Language Planning in Education in Singapore: History, Transitions, Futures

S. Gopinathan

Context

Any accounting of language planning in education – and any assessment of how successful it has been – must be judged by the challenges such an enterprise faced, the quality of the policy responses, quality of implementation, and how school leavers use language and what they believe about the language skills they were taught, possess and can use. Thus, Singapore's unique historical, social, political and linguistic ecology must be the starting point. Language Planning according to Paulston is a deliberative attempt, at social change in language behaviour by a decision-making administrative structure" (1973). Perspectives used to study LP range from technico-rational models to critical ones that analyse language relationship issues in terms of contestation over power and privilege.

The best way to understand the role of languages in Singapore society is to recognize that the state in Singapore used language to build human and social capital – and one might argue continues to do so. It sought, through language, to address two issues, first, of transforming the economy, from entrepot to industrial and now, a knowledge-based economy, and second, to build unity and cohesion in a fragile, divided society. The great triumph of language planning in Singapore is that it was successful in building a strong economy and society via its deft handling of language issues. But the terms of survival have changed and globalization processes are posing new challenges. How well Singapore meets them will be crucial to how well it masters the challenges of the next four to five decades.

Medium of instruction issues had been a problem for the colonial state since the 1920s. An education policy of benign neglect had spawned a four-medium of instruction school system. English medium education was largely church and state-supported but Chinese medium schools were supported by either clan or individual philanthropists. Chinese school students, teachers and the community felt discriminated and became receptive to anti-colonial, republican and later, communist
influences. The colonial state’s response was to promise more aid if these schools came under supervision and taught more English (Gopinathan, 1974). By the end of World War II the Chinese majority felt that colonial education and language policies were discriminatory, and that English was a colonial language which privileged a small number of collaborators. Thus what the post-colonial state inherited in the mid fifties was a school system segmented along medium of instruction lines and divisions within ethnic groups, especially the Chinese, and between groups. Policies related to language in education were contested. Coupled with post war economic hardships the potential for inter-ethnic conflict was large and real. It has taken the state almost five decades to defuse this threat.

There are 2 major reports of the post-war period to keep in mind. The 1956 All Party Report on Chinese Education is a political document as the committee was inter-party and the report was presented to the Legislative Assembly. It addressed the political problem of mobilizing large numbers of the non-English educated to support the emergent post-colonial state. The Report enshrined the principle of ‘equality of treatment’ for all official languages and committed the post-colonial state to removing discrimination and taking steps like building schools, developing curriculum and training teachers so that this principle could be realised in substance as well as in form. In 1960 the learning of the second language became compulsory at the primary level, and in 1966 at the secondary level. Continual refinements to curriculum time led, in 1987, to English becoming the dominant medium of instruction. Through this report the state sought to enhance the economic and symbolic power of language, to see them as assets not liabilities, and to use language for economic and social cohesion purposes. Language planning in education was intended to grow both human and social capital. English was assigned a modernization role, to assist in Singapore’s industrialization strategy, and the mother tongue were to serve as links to culture and tradition and to strengthen ethnic identity. This view of language as asset is vindicated by globalization which has given a boost to English and the economic dynamism of China which is making Mandarin an increasingly important language. The principle of equality of treatment underpins language planning for education to this day.

The Report on the Ministry of Education (1978), by contrast, is an educational document and can be seen as the first major evaluation of the consequences of the bilingual education policy implemented in schools since the 1960s. It signalled the acceptance that policy and practice had produced “an unworkable bilingualism” that was having disastrous consequences for student achievement and for the language and cognitive skills needed for Singapore’s economic modernisation. The policy had assumed a capacity amongst a majority of students to master both languages equally well, what Macnamara (1966) termed “balanced bilingualism”. I think it fair to say that what troubled Dr Goh and his review team was faltering mastery of English, and the consequences of that for economic growth. It is a view echoed by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew a quarter century later when he acknowledged that the policy had been articulated in the belief that ‘nearly everyone could be effectively bilingual’. It is important to remember that the type of economic modernization Singapore opted for, export-led industrialization, relied on a mastery of English language skills. In retrospect, it is clear that the authors did not examine assumptions about capacity for bilingualism or the standards expected but chose a curriculum device, streaming as the solution. The problem was seen to lie with students, not the system. Policy changed after the Report and language-based streaming was introduced to ensure functional mastery in English by all students. This was accompanied in 1979 with the launch of the Speak Mandarin campaign which sought to decrease the use of dialects and to enhance communication in Mandarin among the Chinese.

An understanding of this context is vital to recognizing what has been achieved, and what remains as challenges. The major achievement has been linguistic peace,
achieved not just by sensible polices but also because economic growth provided opportunities for use of language skills learnt in school. The utilitarian value of English and the state’s commitment to providing the widest possible access to English has led to what Pakir (1992) has termed ‘English-knowing’ bilingualism, and possibly the highest levels of English language competence in Asia, at least for a broad swathe of the population. The state has also remained faithful to its commitment to provide to mother tongue education; the paradox is that many Singaporeans wish the state was not so insistent on the mastery of the mother tongue!

The other goal of education policy since the ‘50s, that of strengthening social cohesion has also been facilitated by widespread access to English and the broadening acceptance and its increased use as a lingua franca. Indeed, while the state continues to link identity formation with mother tongue learning and use, the ever increasing use of English, and its indigenization as in Standard Singapore English points to it becoming a strong marker of a Singaporean identity. It cannot be the case that a language that is supposed to help Singaporeans breach ethnic and linguistic divisions can do so without it also being, if not a carrier of, common culture, at least an instrument in forging one. This is especially the case with English with its vast cultural resources. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that the mother tongue has been less successful as a carrier of heritage and values primarily because mother tongue examinations were high stakes examinations and teachers chose to spend a lot of time on examination preparation.

**Language Shifts among Singaporeans**

There has been, in line with the broad policy objective, “massive language shifts and phenomenal sociolinguistic realignments“ (T’sou, 2002). Literacy rates have arisen overall as have biliteracy rates. The proportion for those 15 years and over who were literate in two or more languages has increased from 45 percent in 1990 to 56 percent in 2000. The Chinese ethnic group saw an increase in the use of both English and Mandarin at home, English from 19.6 per cent in 1990 to 23.9 per cent in 2000 and Mandarin from 30 per cent to 45.1 per cent in 2000. The use of dialects dropped from 50.1 per cent in 1990 to 30.7 per cent in 2000. However, when age groups are taken into consideration, it is interesting to note that for the five to fourteen years category, the use of English increased by 9 per cent between 1990-2000, while for Mandarin it appears to have plateaued with a minimal increase of 0.6 per cent over the decade. When level of educational qualifications is taken into consideration, 47.3 per cent of university graduates spoke English at home while 29.5 per cent spoke Mandarin. For diploma holders, 43.3 per cent spoke English while 30.4 per cent spoke Mandarin, while for polytechnic graduates 28.6 per cent spoke English and 41.4 per cent spoke Mandarin. Given the increased opportunities for training available in English and the further internationalisation of Singapore’s economy, the dominance of English as the economic language of choice is likely to be further strengthened. While it is probable that the use of Mandarin in a number of domains, including the home, will decline, the shift to the greater use of English and Mandarin is clear. We must however note that the use of English among the different ethnic groups varies, with the Indians using it most. In terms of school success in English, in 2001 at the ‘O’ levels 87 per cent of
Indian students passed, 80 per cent of Chinese and 70 per cent of Malays.

What of language diversity? While it must be noted that promoting Mandarin as the dominant dialect has led to reduction in dialect use, and an elimination of some dialects, it must also be noted that Singapore's success in plugging into the global economic grid, principally via English, has meant we now hear more Thai, Bengali, Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia, Japanese, etc.

**Globalisation and Its Challenges to Education and Language Policies**

The pace and intensity of change under globalisation are such that societal level strains have emerged in many countries. Lo Bianco (2001) points to a general destabilisation affecting all advanced societies, a moment of new kinds of hybridity of language and culture, the emergence of multicultural societies everywhere, vast population mobility, ever more diversifying codes of communication and "micro-cultures" of "internet mediated identity". These global trends are inevitably changing old relationships between language, knowledge, and identity. The huge amounts of information available in English on the Internet and the changing economic landscape in countries like China have given a boost to both English and Chinese as languages of economic opportunity; it is estimated that some 200 million Chinese are learning English. Thus, while Chinese on the mainland are learning English to participate in the global economy, Singaporean Chinese are urged to master Mandarin to avail themselves of economic opportunities in China. Heller (2002), reviewing the progress of the debate and evidence on bilingualism in Canada, notes that globalisation has weakened the power of the nation state to prescribe, prohibit and privilege access to and use of languages among its citizens. The new economy, she asserts, has created new markets for language and in Canada today there is a greater willingness to learn French amongst the dominant English-speaking population. Younger Canadians, she reports, are more prone to seeing language less as a marker of identity and more as a much needed tool for occupational success. In these changing contexts, international and national, we need to ask what it means to be literate.

As the Government is persistently reminding us, we live in new times and must prepare for a turbulent, uncertain future. Globalisation's economic and cultural imperatives, the emergence of new economic centres such as China and India, the telecommunication and life sciences revolutions, among others, call for new economic, socio-cultural and educational strategies.

The combined effects of globalisation, the technological and life sciences revolution, the large displacements caused by migration, student flows, travel, etc. have created a major upheaval in the social sciences, which is our way of understanding social relations. Globalisation is both a phenomenon to be studied and as a discourse; there is quite clearly a post-modern turn in the social sciences and how we view language, language relationships, what learning a language now must mean, have all to be freshly considered. The way the early Singaporean state boxed up language into discrete domains — English for utilitarian purposes, mother tongues for cultural identity, the aggressive elimination of dialects, periodic campaigns against Singlish, the state's allocation of mother tongues, will all have to be revisited. We have to pay more attention to diversity, to see culture as much more diasporic and deterritorialised, and therefore the process of identity formation as much less linear, and inevitably, more contested. This has obvious implications for language learning in our classrooms.

How has educational policy responded to these trends and pressures? There is clear evidence of a paradigm shift. Though we tend to mark 'big bang' reform in education in Singapore from 1997, it can be located further back, to the *Towards Excellence in Schools* (1987) report which provided a rationale for decentralisation in governance of education and which led to the introduction of independent and, later, autonomous schools. The view gains support if we look at the nature of the 1991 and 2001 syllabus for English
Language. Cheah (2002) traces the evolution of the syllabus, describing the syllabus in the 80s as being more prescriptive and grammar-based, focused on knowing the language but describing the 1991 and 2001 syllabus as emphasising thinking skills, learning how to learn, being able to use the language flexibly and appropriately in a variety of contexts. The 2001 syllabus has literacy development at the heart of the English language instructional programme with the emphasis on language learning, literacy skills and communication skills. Students were to be taught to be aware of different presentation modes, the varieties of discourse, context and purpose; it is certainly a view of language, and of language learning much more in keeping with the 'new times'.

It can therefore be argued that the 1991 English Language syllabus anticipated the thrust of the 1997 Thinking Schools Learning Nation (TSLN) initiative but the latter, as a broad based and system-wide reform initiative, lends crucial support to the goals of the syllabus. The TSLN initiative coupled with the launch of the IT Master Plan indicated a bold reforming vision for Singapore education, to produce school leavers better able to cope with new economic formations, to use technology confidently and to better navigate cultural diversity. The emphasis was to be placed more on learner initiative and autonomy, to encourage innovation, creativity and critical thinking skills, to cut back on the traditional emphasis on content mastery, on searching for the one right answer, a greater emphasis on problem solving and being able to critique, synthesize and use knowledge. Though some progress has been made since 1997 PM Lee's call at the National Day Rally in August 2004 to 'teach less, learn more' shows that the reform process is far from complete.

Changes to Chinese

In tandem with changes to the English language syllabus there have also been changes to the Mother Tongue syllabus and extensive curriculum and syllabus review efforts over the past two decades have sought to meet the challenge posed by the increasing use and utility of English. While it cannot be argued that the mother tongue policy is a failure, serious problems remain, and in response to this, in typical Singapore style there has been a frank admission of the need to change. Lee Kuan Yew has said "we have turned off one generation, which is a great pity for us — they are forced by parents and schools (to learn Chinese) — they hate it, they want nothing more to do with it" (The Straits Times, 12/10/04). Asserting that Singapore's language policies are not cast in stone he stated that the bilingual policy is a 'moving target' that has to be reviewed from time to time as the language climate changes.

As presently articulated the goals of the bilingual policy with regard to Chinese are

a) for the majority: to listen, speak, read Chinese. Make learning fun and give them a foundation they can build on
b) for those interested in Chinese: encourage more to study it at a higher level, and help keep Chinese language and culture alive (in Singapore).
c) for top students keen on Chinese: make them effectively bicultural via the Bicultural Studies programme
d) to do business in China: need to speak, understand what is spoken and read. Know how to use dictionaries, computers and software.

The Ministry would be satisfied for the majority to attain an 80 per cent mastery of English and a 60-70 per cent for Chinese. The aim is to make learning Chinese fun and to give parents more options to decide what kind of bilingual education they want for their children. This flexibility is intended to enable parents and schools to take into account students home language backgrounds and aptitude.

The new syllabus will be modular in nature to allow schools room for customization. A core
module taking up 70 – 80 per cent of curriculum time, with an emphasis on oral communication, will be taught to all. Those from non-Chinese speaking homes can opt for special modules to strengthen their command of the language while others can take additional modules for extension and enrichment. Another major change will be a focus on reading, speaking and listening instead of the current emphasis on writing and memorizing of characters. At the other end of the continuum, in pursuit of the goal of creating a Chinese cultural elite, competent students will be given the opportunity to study Chinese at university level, to go on attachments to educational institutions in China so that they can become ‘bicultural’ Singaporeans who will have “an intuitive understanding of China”.

These changes to the syllabus will be followed up with changes to assessment. A newly designed Primary School Leaving Examination for Chinese will require less mastery of large numbers of Chinese characters; the current list is 2,500 characters. Criteria for the choice of characters will be words that are relevant and those they can relate to in everyday settings.

We can best evaluate these changes with reference to locally produced research. There is an interesting body of work on the language planning and teaching situation, especially for English from a broad range of perspectives, Tan Su Hwi on language planning (1998), Cheah Yin Mee (2002, 1996, 1997), Maha Sripathy (1998) and Parveen Sandhu (2000) on language teaching from a classroom teacher perspective, Glenn Toh on textbooks (2003), Benedict Lin on syllabus construction (2003) and Kramer Dahl on teacher training (1997); additionally, there has also been collections of research papers on language, education and society (Gopinathan et al, 1998). It is a literature that all language teachers can benefit from. These works raise serious and troubling questions about the purposes of language in our society and teaching in our classrooms. They explore the language learning context in new ways; they explore the implications of policy from the site of instruction, the classroom and they ask if another in-service course on method or a syllabus revision will ‘solve’ the problem. It provides a useful corrective to the largely functionalist and assessment-driven views that dominate language in education discussions.

What are we to make of these critiques? A fair verdict would be: ‘valuable in parts’. They are beneficial in so far as they force us to consider issues in language teaching, especially English Language teaching, from a variety of perspectives. We need to acknowledge that given the importance of English in social and occupational communication, and the fact that a large number of students do not master English to acceptable levels, we must be more critically aware of our pedagogic strategies and what might work better for these students. But the more ideologically motivated critique of Philippson (1998) and Pennycook (1992, 1994) has less relevance to the Singapore situation. English in Singapore is not a minority language spoken by an elite as in Thailand, Indonesia or Vietnam. We need to acknowledge that the
state has invested enormous resources to widening access to English since the mid-50s and given Singapore's need to be economically competitive and the need to have a language to facilitate inter-ethnic communication, the choice of English was inevitable. English is not seen as a privileged language in Singapore, even as we acknowledge that social class, economic opportunity and competence in English are obviously related and that this has implications for both policy and practice. And even though one may have reservations about the policy on dialects, the government cannot be faulted on its commitment to preserve and encourage use of the indigenous languages.

The most recent changes to Chinese raise some interesting issues, at one level about curriculum, syllabus, pedagogy and assessment in Chinese and at another level about how changes in a major mother tongue may impact on language ecology. Lee's frank admission of wrong assumptions about bilingual capacity show a readiness now to confront linguistic realities and to make changes. A pity though that it took so long. The assumption that increased use of English causes 'problems' for mother tongue acquisition and use, while true in a broad sense, masks considerable differences in the extent and nature of use of English at home between different ethnic groups and within ethnic groups. In an environment where English will become even more dominant, the government will need to ensure that appropriate levels of competence are achieved by all.

It will no doubt be the case that the changes proposed for Chinese will be followed up with changes in Malay and Tamil. The even-handed treatment this represents is to be welcomed but here again there is need to avoid knee jerk reactions. The problems faced by pupils learning Tamil and those learning Malay (where the English alphabet is used) are different. This could also mean that while all would need to sit for an examination, examination formats need not be all alike. Ability driven education must mean due regard to difference.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the changes is the offer by the government to establish, if parents wish it, schools where Chinese would be the main medium of instruction. The rationale offered is that while English would remain the dominant language, Chinese would grow in importance and parents may wish to ensure that their children reach high levels of competence. Lee was aware that this could cause concerns in other language groups and has said that the option would be available as well to the other language groups. Though at this point, a promise it could be argued that if it comes to pass this will be a further extension of the Special Assistance Plan concept and a backward step from the ideal of a unified school system with English as the main medium of instruction.

The Challenge for Pedagogy

What is happening at the level of classroom practice? And though the studies mentioned earlier are to be welcomed, there is need for much more data on what is actually going on in our language classrooms. At the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education an effort at observing, audio and video taping, and analysis of pedagogy across all curricular domains, including English and the mother tongues has begun. It will, when completed offer a detailed picture of Singapore pedagogy. Ingrained practice is hard to change and there are reasons why some practices are hard to change - the influence of assessments, for instance. So, while some innovation is happening it is clear to me that we are far from
achieving in practice the ideals espoused in the syllabus. Cheah (2002) reported with reference to the 1991 syllabus that teachers were upset at the lack of authoritative direction, and anxious about the flexibility they were given. Foley (1998) noted that while the syllabus promoted flexibility and the creative use of language, what he observed was the dominance of textbooks, a lack of genre awareness and the persistence of a narrow range of discourse patterns, both in oral classroom talk as well as in reading and writing. The Minister for Education, Mr. Tharman Shanmugaratnam has echoed the views of many others that Singaporean students need to be much better at communication and persuasion. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that insufficient attention is paid to sustained reading and writing in our language classrooms. Poor implementation then can undermine the good intentions of a progressive syllabus.

As noted earlier there is far less research on pedagogy in mother tongue classrooms. If we follow the logic of domain separation then, in contrast to English language classrooms, which are supposed to be sites for learning and using English for knowledge acquisition and to facilitate inter-ethnic communication, mother tongue classrooms, besides being ethnically segregated classrooms are sites for strong ethnic identity formation via language and emphasis on values. Civics and moral education are expected to be delivered via the mother tongue at the primary level. The earlier judgment of Lee Kuan Yew of a failure to teach mother tongue effectively raises serious questions about how well the goal of identity formation has been met. For a majority of students in Chinese, a misguided pedagogy whose limitations have now been acknowledged, has been in use. Preparing children to pass the all important PSLE examinations has meant that less attention has been paid to familiarizing children with their ethnic cultures.

The fundamental premise of the 2001 English language syllabus is that Singapore's school leavers must become better learners, creators and communicators. While these attributes must be built upon a fundamental mastery of the English language equally important will be their capacity to use English flexibly, creatively as a tool, and as a means to communicate effectively. To do that pupils must see English as invested with power to alter their lives, to extend and shape their dreams, to think with the language. Though accuracy in the use of language is important, it cannot be allowed to dominate our pedagogy. To do this in a situation where English is not the dominant language of students requires teachers to model appropriate language use and learning behaviours themselves, and to create open and interactive language classrooms. Singapore has introduced streaming to accommodate differences in ability and aptitude but we cannot yet be sure that EM3 and Normal (Technical) students are learning English that is both appropriate and adequate to their needs outside the classroom.

A second major issue is 'cultural literacy'. It is somewhat paradoxical that we need to stress this in multi-ethnic Singapore, where multiculturalism is proclaimed a pillar of the
state, where the very rationale for bilingual education is stated to be, through the mother tongue, to strengthen and enrich cultural roots. We cannot even be sure, though this is the rationale, that this is being done effectively in mother tongue classrooms. Also, in the implementation of this policy we have wandered into the dead-end, culturally speaking, of ethnically segregated classrooms and schools; even our teachers unions are language based. How are we to square the circle when, with English as the main medium of instruction, we ignore the rich possibilities for cultural learning by insisting that it be learnt as a linguistic tool, for accessing economic not cultural resources? The reality is that English cannot be, and is not being so contained. What we have to do is explicitly acknowledge that in Cheah's (1997) words classrooms are sites for "cultural border crossings", sites for the creating and sharing of culture. A view of curriculum as content has meant that even in history, geography, social studies we have taught cultural information factually and neutrally. The English language teacher must use his/her unique position to access these resources for culturally meaningful language learning. Looking ahead we need to address more urgently the knowledge and skills demands of the new syllabus. We have in place the policy rationales via TSLN and a progressive syllabus. We are all too aware of the limitations of large classes, and the range of linguistic abilities students bring to our classes. We do not yet have a sufficient supply of qualified English graduates coming into teacher education. Many of these limitations will not change in the near future, though the promise of more manpower for schools should allow for more flexible use of curriculum time.

It is too early to say how the proposed changes to the teaching of Chinese, and presumably other mother tongues, will facilitate the emergence of a more flexible and appropriate pedagogy. The positioning of the mother tongues as carriers of traditional culture and values may in part have contributed to a pedagogy that is formal and pedantic. A balance will have to be struck between providing able students with the linguistic resources to access the riches of ethnic cultures while at the same time rooting language learning in the context of contemporary language use in Singapore. Language learning in mother tongue classrooms must also acknowledge the changes occurring in language ecology in Singapore and the new demands being made.

So, our pedagogic practices can and must change. Some teachers have responded to the pressures of language teaching and high stakes language examinations by opting for reductive and disempowering practices; many others have taken on much more seriously notions of learner centredness, integration, exposing students to a variety of texts; more attention is being paid to the processes of reading and writing.

We have not done as much as we can to use the language classroom to foster intercultural awareness. We in Singapore have a unique language learning and use environment. The global requires us as teachers to equip our students with the English language skills to manage exciting if uncertain futures. But the
national requires that our students acquire greater inter-cultural awareness. This is the next big challenge for our English language classrooms.

Note
This paper is based in part on 'Understanding Paradigm Shifts in Language Planning in Education in Singapore: A Teacher Educator's Perspective' (2004) and Ethnicity Management and Language Education Policy: Towards a Modified Model of Language Education in Singapore Schools (2004).

References

Prof. S. Gopinathan is the Vice Dean (Policy) at the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP), National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.