

Singapore's Journey: Bilingualism and role of English language in our development

By Mrs. Wai Yin Pryke¹

Greetings from Singapore.

For those of you who do not know where we are geographically, we lie at the southern tip of Peninsula Malaysia, sometimes being so small on a map that it is invisible on an atlas. One of our neighbours referred to us as 'the little red dot', a term we have embraced as being a rather endearing description of our tiny island. Indeed, in the scale of countries, Singapore is very small, a city state. The current size of Singapore, even with all the reclamation efforts, is 42 km in length and 23 km in breadth.

In terms of ethnic composition, Singapore is a veritable melting pot. Today, the ethnic Chinese form 74.2% of the Singaporean population, with the country's original inhabitants, the Malays, comprising 13.3%. The Indians make up 9.2%, and Eurasians and Asians of different origins making up a combined 3.3%. Singapore also has an expatriate population comprising people from countries as diverse as North America, Australia, Europe, China, Japan and India. The current population of Singapore stands at 5.4 million people.

In terms of language, we have 4 official languages –English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil, while our national language is Malay. The working language for government and business is English. As far as language spoken by the population is concerned, in a recent survey on home language backgrounds of students entering primary 1, the proportion of English-speaking homes has risen to about 59% over the last 10 years.

Despite its small size, Singapore has been able to punch above its weight. In terms of education, in recent years, Singapore has been able to distinguish itself in international benchmark tests like the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMMS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Progress for International Student Assessment (PISA) mounted by the OECD. For example, Singapore achieved first and second respectively in Mathematics and Science in the 2011 TIMMS study, and was placed 4th in the 2011 PIRLS study. Singapore has also been cited as a high performing education system in the seminal McKinsey report 'How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better'. In the report, it was stated that the investment in education, especially in

¹ *Principal, English Language Institute of Singapore*

hiring high quality teachers and providing continuing training for them, is a key ingredient for our success. Similarly, in a book written by Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley called 'The Global Fourth Way' which looked at the quest for education excellence, Singapore was cited as a system which looked at quality when hiring teachers (we hire the top third of every cohort into teaching) and consistently developed them, especially in identifying and grooming talent for leadership.

In terms of its economy, despite having no hinterland and no natural resources apart from its people, Singapore has sizeable trade with other countries. Besides its natural partners in ASEAN and Asia, Singapore also works closely with the United States of America and the EU27² countries. The push to expand its trade connections has continued unabated, with Free Trade Agreements and Investment Guarantee Agreements being signed with countries outside of the usual trade partners. In fact I note that just in July this year, Singapore and Colombia signed an Investment Guarantee Agreement to promote greater investment flow, and the push for greater economic cooperation between Singapore and Latin America is set to continue, with our DPM Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam noting in the 10th Latin Asia Business Forum held in Singapore in October this year that there is plenty of room for Asia and Latin America to boost ties. No doubt Singapore will be very keen to explore trade opportunities with this region.

I paint this to give us a backdrop of the relevance of Singapore to your conference theme 'English for Prosperity'. Indeed, the fact that Singapore is able to get from 'Third World to First'³, and its diverse linguistic backgrounds, to borrow a book title from our renowned elder statesman Mr Lee Kuan Yew who was responsible for much of this transformation, is partly because of the policy to make English the lingua franca of Singapore at the point of independence.

Singapore's Journey of Bilingualism

Singapore had a very inauspicious beginning. Ruled by the British for almost 150 years, Singapore was divided into ethnic enclaves according to what was widely known as the Raffles Town Plan. Consequently, despite the rude interruption of Japanese rule for 3 years (1942-1945) in the Second World War, the education legacy that emerged from years of British colonial rule was a fragmented one - with English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil schools.

When Singapore became independent in 1965, the government of the day was faced with the difficulties of a fragmented population, divided by ethnicity and religion, a fast rising population and a need to provide employment quickly for its people. The situation was rather dire, with hopes of leveraging

² EU27 comprises Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Rep, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovak Rep, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

³ From Third World to First, Lee Kuan Yew, Straits Times press

the Malayan hinterland for economic development and Singapore being a part of 'one Malaya' being up in smoke. It had to find a way of uniting the populace, as well as to leapfrog the region.

To put it in the words of Mr Lee Kuan Yew⁴ :

"How would Singapore make a living? With barely 700 sq m of land, agriculture was out of the question. Trade and industry were our only hope. But to attract investors here to set up their manufacturing plants, our people had to speak a language they could understand. That language had to be English- since World War II ended, the English language had spread. It was the language of international diplomacy, the language of science and technology, and the language of international finance and commerce. Singaporeans would have increased opportunities if they had a strong mastery of English.

For political and economic reasons, English had to be our working language. This would give all races in Singapore a common language to communicate and work in."

Thus the decision to use English as the lingua franca, and the working language for government and business. To ensure that the English language policy succeeded, there was a need to reform the fragmented education system, and to ensure that English was more widely taught in all schools, including the vernacular schools. Given the historical-political context of that time, this was a bold move. Remember in the 1960s nations which shook loose of their colonial heritage wanted to have as little to do with the language of their previous political masters as possible. Singapore was to be an exception in that political climate. Till today, Singapore is still the only country to use English as a working language in the region.

Internally it was also not an easy process. One heritage of the colonial legacy was the deep seated mistrust of Chinese schools for English-medium schools and the resentment held by the part of the non-English-educated⁵. This was because vernacular schools were funded largely by community support, and as the dominant race group in Singapore, the Chinese were fiercely protective of their schools, seeing that as a way to perpetuate their roots and culture. The solution therefore was for the government to adopt a policy of bilingualism, which demanded that each student should be proficient in English and the mother tongue.

This policy is a cornerstone of the Singapore education system and remains in place till today. The rationale for bilingualism was clearly spelt out and still upheld today, is best summarised by a speech made by then Education Minister Dr Tony Tan in 1986⁶:

⁴ From 'My Lifelong Challenge': Singapore's Bilingual Journey', p.59

⁵ From 'Challenge Facing the Singapore Education System Today', p7

⁶ Tony Tan Keng Yam (1986a) Parliamentary speech, March 1986

“Our policy of bilingualism that each child should learn English and his mother tongue I regard as a fundamental feature of our education system...Children must learn English so that they will have a window to the knowledge, technology and expertise of the modern world. They must know their mother tongues to enable them to know what makes us what we are”.

In view of these challenges, the process of reforming the education system had to be gradual-starting with making it compulsory for all secondary schools to offer a second language in 1966. This meant that English-medium schools had to offer a mother tongue language for study, while vernacular schools had to offer English. There was also the attempt to introduce integrated schools, where teachers and students from two or more schools of different language streams will come under one principal and administration. The idea was to let students of different language streams mingle and have opportunities to practise linguistically but this did not take off as students continued to gather in their language groups and did not mix socially.

There were many more policy changes to encourage greater and greater use of English, while catering to the political and cultural sensitivities of the proponents of the vernacular schools, especially the Chinese schools. For example, the government also saw to it that mother tongue languages were promoted with equal emphasis when it became clear that students were losing interest in these languages and were being overly focused on English. A few language review committees were formed to ensure that there was equal emphases being paid to the teaching of mother tongue languages.

In the end, what turned the tide was economic realities. Parents began to see the value of an English-medium education, as business and commerce were conducted in English. The popularity of vernacular schools fell drastically, with parents preferring to enrol their children in English-medium schools. Even the most ardent Chinese medium schools had to offer English language streams within their own premises. Eventually in 1987, English became the medium of instruction for all schools. The Universities had earlier adopted English-medium instruction in 1980 when the Chinese-medium University, Nanyang University, merged with the University of Singapore.

Promotion and spread of English in Singapore

Language policies would not work as effectively if there were no other efforts made to promote integration and mixing. We had already talked about education, and how schools in Singapore use English as the language of instruction and children of all races attend the same school. The use of English also became more prevalent for social mixing when the government introduced a race quota policy for public housing, to ensure that in any estate, there would be residents from different races to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves.

In the promotion of English in Singapore, it was not just the efforts of the education system-it was indeed a whole of government effort. For example, in the 1960s, adult education training boards were set

up to promote technical education and workers were encouraged to take basic English courses in order to access continuing technical education. Moreover, once the government, the biggest employer, decided on English as an official language, the incentive to learn English became very apparent for employment and promotion. In effect, socio-economic mobility depended on proficiency in English.

The broadcast media also played a very important role. When television was introduced in 1963, the then Radio Television Singapore had free to air telecasts in the 4 official languages. The presence of an English channel enabled the spread of English, and of course, today, with cable and satellite transmissions and the popularity of Western (mainly American) culture, English has continued its popular ascent. More recently, the dominance of the internet in daily life has further entrenched the role of English in Singapore society.

Benefits of Bilingualism

There is no doubt that despite such a painful genesis, the widespread use of English as a medium of instruction in Singapore has had many benefits for Singapore.

The first is the point of social cohesion-promotion of English was accompanied by social policies that promoted integration-national schools, compulsory education, housing policies all served to create an environment that demanded that English be used for communication. Now all races can communicate in a common language, fostering understanding.

There are undoubted economic benefits. There is no doubt that the use of English has enabled us to tap the global economy. In the early days-attracting Multi-national Companies (MNCs) to set up shop in Singapore-provided employment for the masses. From these humble beginnings, Singapore is now a banking and financial hub in Asia. Despite its small size, Singapore is the world's 14th largest trading nation, with merchandise trade three times the size of our GDP.

Our workers are in demand for high skills industry the world over, with many Singaporeans being able to live and work abroad, due to the fact that they are bilingual and are conversant in English and one other language-with Chinese and Indian languages being ones that are relevant to the 2 biggest emerging economies of China and India. This has helped Singapore play a stronger role in helping English-speaking businesses link up with these Asian economies.

Challenges for English in Singapore

There are of course challenges with regard to the use of English. Because of the complex linguistic environment of Singapore society, it is a huge demand on our students to have to learn 2 languages well. Thus, over the years, the Ministry of Education has made revisions to its syllabuses in English and Mother Tongue to ensure that desired learning outcomes are achieved. In the context of English, from a highly centralised approach with clear guidelines and accompanying resources, there

have been a series of measures to move from a prescriptive approach to allowing teachers to decide what was to be taught based on the needs, abilities and interests of the students under their care. In the most recent syllabus revision in 2010, there is an emphasis on using rich texts with Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading (STELLAR) being introduced at the primary schools to promote communicative competence in English.

As more and more people adopt English as their first language, English in Singapore has also morphed. An informal Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) or Singlish has sprung up. To give an example, instead of saying "Where are you going?" as in Standard English, the Singlish version will be "You go where?" or for greater emphasis "You go where ah?" This is a very popular version of English and is used pervasively even in homes that declare themselves as being English-speaking. In recent years, there have been growing advocates for the place of Singlish in Singapore society, with some quarters claiming this to be a hallmark of Singapore identity.

However, the fact is that Singlish is a local patois which is not easily understood by people outside of the country. Hence in 1999, the 'Speak Good English' movement was launched, which continues to this day. The aim of the movement is to remind Singaporeans to master English and speak it well so that we can be understood.

As teachers are key to mastering language, the Ministry of Education set up the English Language Institute of Singapore (ELIS) in 2010 and it was launched in 2011 by the then Minister Mentor Mr Lee Kuan Yew. In launching the institute, he once again highlighted the need for Singaporeans to preserve a high standard of English and become effective communicators.

"The launch of ELIS is timely. You, the educators, must be the standard-bearers of the language. You need to encourage, stimulate and challenge your students to be excellent communicators in English, able to hold their own at home and abroad. You must, yourselves, constantly seek to improve your own command and appreciation of the language so that you can engender in your students the same love and appreciation of good English.

Our teachers must have a strong sense of mission, and a desire to prepare our young so that they will upgrade their skills and you have to upgrade as teachers your skills and competency in English, so that you can play an important role in grooming future generations". (Mr Lee Kuan Yew, speaking at the launch of ELIS in September 2011)

Since its launch, ELIS has focused on building the professional identity of English Language teachers by focusing on the strengths of our teachers and providing platforms for their involvement in building a learning community. We have also provided in-service professional development for EL teachers and piloted a model that we feel will lead to deeper learning. This is by providing post-course support and working alongside teachers in schools to ensure transfer of learning.

Similarly, as effective communication emerges as a key 21st century competency, ELIS has also been tasked with promoting effective communication in English across all classrooms. Given that all lessons are taught in English with the exception of Mother Tongue languages, ELIS has launched a 'Whole School Approach to effective communication' which works with school leadership to provide an environment conducive for promoting and using good English in every classroom. Although this is a voluntary programme, increasing numbers of schools have shown an interest in coming on board. In 2014, we would have reached more than half of Singapore schools.

Conclusion

The story of English in Singapore is still an unfolding one. What is clear is the commitment by the government to invest in education and to ensure we continue to have a competitive advantage in English. The goal for every student to become an effective communicator in English is a reflection of higher aspirations for the future where Singaporeans will continue to thrive into a globalised world while rooted in values that come from learning and appreciating the mother tongue languages.

Thank you.