

# Singapore bilingual education

## One policy, many interpretations

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Bilingualism has always been emphasized in Singapore's education system. Since 1959, Singapore government leaders have repeatedly stressed that bilingualism is the cornerstone of Singapore's language policy. Scholars researching language policy and planning in Singapore have also assumed that Singapore has always maintained a consistent stand on bilingualism. This paper cites the case of Chinese language (Mandarin) education as evidence to show how "bilingual" education has undergone significant changes in Singapore by tracing the historical changes and examining how bilingual education has evolved since its implementation. The findings show that the once-compulsory bilingual requirements gave way to differentiated ones in the history of Singapore's bilingual policy. This finding will help researchers have a better understanding of Singapore's "bilingual education" today and its position compared to other bilingual education systems in the world.

**Keywords:** Singapore, bilingualism, Mandarin, Chinese language, education

### Introduction

Language policy has been an important issue in post-colonial Singapore, where the political ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), needs to ensure political security within the region, racial harmony in the multiracial state, and economic progress in a land with no natural resources. After attaining self-rule in 1959 from Britain, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the founding Prime Minister and main architect of Singapore's language policy, stated that the aim of promoting bilingual policy is to give Singapore children "the best combination of languages for their future" – mother tongue for the ethics, values on work and discipline in an orderly

society, and English for access to new knowledge, and for jobs.<sup>1</sup> This bilingual policy became known as “English plus one of the designated official languages” (Cavallaro & Ng 2014; Pakir 1991). The term ‘mother tongue’ here refers to Mandarin for ethnic Chinese, Malay for the Malays, and Tamil for the Indians. Mr Lee spelt out the aims of Singapore’s bilingual policy in clear terms:

When I speak of bilingualism, I do not mean just the facility of speaking two languages. It is more basic than that, first, we understand ourselves, what we are, where we came from, what life is or should be about, and what we want to do. Then the facility of English language gives us access to the science and technology of the West.<sup>2</sup>

In 1959, for most ethnic Chinese schoolchildren, the two languages (i.e. English and Mandarin) taught at school were not the languages spoken at home. The government through current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, repeatedly stressed that “bilingualism is the cornerstone of our education policy” (Hansard, 26 Nov 2004). The exact definition of “bilingualism”, however, was not spelt out explicitly. Dr Goh Keng Swee, a senior member in Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s cabinet admitted, in his 1978 Report on the Ministry of Education (*Goh Report*), that Singapore’s formulation of bilingual policy has been “rather arbitrary” as,

there is no specific definition of ‘effective bilingualism’ in terms of functional usage or in terms of literacy level

This ambiguity has frequently led to intense debate within and without the Parliament on the appropriate level of proficiency for both English and the mother tongue.

Given Singapore’s bilingual language policy and the problems just mentioned, the research questions that guided our study are:

1. Given the original aims of bilingual education, how did Singapore’s bilingual education develop over the years?
2. What has remained the same and what has changed?
3. What were the circumstances under which the changes took place?
4. Given the changes, is today’s bilingual education still able to meet the original aims?
5. Going forward, what might the outlook of bilingual education in Singapore be?

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1. “START WITH CHINESE-LEE,” *The Straits Times*, 30 May 1974, p. 1.

2. “Bilingualism is more than just learning two languages,” *The Straits Times*, 11 Nov 1972, p. 14.

In this paper, we will restrict the discussion on Singapore's bilingual education by focusing on Mandarin as the official mother tongue of the Chinese population for two reasons: Firstly, Chinese education has attracted the most attention in Singapore's bilingual policy research since it "involves the majority of the Singaporean population" (Zhao & Liu 2010), and secondly, the language itself attracts sensitivities that come along with the multi-ethnic and geo-political situation Singapore is in (Chua 2017). In order to follow the discussion on the language policy, we studied various reports in the main English newspaper *The Straits Times* as well as transcripts of Parliamentary Debates in Singapore, which are documented in Hansard. The documents used are listed in the references.

The survey brings out the many complexities of a language policy in a multi-ethnic and multilingual environment such as Singapore. The main issues among these are the establishment of integrated schools, the introduction of a compulsory second language, the importance of language exposure time as well as double weightage of the two languages and the eventual high failure rates in PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examination). The discussion of these issues gave rise to a differentiated approach in bilingual policy leading to the reduction of the requirements for Mandarin as well. A final and separate issue is the introduction of the Speak Mandarin Campaign, the special position of which in relation to Singapore's bilingual policy and its modern language situation will be discussed in detail.

The following section discusses the bilingualism policies from the time when Singapore started self-government in 1959 until 1979. The next section focuses on the various important policies implemented in 1979, which led to significant changes in bilingual education in Singapore that continue today. Thereafter, we discuss the Speak Mandarin Campaign and look back at our main results in a wider perspective, highlighting the major changes that have led to today's state of bilingual education.

## **Bilingualism in Singapore: 1959 to 1979**

This section highlights the milestones in bilingual policy from 1959 to before 1979. Within that time frame, Hokkien functioned as lingua franca among the Chinese population (Kuo 1980). As such, it was quite a challenge for Singapore's language policy to make English and Mandarin the two widely used languages for the Chinese in Singapore.

In the 1960s and 1970s, English and Mandarin were effectively foreign languages for most children, as some 85% spoke neither English nor Mandarin at home (Lee K 2012: 69). Unless their parents were English-educated, most of them

spoke Chinese dialects at home: Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese or some other regional dialects (Kuo 1980). These children could link some of the Mandarin words with those of their dialects, but English was totally foreign to them (Lee K 2012: 69). The 1957 census also shows that only 1.8% of the population spoke English and only 0.1% spoke Mandarin as mother tongues. Platt (1980) described the linguistic situation in Singapore, prior to 1980, as one of ‘polyglossia’, where the average Singaporean tended to be highly multilingual with a possible linguistic repertoire of six to eight language varieties. Though they could converse in many languages, it was extremely rare to find someone who was bilingual in both English and Mandarin.

This is due to the educational system at that time. When it comes to education, the English colonial government adopted a *laissez-faire* approach. As a result, there existed in Singapore four kinds of schools, English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, with the latter three kinds of schools isolated from one another. During the colonial time, there was also a great divide between English-speaking schools and Chinese-speaking schools. There is documented evidence in Chew (2013: 154–155) of a Singaporean teacher who attended both a Chinese-medium Primary school and later, an English-medium Secondary School in the 1940s and 1950s and he described the situation as follows:

As in the typical Chinese schools of colonial times, the Chinese students could only speak Mandarin or the dialects. They could not speak any English nor were they keen to use English. Those who used a bit of English in their conversations would be strongly reprimanded and criticized by their own peers and would be treated as outcasts.

The opposite turned out to be true when he later attended an English-medium Secondary school and was punished for speaking Mandarin and Hokkien in the hallways. As a result, the typical Chinese-educated student could only speak Mandarin, Hokkien which is an intra-group lingua franca, one other Chinese dialect (Cantonese, Teochew or Hakka), Bahasa Malay (an inter-group lingua franca), with little or no English. Mandarin was seen as the “High” language while Bahasa Malay and other Chinese dialects were viewed as the “Low” languages. On the other hand, the English-educated used English as a “High” language and Bahasa Malay and Hokkien as “Low” languages (Chew 2013: 156). This divide continued even after Singapore achieved self-rule in 1959.

The PAP government inherited this sociolinguistic situation and faced the challenge of cultivating bilingualism in English and Mandarin in a diverse education system of two different kinds of schools with, for ethnic Chinese, two different mediums of instruction. The distribution of Chinese students in English-medium and Chinese-medium schools in 1959 was balanced, 28,113 versus 27,223

respectively where the Chinese-medium schools, represented close to half, 45.9%, of the total number of students (*Goh Report*, 1978). Since about 97% of Chinese students spoke dialects at home (COP 1957), it would be a great challenge for them to learn English. The large group of Chinese students in the Chinese-medium schools (45.9%) had no opportunity to learn English. For the rest of the Chinese students, the success rate of learning English was not good either, since English was not the predominant home language.

### Integrated schools, 1959

The first attempt to integrate English and Chinese streams of education, was launched at Bukit Panjang Secondary School and at Litchfield Secondary School.<sup>3</sup> Bilingual principals were appointed, and classes were held in two different language media simultaneously, both in the morning and afternoon school sessions.

The rationale behind the establishment of the Integrated school was, firstly, to foster interracial understanding among the pupils of different races and, secondly, to aid the development of linguistic abilities of pupils in at least two or three languages. Students from the two streams came together during assembly time, canteen breaks, physical education classes and extracurricular activities. The hope was to facilitate interaction between English-speaking students and Chinese-speaking students, so both would improve linguistically and become bilingual. The number of integrated schools in Singapore grew from 2 (1%) in 1960 to 75 (36%) in 1966, with a substantial increase in the number of teachers from 69 to 4,689 (see Table 1 below). This shows that the government was pushing hard for this integration.

**Table 1.** The growth of integrated education in Singapore (Tan & Chew 1970: 7)

Year	Number of schools	Number of teachers	Number of pupils	Total number of students	% in Integrated schools
1960	2	69	1,8171	167,254	1
1961	7	270	7,762	185,250	3
1962	12	526	16,343	203,010	8
1963	24	1,055	31,207	230,912	14
1964	43	2,243	63,021	259,557	24
1965	65	3,660	93,886	287,132	33
1966	75	4,689	114,380	313,556	36

3. Renamed Serangoon Garden Secondary School.

The Integrated school model permitted the development of racial understanding through inter-racial contact while preserving the medium of instructions of the Chinese, Malay and Tamil schools by taking in students from two or more different language streams under one principal and sharing the same compound. However, the evaluation of the new system was not generally considered successful, one source observed that “neither the English integrated nor the Chinese integrated appear more linguistically competent than their respective single stream counterparts” (Tan and Chew 1970: 33). The Integrated School program was not the sole solution to achieve the government’s brand of bilingualism, and it therefore is no surprise that the government looked for additional measures, which were found in the introduction of compulsory Second Language education in primary schools of all streams, as we will discuss in more detail in the next section.

### Compulsory second language, 1960-1966

While bilingualism was encouraged in schools before 1959, learning a second language in schools was optional. In 1960, the PAP government made the study of a second language compulsory for all primary schools of all streams. As such, though most of the Chinese students spoke dialects at home, they would now have the opportunity to be exposed to both English and Mandarin in schools, regardless of the type of schools they were in. With the implementation of compulsory second language education, English became the ‘first language’ in the English-medium schools, while Mandarin remained the ‘first language’ in the Chinese schools. The term ‘first language’ here does not correspond to our current linguistic understanding of ‘first language’ within the context of language acquisition, since this kind of ‘first language’ might not have any meaningful relationship with the language used by the student at home. The terms ‘first language’ and ‘second language’ indicate the expected level of attainment and the exposure time the school gives to each language. The ‘second language’ refers to an official language other than English – Mandarin for ethnic Chinese, Malay for the Malays, and Tamil for the Indians in English-medium schools.

For non-English-medium schools, English was the ‘second language’. The standard of English in these non-English medium schools was generally pitched at a level two years below that of a corresponding class in the English-medium school (Hansard, 10 July 1968), while Mandarin as a second language in English-medium schools was only calibrated one year lower than that as a first language in Chinese-medium schools (SIE 1977).

After independence in August 1965, the Education Ministry intensified its effort to promote the study of second languages in schools. According to Mr Ong

Pang Boon, then Minister for Education, this is to “ensure, within a short period of time that students in any language stream should know one or more languages of the other streams”.<sup>4</sup> Starting in 1966 in stages, the government made the study of a second language compulsory in all secondary schools. In 1969, the second language became a compulsory examination subject in the GCE O-levels.<sup>5, 6</sup> This new initiative would therefore ensure that students who took compulsory second language classes in primary schools since 1960 continued the learning of their second language in secondary schools. With this new rule kicking in, all students in Singapore were educated in a second language for ten continuous years, followed by a compulsory examination of this language.

Though the compulsory second language ensures that all Chinese students would be exposed to two languages in schools, Mr Lee Kuan Yew (2012: 63) pointed out that in hindsight:

the standard of English taught as a second language in Chinese-medium schools was poor; students were thinking in Mandarin or dialects and then translating into English, resulting in wrong sentence structures. Equally lamentable was the standard of Chinese as a second language in the English-medium schools. As English was the language of administration and international communication, most of the ethnic Chinese children in English-medium schools had little or no incentive to learn Chinese.

The compulsory examination would therefore provide both the motivation and incentive for students to be proficient in their second language. Though candidates must sit for the examination, a passing grade in the second language was not a “must” for passing the School Certificate Examination as a whole (Hansard, 14 May 1968).

In addition to compulsory second language education, there was an effort to increase the use of the second language as a medium of instruction. In 1966 and 1967, English was made the language of instruction for mathematics and science in Primary One in non-English-medium schools. In 1969, Civics was taught in the mother-tongue in the English-medium schools. In the following year, in Primary Three in English-medium schools, History was also taught in the second language. However, this policy was terminated in 1971 due to the language in history textbooks considered being above the competency of the pupils (*Goh Report*, 1978). The priority was to increase, in the Chinese-medium schools, exposure to English, to help these students widen their job opportunities, since English is the language for administration and international communication and these mar-

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4. “Action, not persuasion, from now on, says Pang Boon,” *The Straits Times*, 11 Sep 1966, p. 8.

5. General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level

6. General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level

ket forces were at work (Lee K 2012: 62). Therefore, from 1966 onwards, the government committed “more than 1,000 second language teachers in the Chinese, Malay and Tamil streams” to “be trained within three years in special methods of second language teaching”.<sup>7</sup>

### Language Exposure Time (LET) and Double Weightage, 1972-1973

Since English was seen as the language associated with better job prospects, parents naturally preferred the English-medium schools. Data confirm this preference, enrolment in non-English medium schools fell from 45.9% in 1959 to 33.6% in 1968 (*Goh Report*, 1978). To counter this development, various campaigns were launched by different Chinese educational bodies in 1966 and 1967 to persuade Chinese parents to send their children to Chinese schools,<sup>8</sup> but the declining trend was irreversible, with the percentage of children in English medium schools increasing to 79.5% in 1975 and that of Chinese medium schools decreasing to 20.5% (*Goh Report*, 1978). English-medium schools increasingly became the dominant type of school, leading to a shift in focus in the government’s bilingual policy.

The government was determined to achieve a high level of bilingualism through the school education system. One of the strategies employed to ensure that students learned the second language well was the double-weighting strategy. The first language, in 1963, was allotted double weightage of marks for Mathematics and Science at the PSLE, and it was only in 1973 that the second language was also allotted double weightage. The government recognized the significance of the double weightage and used this as an important incentive to maintain an effective bilingual policy in the face of falling enrolment in Chinese schools. This policy was aimed at the Chinese students in the English-medium schools who had no incentive to learn Mandarin. This was confirmed by Mr Ow Chin Hock, the Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Culture<sup>9</sup> in his address to Parliament, where he emphasized the importance of having double weightage for the second language in PSLE, while lamenting that Chinese Singaporeans learn Mandarin for the sake of examinations only (Hansard, 18 February 1981).

Another important step to enforce effective bilingualism was the implementation of Language Exposure Time (LET) in 1972. According to Mr Lee Kuan Yew

7. “Action, not persuasion, from now on, says Pang Boon,” *The Straits Times*, 11 Sep 1966, p. 8.

8. “Promote study of Chinese’ drive,” *The Straits Times*, 11 April 1966, p. 7; “Promote Mother Tongue’ campaign by Chinese in Singapore,” 3 May 1966, p. 11; “Send your children to Chinese schools drive’ begins,” 8 May 1967, p. 11.

9. Mr. Ow was parliamentary secretary for the Ministry of Education from 1976–1981.



(Lee K 2012: 64), LET is the amount of time a student was exposed to the second language or mother tongue while in school, either directly in the form of language lessons, or indirectly through its use as the medium of instruction for other subjects like Civics, Moral Education, Mathematics or Music. In that year (1972), it was announced that LET in the primary school curriculum was to be gradually increased from 25% of the curriculum time to 33.5% in 1974. The target was to obtain 40% LET by 1975. Though LET was implemented across all different types of schools, the thrust was on Chinese students in the English-medium schools. Dr Lee Chiaw Meng, the then Minister for Education, at the opening of a two-day seminar on Teaching of Chinese as a Second Language, told the English-medium schools not to “drag their feet” in the implementation of the bilingual policy.<sup>10</sup>

The curriculum requirement coupled with the double weightage of the second language in PSLE since 1973, as well as increased exposure time in primary schools, worked in tandem as a force to counter the general impression of parents that learning English alone was sufficient for their children to do well in PSLE. This helped to ensure that the status of Mandarin in Singapore, as was the case with English, became an increasingly dominant language.

### High failure rate, 1974

While focusing much effort on promoting bilingual education, it became clear in 1974 that, in secondary schools, the failure rate among students was high. According to Mr Lee Kuan Yew (2012: 66), in that year, then-Education Minister Dr Lee Chiaw Meng reported that out of 1,000 primary one students, on average 206 dropped out before obtaining any kind of school certificate or qualification. Of those remaining, about 440 made it to secondary four 10 years later. Among them only 106 would obtain an O-level pass in three or more subjects. This meant that of the original 1,000 students, only 10.6% were successful from primary to secondary education.

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10. “Schools told to get on with bilingualism,” *The Straits Times*, 16 November 1973, p. 17

## Bilingual Policy after The *Goh Report*

The previous section highlighted that a considerable amount of effort was spent by the government as well as resources channelled, towards the cultivation of bilingual students in Singapore's education system. This section aims to demonstrate that after 1979, though the bilingual policy still retained its importance, the fundamentals of this policy changed drastically. Firstly, there is a radical shift from a unified approach of using a single curriculum to a differentiated approach in cultivating bilingual students in the English stream. Secondly, instead of focusing solely on schools for the implementation of bilingual education, home languages were taken into consideration when implementing this bilingual policy.

In 1978, Dr Goh Keng Swee, due to the innumerable problems the Ministry of Education was facing, was tasked by Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew to assume the post of Minister for Education. Mr Goh and his team of twelve engineers studied the various problems and, six months later, issued the *Goh Report*. They concluded that the ultimate problem in the education system lies with the bilingual policy:

I believe that we have identified the real causes of trouble in our education system. There are three:

1. The languages of instruction in our bilingual system are not spoken at home for the great majority of schoolchildren.
2. The rapid switch from the Chinese stream to the English stream made necessary the mass production of teachers for the English stream schools, to the detrimental of the quality of teaching.
3. One system of education, lasting 12 years, has been tailored to suit the brightest 12 per cent.

This report brought about drastic changes. Before the publication of this report, the government believed that every student could become bilingual through the school system and made every effort to cultivate bilingualism by pushing for a dual medium curriculum (using two languages of instruction) in both English-medium and Chinese-medium schools. It was hoped that this curriculum would increase Chinese students' exposure time to both English, as well as Mandarin, the official mother tongue of these students. However, the *Goh Report* demonstrated that despite what had been done, between 1975 and 1977, there had been high failure rates of 62% for PSLE and 66% for the GCE 'O' level examination for one or both languages. The figures clearly indicated that Singapore failed to achieve bilingualism, let alone effective bilingualism.

The common belief at that time was that only students from the Chinese stream faced difficulties in learning English: "Pupils of non-English stream schools must

try to overcome any mental or emotional block which makes their learning of English unnecessarily difficult.”<sup>11</sup> However, evidence showed that both English and Chinese stream students had difficulties learning English. Dr. Tay Eng Soon, Minister of State for the Ministry of Education, said in 1983 that even though a greater majority of Singapore students were enrolled in the English-medium schools, they found “it easier to learn Chinese, Malay and Tamil than English”.<sup>12</sup> According to the *Goh Report*, 66% of students failed to achieve a pass in one or both languages at GCE ‘O’ level between 1975 and 1977. As more than 80% of Chinese students, since 1975, were enrolled in the English stream and were reading English as a first language (see Table 2 below), it is clear that the teaching and learning of English in this dominant stream had failed.

**Table 2.** Primary school registrations for English-medium and Chinese-medium schools (The *Goh Report*: 1-1)

Year	English stream	Chinese stream	Chinese as % of Total
1959	28, 113	27, 223	45.9%
:	:	:	:
1962	32, 580	22, 669	38.4%
:	:	:	:
1965	36, 269	17, 735	30.0%
:	:	:	:
1968	34, 090	18, 927	33.6%
:	:	:	:
1972	37, 505	15, 731	29.0%
:	:	:	:
1974	36, 834	10, 263	21.7%
1975	35, 086	9, 112	20.9%
1976	35, 035	7, 478	17.9%
1977	40, 622	6, 590	13.9%
1978	41, 995	5, 289	11.2%

11. “Call to boost use of second tongues,” *The Straits Times*, 15 May 1978, p. 11.  
12. “BILINGUALISM IS HERE TO STAY,” *Singapore Monitor*, 22 Dec 1983, p. 2.

The *Goh Report* concluded that:

In the present education system, a considerable percentage of pupils in schools do not meet the minimum literacy skills expected of them. The situation is more severe in the English stream.

This is a clear admission from the government that students were having difficulty in coping with the English language, and not Mandarin, even though they were enrolled in the English stream in which English was used predominantly as the medium of instruction for examinable subjects.

Dialects have a positive transfer on the learning of Mandarin (not English), a viewpoint shared by Mr Lee Kuan Yew when he said “a knowledge of dialect helps the learning of Mandarin” in his speech at the opening ceremony of the inaugural Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979. This explains why students had difficulties in learning English, and not Mandarin. According to Singapore’s Population Census (1980), 76.9% of the entire population were Chinese (1,856,237 persons) and for Chinese aged 5 years and over who lived with their parents as well as with brothers and sisters “Chinese dialects were still the most frequently used languages at home, especially when speaking to parents (87%)”.

Secondly, a student who enrolled in the English stream had to study all subjects counted towards the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) in English, which was not the native tongue or home language for most of them. This excludes, of course, courses taught in the official mother tongue, Mandarin. For students whose native tongue or home language was not the language of instruction in schools, a period of 5–7 years was required, on average, to achieve grade norms in academic aspects of the language of instruction in school (e.g. vocabulary knowledge), while conversational aspects of proficiency reached peer-appropriate levels usually within about two years of exposure to that language (Cummins 2000). The *Goh Report* unearthed three prominent short-comings in the education system, i.e. education wastage, low literacy of many school-leavers, and non-attainment of effective bilingualism. In the words of the report:

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that a single system of education imposed on children of varying abilities, to absorb learning in languages which they do not speak at home, is the main reason for the weaknesses of the system and for high attrition rates. What is remarkable about the system is that so many made the grade in the face of extraordinary difficulties.

This is a clear description of the difficulties in the learning of English faced by most of the Chinese students.

## Streaming to Bi-/ Mono-lingual Tracks, 1979

The mismatch between the home languages (i.e. Chinese dialects for most of the Chinese students) and the language of instruction (i.e. English) led, in the year following the report, 1979, to the introduction of streaming. Streaming, according to the *Goh Report*, is conducted at two different stages in a child's educational journey with an aim to separate students according to their academic abilities and treat each group with a different curricular approach:

- At the age of nine, about 60% of the Primary One cohort will be channelled to a normal bilingual track where they study two languages and complete their primary education in six years.
- The next 20% of the Primary One cohort will also study two languages but they will complete their extended bilingual track in eight years.
- The remaining 20% will be channelled to a monolingual track whose curriculum will concentrate on language and basic numeracy. Pupils in this stream who came from a Chinese home environment should be taught mainly in Mandarin and oral English.

Though this is only the first stage of the streaming exercise, it is clear that a substantial number of Chinese students will not become bilingual after all. The reason offered in the *Goh Report* is that “for them, bilingualism means illiteracy”. A further justification for excluding the latter group of students is also found in the *Goh Report*:

For the majority of pupils, English is a second language, because it is linguistically different from the mother tongues spoken at home. For the below-average pupils who could not cope with two languages and do not have home support for English, it may be more effective to teach them a single language which is linguistically more similar to the language spoken at home than to persist in teaching them two languages or English.

This was the first time a significant portion of students would not be trained to become bilingual in the educational system.

After four days of intense debate in Parliament, streaming was formally implemented in primary schools beginning with the 1979 Primary 3 cohort and in secondary schools starting with the 1980 Primary 6 cohort. Those who were in the bilingual track, whether normal or extended, after getting promoted to secondary school, were further classified into Special, Express and Normal tracks.

Only students in the Special track (top 8% of the primary one student population or top 10% of PSLE passes) read both English and Mandarin as first languages, while the rest read English as the first language and Mandarin either at a

second language level in the Express track or at a lower “second” language level in the Normal track.<sup>13</sup>

Though streaming has been credited with bringing significant improvements in bilingual effectiveness, a higher number of passes in the PSLE and O-Level examinations as well as a decline in attrition rates (Soon 1988), streaming *per se* does not tackle the root problems in the education system, which are the home language and the language of instruction. The *Goh Report* clearly implied that having more and more Chinese dialects speaking students in English stream schools was the main culprit of high failure rates and academic wastage:

It has not occurred to many Singaporeans how unnatural the present school system is. Most school children are taught in two languages – English and Mandarin. Eighty-five per cent of them do not speak either of these languages at home. Our system is largely modelled on the British pattern but the social and demographic background could hardly be more dissimilar. If as a result of a world calamity, children in England were taught Russian and Mandarin, while they continue to speak English at home, the British education system would run into some of the problems which have been plaguing the schools in Singapore and the Ministry of Education.

Streaming does not change the home language of students or the language of instruction in school. Instead, streaming accepts this predicament and still operates within the confines of this mismatch between home language and language of instruction, except that the bilingual policy now only allows capable students who have overcome the “extraordinary difficulties” imposed upon them by the afore-said mismatch to undergo a bilingual education of reading both English and Mandarin at first language level in secondary schools. As for the rest, most will read English at the first language level and Mandarin at the second or possibly third language level, while a significant percentage of students from the same primary one cohort will be consigned to a monolingual education.

English eventually became the main medium of instruction for all schools in 1987 due to the irreversible declining enrolment of students in vernacular schools mentioned in the previous section. As such, the significant impact of ‘streaming’ on bilingual education is that it introduces a ‘differentiated’ kind of bilingual education compared to a ‘unified’ one, as it was before that time. This means that students will no longer receive the same type of bilingual training from Primary to Secondary education. This differentiated approach radically changed the mindset of language planners in Singapore’s bilingual policy, allowing the introduction

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13. “Grading for 1980 PSLE,” *New Nation*, 29 Oct 1979, p. 1

of a Chinese ‘B’ syllabus in 1999<sup>14</sup> and an elective Chinese language programme in secondary schools starting from 2020.<sup>15</sup> The Ministry’s approach to the teaching of Mandarin in schools can be illustrated with the Chinese slogan: *baodi bu fengding* 保底不封顶 ‘do not cap the top, but keep the bottom’, as used by officials from the Ministry of Education since 2010 (Hansard, 18 May 2010), is clearly a continuation of this differentiated approach.

## Lower Mandarin for higher English proficiency

Not only did the *Goh Report* introduce streaming, it also was the first to acknowledge that “there is no specific definition of ‘effective bilingualism’ in terms of functional usage (e.g. the abilities to read the newspaper and to converse) or in terms of literacy level” in Singapore’s pursuit of effective bilingualism. As such, the level of Mandarin in schools also came under scrutiny in this Report. With regards to the level of Mandarin in Chinese stream schools, it said:

The raising of standards of English in Chinese language schools, for instance, may require some marginal changes in performance levels in the Chinese language if pupils are not to be over-loaded.

As for the level of proficiency of Mandarin in English stream schools, it assumes that since most of these pupils would not be capable of entering university, the requirements of the second language “could be less stringent.” Mandarin proficiency was scheduled to become compulsory for university entrance from 1980 onwards. The kicker is: “It is better that they leave school with a good command of the English language than a poor command of two languages.”

From then on, the general level of Mandarin in schools continued to be lowered to facilitate the learning of English at first language level:

We feel that the standard of L2 today has been pitched at too high a level for functional purpose and for the purpose of university entrance requirement. We suggest that the professional officers examine how the standard of L2 could be reduced. (*Goh Report*, 1978)

Streaming not only introduces a differentiated type of bilingual education into Singapore’s education system, it also seeks to lower the general level of proficiency

14. “Changes to teaching of Chinese,” *The Straits Times*, 21 Jan 1999, p. 1

15. “More mother tongue programmes in schools,” *The Straits Times*, 29 May 2019 (<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/more-mother-tongue-programmes-in-schools>, accessed on 16 Oct 2019.)

for Mandarin for most, if not all, Chinese students. Secondary 3 CL1 in the new system will only be equivalent to Secondary 2 in the old system, and Secondary 3 CL2 will only be equivalent to Secondary 1 in that system.

### Exposure to two languages reduced

Not only was the level of proficiency of Mandarin lowered across the various tracks, the dual medium curricula were also discontinued. As dual medium curricula in schools were closely tied to Language Exposure Time (LET), a major initiative proposed to expose students to the two school languages. The *Goh Report* evaluated this initiative and concluded that the policies of LET and bilingualism in primary and secondary schools had contributed to the increased workload for pupils. The final nail in the coffin of the proposal was empirical evidence found by a team from the Ministry of Defence. That team,

studied examination results of 23 Chinese primary schools in which science and mathematics were taught in English. They concluded that there was no improvement in English as a second language, but there was a decline in science examination results. (Goh Report, 1978)

Though the learning of Mandarin showed significant improvement with the implementation of LET, which was expected since they spoke dialects at home, this conclusion was dismissed in the Report.

With all the changes highlighted above, the previous dual medium curricula, which aimed to give students exposure to two languages in school, gave way to a single medium curriculum. For the Chinese students this meant that the official mother tongue, as a stand-alone subject, was taught in Mandarin. This is consistent with the aim of the *Goh Report* to create an English-speaking environment for students in schools:

The most profound influences on the child's acquisition of language skills are the home and the school" (Professor Heaton, Institute of Education). While it is difficult to influence the home environment, it is possible to create a conducive environment in the schools.

Finally, with the new education system, the impact on the bilingual policy:

will be one in which great prominence is attached to the English language at the cost of some reduction in standards in the mother tongue, be it Mandarin, Malay or Tamil.



This trend, a rapid shift from the mother tongue of each of the three major ethnic groups to English, had its roots in the implementation of the *Goh Report*.

### Speak Mandarin campaign and language shift

The Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) was launched in 1979 in the same year that Mandarin was reduced to a single subject in schools due to the termination of the LET. The three main arguments brought-up in favor of the Speak Mandarin Campaign were based on educational, cultural and practical considerations; at the educational level, it was argued that dialects interfere with the effective learning of Mandarin in schools; from the cultural perspective, it was assumed that Mandarin would represent the core values of Chinese culture, and from a practical perspective, it was thought that one language, Mandarin, was preferable to a multitude of mutually unintelligible dialects (Newman 1988). The relationship between the Speak Mandarin Campaign and Singapore's bilingual policy was laid out by Mr Lee Kuan Yew when he,

explained that the need to replace dialects with Mandarin is necessary to making the policy on bilingualism work.<sup>16</sup>

And in his speech at the opening of the inaugural Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979, Mr. Lee said:

Because Singapore is 25 per cent non-Chinese, English will be the common language between different ethnic Singaporeans. – Chinese parents face this choice for their children – English-Mandarin or English-dialect. If they secretly want English, Mandarin *AND* dialect, then their children will find Mandarin burdensome and will never master it.<sup>17</sup>

The Speak Mandarin Campaign gained so much momentum and intensity that Mr Chua Sian Chin, the Minister for Home Affairs, had to call for a review of this campaign barely two months into the campaign to ensure that,

the campaign must not be pushed too hard so as to avoid infringing on ethnic sensitivities.<sup>18</sup>

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16. "PM lays down the line," *The Straits Times*, 26 Oct 1981, p. 1

17. "LEE'S PLEA: USE MANDARIN," *The Straits Times*, 8 Sep 1979, p. 1

18. "Mandarin: Call to review the campaign," *The Straits Times*, 12 Nov 1979, p. 1

Moreover, Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew also had to reassure the other ethnic groups that,

they need not learn Mandarin, claiming that the campaign had veered from its original of phasing out the use of dialects among Chinese Singaporeans.<sup>19</sup>

The urgency and intensity of the campaign within such a short period since its launch is rather puzzling and will only make sense when seen in the context of the *Goh Report*. This Report had proposed to reduce the level of proficiency of Mandarin and the exposure time to Mandarin in schools. This means that while the *Goh Report* acknowledged the difficulty in influencing the home environment, the government had taken up this difficult task with the implementation of the various recommendations in the *Goh Report*. Bokhorst-Heng (1999) observed that on the surface, the SMC appears to be about behaviour in the public domain but is actually aimed at changing the language at home to Mandarin. Interestingly, Lee Kuan Yew in 1979 stated that he would not interfere with the home:

I want to be quite clear we cannot control what is done at home; that we have to leave to the good sense of the parents and the grandparents.

He went on to say,

Because administrative action cannot reach the home where dialects, already entrenched, will prevail,

the government will focus on “dramatically” altering the pattern of language usage outside the home, in government offices, public transit, hawker stalls and restaurants, shopping centres and so on (Campaign Speeches 1989). Then quoting from Lee Kuan Yew again, “The ultimate test” of the success of the campaign,

is whether Mandarin is spoken at home between parents and their children. That is the meaning of mother tongue.<sup>20</sup>

Shortly after the campaign began, Mr Goh Chok Tong, then Trade and Industry Minister and later Singapore’s second Prime Minister, announced that the 1980 census would for the first time include a survey on what languages Singaporeans speak at home and again in the 1990 census “to monitor the success” of the SMC.<sup>21</sup> This clearly shows that the strong push for the Speak Mandarin is aimed at

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19. “More welcome Premier’s assurance on Mandarin,” *The Straits Times*, 26 Nov 1979, p. 11

20. “PM lays down the line,” *The Straits Times*, 26 October 1981, p. 1

21. “Population census to have language survey,” *The Straits Times*, 19 November 1979, p. 32

increasing Mandarin at home to counter the drastic drop in the Chinese requirement and exposure time in schools.

In theory, parents helping children to replace Chinese dialects with Mandarin as the home language is a viable alternative in Singapore's pursuit of cultivating bilingual students, since schools have now become more English dominant following the *Goh Report*. In reality, the government has failed to realize that when streaming was implemented in 1979, the home language of Chinese students did not shift towards Mandarin as planned, but to English instead. This was first acknowledged in the 1992 Report of the Chinese Language Review Committee (CLT 1992) chaired by then Second Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Ong Teng Cheong which said that "(a)ccording to the 1990 Census of Population, the number of Chinese Singaporeans that use English as their principal household language has increased from 7.6% in 1980 to 18.2% in 1990." This trend continued and was irreversible according to a ministerial statement delivered by Mr Lee Hsien Loong, current Prime Minister of Singapore, in Parliament in 1999:

the language profile of Singaporean families is changing rapidly. More Singaporean homes are now English-speaking. Younger families are much more likely to be English-speaking than older ones. In 1988, only 20% of the Primary 1 cohort came from English-speaking homes. By 1998, the figure was 40%. In 10 years, the proportion has doubled. It will continue to rise. (Hansard, 20 Jan 1999)

## Discussion

In this section, we will revisit our research questions in the first section and offer a preliminary discussion to these questions. The original aim of Singapore bilingual education was to equip Chinese Singaporeans with Mandarin (i.e. their mother tongue) for the ethics, values on work and discipline in an orderly society, and with English for access to new knowledge, and jobs. Given the linguistic environment of Singapore in the early years of self-rule and independence, one has to agree with the conclusion of Mr Dhanabalan, in his eulogy to Mr Lee Kuan Yew, that "these were the acts of an idealist".<sup>22</sup> The push to have the general Singapore population be bilingual in English and one of the official mother tongues has remained unchanged over the past fifty years. What has indeed evolved is the type of bilingual education pursued by the government.

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22. "He was an idealist at heart: Dhanabalan," *Today*, 30 March 2015 (<https://www.todayonline.com/rememberinglky/he-was-idealist-heart-dhanabalan>, accessed on 16 Oct 2019.)

Researchers have arrived at different conclusions about the state and type of bilingualism in Singapore. For instance, while Lin & Man (2009: 109–110) labeled Singapore bilingual education a ‘weak form’ of bilingual education under Baker’s typology, Baker & Wright (2017: 234) had upheld Singapore as an example of having bilingual education in majority languages, contradicting Lin & Man’s classification. We need a historical perspective to clarify this issue based on the typology of bilingual education (Baker & Wright 2017: 171–303).

This paper has shown that from 1959 to 1979, the government was actively trying to promote a ‘strong form’ of bilingual education by introducing integrated schools, making studying a second language compulsory, adding double weightage to the second language, and introducing LET. The LET concept is similar to Baker’s “Dual Language Programme”, a strong form of bilingual education which aims to achieve language balance among students in schools (Baker & Wright 2017: 215–223) (except that in the case of Singapore, most students do not speak these languages at home). During this time, though there were schools in the English and Chinese streams, one common bilingual curriculum was applied to all schools. Every student was required to cover the same syllabus within the same period and sit for the same examination. Schools were the designated place for bilingual education.

Few scholars have noticed that at the beginning of this endeavor, the odds were stacked against the new PAP government in successfully implementing its brand of bilingualism as English was a foreign language to most Chinese students. No one considered the effects of the home language at this stage. There was a mismatch between the home language and language of instruction at schools, especially so in the English stream schools. The situation was exacerbated when more and more parents enrolled their children in English stream schools.

The interdependence hypothesis of second language acquisition states that students with lower home exposure to and use of the language of instruction are predicted to have poorer educational outcomes (Quentin 2005). Quentin also points out that in countries where a former colonial language has been adopted to educate a majority who do not speak that language, students experience high dropout rates and high levels of failure. They were not able to achieve even basic academic outcomes. As such, though the government aimed for a strong form of bilingual education, in actual fact this form of bilingual education in the English stream should be better understood as a transitional or weak form of bilingualism (Baker & Wright 2017: 197–206). This is because the students did not speak English at home and were learning the subjects counted towards the high-stake PSLE in their weaker language. Baker & Wright (2017: 201–202) describes this as a submersion programme in which the student is “thrown into the deep end and expected to learn to swim as quickly as possible without the help of floats

or special swimming lessons". As a result, "language minority students will sink, struggle or swim" (Baker 2017: 201). This was precisely the situation in Singapore then and the problems identified in the *Goh Report* have their roots in the mismatch between home language and the language used for academic instruction in schools.

The *Goh Report* has been widely credited to have changed Singapore's educational system profoundly (Chew & Kwa 2012), but as pointed out earlier, it did not seek to address the mismatch between home language and the language of instruction in schools. Instead, it raised the stakes for not doing well in the PSLE by channeling these primary school children either to the monolingual track or to continue their primary school education with another extra two years of study. In addition, it repudiated LET and strengthened the teaching of English in schools. This paper argues that the Speak Mandarin Campaign which was launched in the same year as the implementation of the *Goh Report* must be seen against this background. It demonstrates the government's effort in tackling the issue of home language in promoting bilingualism in Singapore.

With such a high-stake streaming in place, it is understandable why parents used English as a home language instead of Mandarin. This led to a swift shift of home language in Singapore. Silver (2005) made the following observation: "In this case, although the shift may be unintended by the government, it is certainly intentional on the part of families who feel they can give their children a 'head start' in the educational system by shifting to English at home." Given the historical changes in Singapore bilingual education, it is evident that streaming had increased the stakes of academic failures in Singapore society and had shaped the current Singaporean society into a "*kiasu*" ('afraid of losing out' in Hokkien) one (Barr & Skrbis 2008: 153–154).

Paradoxically, though streaming did not aim to resolve the mismatch between the home language and the language of instruction in schools, it actually resolved this mismatch in another way by providing the impetus for parents to shift the home languages to the language of instruction in school – English. Incidentally, when this shift to English as home language gained momentum from 1979 to 1999, Singapore's education system also began to gain worldwide recognition through its excellent results on international comparisons such as the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) during this period (Quentin 2009).

After more than fifty years of bilingual education, English has indeed become the most frequently spoken language at home by the Chinese population. Citing data from the Singapore Ministry of Education, PM Lee Hsien Loong pointed

out in 2019 that 71 percent of Chinese households with Primary 1 children speak mostly English at home today, a jump from 42 per cent two decades ago.<sup>23</sup>

According to the original aims of bilingual education, Mandarin as the official mother tongue is supposed to offer the cultural ballast for Chinese Singaporeans (Ritu & Wee 2019), but with the differentiated approach introduced to the teaching of Mandarin in the Singapore since 1979, it remains an open question as to how this could be achieved for the general Chinese Singaporeans, even though Ritu & Wee (2019) is confident about the dominance of Mandarin in Singapore.

## Conclusion

The original aim of bilingual education in Singapore stated by Mr Lee Kuan Yew is to gain access to the science and technology of the West via English and to understand ourselves via our mother-tongue.<sup>24</sup> This paper has shown that from 1959 to 1979, the government was actively trying to promote a 'strong form' of bilingual education by introducing integrated schools, making studying a second language compulsory, adding double weightage to second language, and introducing LET. After 1979, it became a 'weak form' in order to arrest the trend of academic wastage, which is a product of mismatch between home language and language of instruction in schools. Streaming was implemented, and brought with it a differentiated approach to bilingualism resulting in the educational system offering Mandarin lessons of different proficiency levels for students. The lowering of Mandarin learning in schools has continued to the current day (Lee C 2012). Hence, with the increase in English and differentiated approach in learning Chinese, it is doubtful that Mr Lee Kuan Yew's original aim of learning the 'mother tongue' can be achieved. If this trend continues, then the general level of Mandarin will continue to decline in the future.

## Funding

This research was supported by the grants from Ministry of Education Research Funds (R-102-000-112-115 and R-102-000-102-115).

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23. "Singapore must guard against losing its bilingual edge: PM Lee," *The Straits Times* 23 October 2019 (<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/spore-must-guard-against-losing-its-bilingual-edge-pm-lee>, accessed on 11 May 2020.)

24. "Bilingualism is more than just learning two languages," *The Straits Times*, 11 Nov 1972, p. 14.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the anonymous reviewers and their helpful comments.

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