a small group of English speaking Singaporean Chinese (Teo, 2004a; Lim, 2007).

The second refinement is the lowering of the eligibility criteria for Higher Chinese. Since 2004, 1348 Secondary One students who would not have qualified for Higher Chinese under the previous criteria were given the opportunity to study Chinese at a higher level. Now that more students are allowed to take the higher mother tongue, it might raise the students' confidence in the language, which would then lead them to be more interested in the language.

There are two views on the policy refinements (Teo, 2004a). Some held views sympathetic to those facing difficulties learning Mandarin, supporting the Ministry's move to provide greater flexibility. They felt that the CL B would motivate students to learn the language at their own pace and is useful for students with learning problems. However, others expressed concerns on whether CL B would be a "soft option" and lead to the further decline of Chinese language standards in Singapore. Those against the Ministry's move felt that Singapore lacked a conducive learning environment for Chinese learning in schools (Loh, 2004). The Parliament had a heated debate about this issue as well. Some members of Parliament,

mostly the Chinese educated ones, expressed concerns that the government was de-emphasizing Mandarin and they wondered about the future of the Chinese language in Singapore. On the other hand, the mainly English-educated members of Parliament spoke in support of the MOE and called for more innovative ways of learning Mandarin.

The Prime Minister back then, Mr Goh Chok Tong's view on the matter was that despite all the recent changes made by the MOE, the government has not changed its longstanding bilingual policy or shifted its position on the Mother Tongue (Teo, 2004b). He felt that English is not our native language nor are the English culture and customs. Singaporeans are required to study their Mother Tongues in schools for as long as possible and to as high a level as they are capable of achieving, to ensure that they remain grounded in our ancestral Asian cultures and values.

Also, now that the government has acknowledged the problem that English is slowly beginning to become the dominant and possibly sole language in Singapore in the near future, they are taking measures to improve the standards of the Chinese language in Singapore schools (Koh, 2006). For one, the government aims for most Singaporeans to recognize and appreciate the importance and value of learning Mandarin. The government also aims to find more innovative ways to help students learn the Chinese language, and for so, the learning experience would be made more fun and interesting, so that students could be more stimulated to explore the richness of the language (Lim, 2007). For example, one attempt to make Chinese more interesting is the start of a section, Popcorn, in Singapore's Chinese newspaper, *Zaobao*. It projects a hip image to Chinese so as to help Singaporeans be more interested in the Chinese language.

The young generation of Singaporeans must make an effort to continue our mother tongues by using them more often so that they would not die out. Moreover, our mother tongues will also help maintain our bilingualism and so retain our cultural, and linguist heritage as it gives us the self-pride necessary for achievements.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Literature reviews of books and journals were done to better understand the background of the bilingual situation in Singapore, and the various language policies that Singapore has implemented to encourage bilingualism. Internet research was also conducted for more updated background information. However, there are a few limitations to this method which include the reliability of internet sources in terms of content as the information may not have been officially proven, with the exceptions of government websites.

Questionnaires were sent out to fifty Secondary Three students from two top schools in Singapore, Raffles Girls' School (RGS) and Hwa Chong Institution (HCI) each. The survey was done randomly to ensure objectivity. RGS was previously an English-educated school whereas HCI was previously a school, which used to teach students in Chinese. The survey tried to identify the difference in the emphasis the two schools place on Chinese and English. The survey touched on several aspects, some of which are the students' interest in the languages, their family influence on their attitudes towards the languages and their competency in the languages.

Interviews were also conducted with two students from the two schools in order to better understand their views on this topic as the surveys were only able to provide a big picture of the results of the current language policy. One ex-RGS and one ex-HCI student were also interviewed to compare the current language policy with those ten to twenty years ago.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Survey Results



Figure 1 Language which

The majority of the students who responded to the survey learnt English as their first language. Parents could have wanted to educate their children in English first as it is the working language in Singapore. This could play a factor in students having a stronger foundation in the English language rather than Mandarin since students would spend more time learning the language overall if they start at a younger age. Even though more students from HCI learnt Mandarin first, the difference in number is too small to be considered.

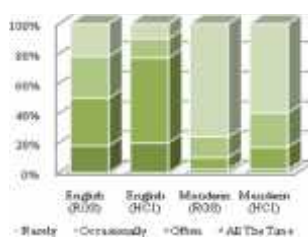


Figure 2.1 Percentage of time spent reading English/Mandarin materials outside curriculum every day

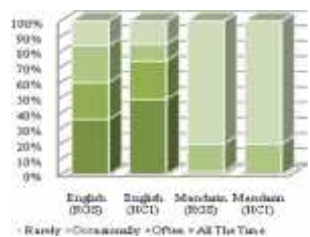


Figure 2.2 Percentage of time spent writing in English/Mandarin outside curriculum time every day

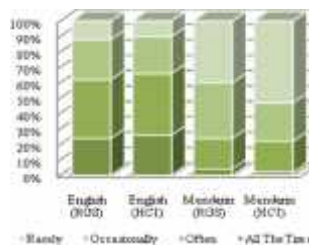


Figure 2.3 Percentage of time spent conversing in English/Chinese outside curriculum every day

The above 3 graphs give a clear indication of students' interest in the English language in comparison to Mandarin. Whether it is reading, writing or conversing among students, English is much more widely used than Mandarin as it is much easier for them. More than 60% of the students rarely read Mandarin materials, almost all of them fail to write regularly in Mandarin, showing the little amount of practice students have with the language out of Mandarin lessons. However it is much better when it comes to conversing, the number of students is much more similar for both schools than in reading and writing. Without sufficient practice of writing and reading skills, it will be difficult for students to score well for that particular language as most of the examinations are written tests.

Sixty-two percent of the students from both schools claimed that their English is stronger than Mandarin, yet only 42% of the students scored better in English for their previous year's end-of-year assessment. This unexpectedly showed that even though students believe that they excel in the English language more than in Mandarin, some of them still fail to get better scores for English. However this could be due to the different marking schemes for each language.

Most of the students also responded in the survey that learning Mandarin would benefit them in the future as Mandarin would help them to grab more business opportunities in China, especially with the rise of China's economy. Ninety-four percent of the students felt that learning and mastering Mandarin is important. The majority of the students interviewed felt that Mandarin is after all our Mother Tongue and an important part of our heritage, thus it is vital to not forget our roots, 62% reported that bilingualism would give them more work opportunities and if they tap into the China business market, it will benefit them alongside with the rise of China. However it seems very contradictory when almost 50% of the students chose to drop Mandarin if they were given the choice mainly due to the lack of interest and of time, and the syllabus, which they felt is too hard for them.

From here it can be seen that students tend to drop their Mother Tongue because of a loss in interest. This is possibly due to time constraints of students, resulting in failure to master the syllabus or reaching the standards set for them by the MOE. It is important to increase the students' interest in Mandarin in order for them to master this language. Home environments are also very important for this. Sixty-six percent of the students speak English at home so instead of speaking just one language, parents should consider speaking more Mandarin at home if possible or

watch Chinese television programmes to help raise their children's Chinese language standards in order to sustain their interest in the language.

## **INTERVIEW RESULTS**

From the results of the interview, both the HCI students and the RGS students felt that Singapore should not practise monolingualism as Singapore would lose its unique feature of bilingualism. They also agree that the traditional way of teaching Chinese is more effective since they could learn the language better with more drilling and that the current method of focusing on speaking does not actually reap positive results. However, since the current method is not as strenuous as the past method, one respondent felt that he could be able to study at his own comfortable pace and go in depth when he is interested without the examination stress. The RGS students felt that there is no significant decrease in the emphasis of the Chinese language; on the other hand, HCI students felt that the current syllabus is much easier as compared to the one 20 years ago. Three students unanimously agree that they would not drop Mandarin even if given a chance as they would lose out to foreigners due to the economic boom in China and because of our Chinese roots. However, one RGS student felt otherwise because of a lack of interest and talent in the language.

HCI Chinese language teacher Ms Chen feels that the government is making English the working language and that Chinese, the second language, is responsible for the language shift in Singapore. Ms Chen believes that due to the policy, more and more families are using English as their first language. Therefore the number of people who speak Chinese at home has been decreasing, resulting in a new generation that either loses interest in the language or cannot master it at all. Although the policy has led to the language shift, Ms Chen believes that overall the policy has brought a positive change to the students' education in language learning, as Singapore is a multicultural society thus it will require Singaporeans to master English in order for the different races to communicate and live harmoniously.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING**

The survey and interview results provide the following implications, which might help to improve the current teaching methods to increase students' interest in mastering the Chinese language. Firstly, as many students find the current Chinese teaching methods not intriguing enough to engage them, teachers might want to bring in multimedia tools, for example, showing videos or playing pop Chinese songs during their lessons to make lessons more captivating. Suitable movies or songs can be played during

lessons to reinforce ideas and contents taught in class as students might find it easier to learn the language that way.

Secondly, internet technology can be creatively incorporated into teaching to engage students. Internet offers the great potential for resource-based learning, collaborative learning, interactivity, publication, updatability, self-control over learning etc. Today students like to hang on internet and they do need to master internet skills no matter what their field or profession in the future. Chinese teachers should tap on the great potential internet offers to develop kind of positive addiction (Glasser, 1976) in the students to Chinese learning.

Thirdly, 75% of respondents feel that a mix of the traditional method of teaching Chinese and the current method which is to speak more but write less would be most efficient in improving the students' Chinese language abilities. A few years ago, the Minister of Education stopped the practice of writing Chinese characters as part of the student's regular homework. The main reason for practicing how to write Chinese words is to help students remember the correct way of writing the respective Chinese characters better. Even though it might be tedious and boring, it does help students master Chinese more effectively. Today without such practice, many students fail to remember how to write the new characters learnt in class, many even forget how to write the simplest ones learnt in the previous years. Therefore, it is advisable that the writing of Chinese Characters should be re-used to help students master Chinese more efficiently. Besides that, Ms Chen also thinks that the syllabus could be made easier to benefit the majority of the students whose standards are low and who are losing interest in Chinese because they think Mandarin is too difficult for them to master.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through this research, we managed to confirm our hypothesis that English language has been playing a much larger role than it did ten to twenty years ago, while Chinese languages on the other hand has a much smaller role to play in Singapore's society. Students in elite schools, which focus more on Chinese language, felt the Chinese standard dropping but those from elite schools, which focus more on English language, do not feel any less emphasis. In general however, the students from both schools are losing interest in the Chinese language and are more inclined towards the English language. Our inference for this shift in language emphasis is that adults give students reasons to believe that English language is more important than Mandarin and set examples for them. This is unavoidable because of the necessity for a working language in Singapore for different races to communicate and on a more personal level, self-benefits for those



who understand the English language (Loh, 2004). However, there is no doubt that Mandarin is still viewed as an important language, as with the growing economy in China, adults are now encouraging their children to put more efforts into studying Mandarin, so as to expand business opportunities for Singaporeans in the future. We feel that this paper will be able to provide the basis for future language policies whereby more emphasis can be given to the Chinese language so as to maintain our culture, for enhancing current Chinese teaching pedagogy and also for Singapore to be able to flourish with the growing economy of China.

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## **THE AUTHORS**

Wang Jiayan, Liu Junru and Wong Huiqi are studying as second year students in Raffles Junior College, which is consistently ranked as the best in Singapore. The paper is based on the Humanities and Social Science research program mentored by Dr Titima Suthiwan, National University of Singapore. The paper was presented at Humanities and Social Science Research Program Symposium in 2008 in Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Questions**

#### For current students

1. Do you feel that there is an increasing emphasis on the English language over the past few years? What do you think is the reason for this?
2. Do you think there has been a decreasing emphasis on Mandarin in the past few years? What do you think is the reason for this?
3. Do you think the changes in the Chinese language syllabus in the recent years play a part in causing the level of Chinese language in Singapore to drop? Why?
4. Do you feel you can articulate your ideas better in Chinese or English? Why do you think so?

5. In comparison to the English language, what do you think is the general attitude Singapore students have towards learning Chinese language? Describe in three sentences.
6. If given a choice, would you prefer the traditional way of learning Chinese (writing Chinese characters for every chapter, having the weekly dictation and memorizing text) or the current method which is to communicate more and write less? Why?
7. Which method do you think will aid you better in learning Chinese?
8. If you can, would you drop Mandarin? Why?
9. If Singapore decides to change the bilingual policy to a monolingual policy, would you be supportive of it? Why?

For ex-RGS/HCI students

1. How were English and Mandarin lessons taught in the olden days?
2. Based on your understanding and communications ability, do you feel that English or Chinese was a stronger subject for you? What makes you say so?
3. The Chinese language syllabus has been made considerably easier and students' eligibility to take higher Chinese has been increased in the past few years. What is your view on the new implementations of this language policy?
4. Do you think the traditional ways of teaching Chinese language is more effective in mastering a language? Why?
5. What was your attitude towards language learning?
6. Do you think that could have played a part in your language proficiency now? Why?

For school teachers

1. The government made English the working language in Singapore while Chinese, as one of the mother tongues, a second language. In the recent years, Chinese language syllabuses have been made much easier compared to about a decade ago. Do you think this government policy has anything to do with the shift in language use in Singapore? Why?
2. Do you feel that the policy brought a positive or negative change to the students' education in language learning overall? What makes you think so?

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Survey Questionnaire About First Language (English)**

- 1) Is English the language that you first learnt as a child?
  - Yes
  - No
  
- 2) How many percent of your time per day do you use English besides during school hours?
  - All the time (76-100%)
  - Often (51-75%)
  - Occasionally (26-50%)
  - Rarely (0-25%)
  
- 3) Who do you use your first language with? You may tick more than one.
  - Parents
  - Siblings/Cousins

- Classmates/Friends
  - Grandparents
  - Others:
- 

4) How many percent of your time do you make use of the 3 skills listed below 4 outside curriculum time every day?

-Reading (i.e. books/newspapers/magazines):

- All the time (76-100%)
- Often (51-75%)
- Occasionally (26-50%)
- Rarely (0-25%)

-Writing (i.e. emails/letters/faxes/MSN/SMS):

- All the time (76-100%)
- Often (51-75%)
- Occasionally (26-50%)
- Rarely (0-25%)

-Conversing (i.e. phone calls):

- All the time (76-100%)
- Often (51-75%)
- Occasionally (26-50%)
- Rarely (0-25%)

5) Do you think your first language (English) is stronger than your second language (Mandarin)?

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6) Is your English grade better than that of your second language (Mandarin) grade?

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7) What is your first language (English) overall score last year?

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**About Second Language (Mandarin)**

1) When did you start learning your second language?

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2) Where and how did you start learning your second language?

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3) How many percent of your time do you use second language besides during Mandarin lessons within curriculum times?

- All the time (76-100%)
- Often (51-75%)
- Occasionally (26-50%)
- Rarely (0-25%)

4) What is your second language (Mandarin) overall score last year?

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5) How often do you make use of the 3 skills listed below outside curriculum time every day?

-Reading (i.e. books/newspapers/magazines):

- All the time (76-100%)

- Often (51-75%)
- Occasionally (26-50%)
- Rarely (0-25%)

-Writing (i.e. emails/letters/faxes/MSN/SMS):

- All the time (76-100%)
- Often (51-75%)
- Occasionally (26-50%)
- Rarely (0-25%)

-Conversing (i.e. phone calls):

- All the time (76-100%)
- Often (51-75%)
- Occasionally (26-50%)
- Rarely (0-25%)

6) State 3 ways of learning Mandarin which you think might benefit you?

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7) Will you continue to learn Mandarin even if it is no longer compulsory? Why?

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8) Do you think learning and mastering Mandarin is important? Why?

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