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**Asian Reading Congress 1995  
Literacy and Biliteracy in Asia: Problems and Issues in the  
Next Decade**

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**The Role of Community Language Organizations in  
Promoting Literacy in Singapore**

**Abstract**

While a great deal of research has been reported on the role, status and functions of the English Language in Singapore, the work on reporting the role of community languages, as well as second languages has just begun. This paper will report on a brief survey undertaken on the role of community languages, ethnic languages and second languages in promoting reading and literacy in Singapore.

The paper will examine the objectives, the organization of the teaching of these languages, the role of social and cultural organizations in promoting the link between literacy and culture, the nature of the community support for these languages, the success and problems related to achieving some of their goals in literacy, educational achievement, mother tongue language maintenance and ethnic cultures.

**Introduction**

Current studies on literacy issues have begun to shift from earlier studies on monolingual, monoliterate nations and communities, which very often studied dominant language use especially literacy in English language to community languages. This has also been the case in Singapore, where a number of studies have looked at reading habits, and a number of research projects were undertaken: the Reading and English Acquisition Programme (REAP) 1985, (LEAR)- Meaning Experience Approach to reading (MLEA) Modified Language Experience Approach, Shared Book Approach (SBA), Book Flood.

This paper will look at some of the micro-macro level issues of biliteracy in bilingual, multilingual Singapore.

**Review of Literature on Biliteracy**

In the eighties several researchers began to study biliterate communities. Street (1984:8) using an ideological model states that the " meaning of literacy depends upon the social institutions in which it is embedded" and argued more for multiple literacies than for any single literacy,

Hornberger(1989) in an article entitled Continua of Literacy reviews the literatures on literacy, bilingualism, and the teaching of reading and writing and provides a framework for understanding biliteracy. Honeberger traces the shift from a pluralistic notion of literacy to a 20 th century notion of a

single, standardised schooled literacy. She proposes a continua to define the contexts of micro-macro, oral-literate, monolingual-bilingual, reception-production, oral language-written language, first and second language transfer.

### **Literacy and Language Planning**

I would like to look briefly at biliteracy issues within a framework of language planning decisions (see Nahir: 1977 for a classification of language planning) Some of the language planning decisions may be described essentially as status planning decisions made by government and its institutions in selecting the languages to be acquired amongst the multilingual population of Singapore.

Language planning and status planning decisions can take the form of efforts directed toward the allocation of functions of languages and the related literacies in a given speech community.

Thus once the distribution of languages and the related literacies was decided upon government institutions and agencies worked on supporting, creating and improving opportunities and providing incentives to acquire the official languages.

These status planning decisions are supported by the allocation of educational resources, teacher training, curriculum materials, for acquiring the languages as well as funding for studies, surveys and projects on language teaching and language learning.

Status planning determines the functional allocation of language codes and literacies and to some extent this determines the domains and functions of each official language. It is as if the population is schooled to make language choices. But in reality it is far more complex than this and it is possible to observe a variety of different linguistic combinations for different ethnic groups.

The bilingual policy in Singapore promotes mother tongue education to ensure identification with and maintenance of traditional cultures and their values.<sup>1</sup> Politicians who often play the part of language planners have stressed the value of mother tongue competence as a guard against becoming 'deculturalized', 'de-ethnified', that is 'westernized'. (See Gopinathan (1979,1985,1988,1994) for a summary and critical review of education policies in Singapore).

Although it is official policy to give equal importance to the official languages, English is seen as having the key role in the modernisation and development of Singapore and is accepted as the language of science, technology, commerce and industry.

One might conclude that this seems like a neat distribution of language functions i.e. English for the working language of government, education, modernisation, industrialisation and for

wider communication and selected community for mother tongue maintenance and for use in the home, family, and neighbourhood domains. But in reality it is a different combination of language codes for the multilingual community in Singapore determined by the status and prestige assigned to different languages.

As a consequence of four decades of language planning efforts Singapore has attained 90% general literacy and increased competence in English and Mandarin. A strong acceptance of the value of English as the dominant language has established itself across all communities. Studies and surveys on patterns and consequences of bilingualism amongst the Chinese, Indian and Malay communities in Singapore have related to issues related to the spread of English in a multilingual setting, changes in the patterns of interlingual communication and functional uses of community languages, concerns with language maintenance as a result of language shift of community languages, and educational achievement amongst the multilingual population of Singapore (see Gopinathan et al 1994) .

### **Biliteracy in a Bilingual Society**

Biliteracy in a bilingual society may often be seen to exist in a context of unequal power relations where one or another literacy becomes marginalized or specialized by functions (see Hornberger 1989:277-8) Fishman 1967). In some societies it has been observed that different varieties of one language may be identified with high and low functions (Hornberger 1989: 280, Ferguson 1959).

One needs to recognise that the bilingual in a multilingual society such as Singapore makes a complex set of language choices for the various domains and functional roles associated with one or another language.

This may be illustrated by the Malay community and its use of Arabic, Malay and English in specialized functions. Arabic is the medium of instruction in the *madarasi* or religious schools run by community and Moslem religious organisations. Moslems acquire Arabic in community run classes as the language of worship is Arabic, that is, in the reading of the Koran, during religious discourse. Malay children acquire literacy in English and Standard Malay through the national school system. Bazaar Malay is used for inter-ethnic communication amongst an older generation of Chinese and Indian speakers, and amongst an older generation of speakers who did not acquire a higher level of English.

Language policies have brought about changes in the functions of Chinese community languages. Literacy in English and Mandarin are acquired through education. Amongst the younger generation of parents who are parenting young children who acquire Mandarin in pre-school, Mandarin is replacing the community languages of Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew in most domains: home, work, transactions, and entertainment. These community languages are regarded as dialects and have been given a lesser status than Mandarin. Interlingual communication has

been made possible by unifying the various Chinese linguistic communities through a single language and literacy as in China. This is regarded as a positive gain.

What of the Indian communities in Singapore which do not have a common language code? The next section discusses these issues.

### **Which Literacies for What Purposes: the Indians in Singapore**

Singapore's Indian population comprises 6.4 percent of the total population, with the main linguistic groups being: Tamil 63.9%, Malayali 8.6%, and Punjabi 6.7%. speakers, and smaller linguistic communities of Bengali, Urdu and Gujerati speakers. Their diversity is expressed in the ethnic languages, the religions practised and in the complex sets of cultural practices and values observed by the various linguistic communities.

Gopinathan and Mani (1983) note that the Indian communities have accepted the acquisition of English for its utilitarian value. Saravanan (1994) argues that the diminished use of Indian languages such as Tamil, is a consequence of a loss of functionality.<sup>2</sup> Similar observations on the diminished use of mother tongue languages, loss of ability in the home language have been made on immigrant children in America by Wong-Fillmore(1988), in Australia by Clyne (1985), Pawles (1994).

### **Role of Social and Community Organisations in Promoting Mother Tongue Literacy**

#### **Revival of Indian mother tongues**

In the nineties, community organisations have begun to be involved in reviving interest in their languages, for example, ethnic organisations that represent Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi and Gujerati speakers.

These organisations are making attempts at restoring literacies with diminishing users by introducing school-based literacy in the four skill areas: listening, speaking, reading and writing and as a cultural medium for cultural identity.. The Hindi speaking organisation, for instance, is promoting Hindi as a means of intra-community communication.<sup>3</sup>

The objectives of these linguistic and cultural organisations range from making links between language and culture and raising self-awareness among the communities on ways to build cohesiveness in the community, through linguistic, social and cultural activities.<sup>4</sup> The government has recognised these attempts and a minister was quoted (May,1995) saying *doodh ka doodah. pani ka pani*, translated to mean that 'milk will be milk water will be water.' He was quoted as saying that each community would have to draw strength from its own culture until a Singaporean identity has been firmly established" (Minister for Education, Sidek Sanif, at the opening of the Hindi school).

Classes began in 1990 with primary 1 to A levels in Punjabi (400 students), Hindi (1,200 students) and Sandhi, Gujerati (100 students). The success rate has been very high; 230 Hindi students sat for the PSLE, 'O' and 'A'-level examinations and a total of 96 obtained distinctions and the pass rate has been 90-100 per cent.

The Malayalee community on the other hand has accepted the acquisition of Tamil as a second language. However there are attempts by the Singapore Kerala association to revive community interest in the language as has been noted "with the loss of language the culture also disappears" (Malayalee annual *onophaharam* 94)

There is concern as the oral literacies of these languages will be eroded with the passing away of the elders in the community: "the *moothachans*, *moothammas* and *achamas* are walking encyclopedias on customs, rites and fairy tales of the Malayalam culture." (Balaji, a journalist in *onophaharam*, Malayalee annual 1994)

### **Literacy in Other Indian Languages**

The government recently approved the teaching of Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujerati and Urdu in community run classrooms. A preliminary survey by Saravanan (1994) showed that the curriculum materials come from India or Britain and do not reflect the cultural context, setting, lifestyles of children growing up in Singapore. The materials emphasise structural exercises and drills in preparation for the 'O' and 'A' levels examinations conducted by Cambridge Examinations Syndicate. They do not have the resources to write adequate reading materials as well as children's literature for Singapore children.

The psychology of the young learner in a bilingual setting has not been carefully considered. While the bilingual child has a wide variety of attractively written and illustrated children's books in English, there is a lack of children's literature in the other official languages acquired by children. What is available in the Indian languages is a poor choice of books on folk tales and mythology from India, printed on poor quality paper, mostly in black and white or with little colour. These poor quality books have little appeal in comparison with children's materials published in English.

### **Survey on Literacy and Language Use Amongst Indian Speakers**

#### **Results and Comments**

A sample of 168 students studying Bengali, Hindi and Punjabi in community run classes were surveyed Saravanan (1995). The results are presently being analysed using SPSS.

Item 21 was on language and type of newspapers read most frequently:

Table 1

|               |       |
|---------------|-------|
| Straits Times | 75.0% |
| New Paper     | 23.2% |
| Other         | 1.2%  |

As there are hardly any newspapers published in these ethnic languages in Singapore it is obvious that a natural choice would be to read the two dailies published in English in Singapore.

Item 21b was on frequency of leisure reading by language, ranging from everyday to once a week, month etc, the following results were obtained:

Insert Table 2: Leisure reading by language

(i) English books and magazines were read frequently, everyday (N=141) compared to home language (N=18).

(ii) Books in two other languages were also read, Malay (N=7) and Mandarin (once a week, N=3). A reasonable explanation for this is the fact that Bengali, Hindi and Punjabi speakers do not opt for Tamil, a Dravidian language which has no common linguistic roots with North Indian languages and therefore Tamil was not their language of choice. Some of these speaker opted for Malay or Chinese for their choice of the compulsory second language requirements. Many of these students only moved to classes in their ethnic languages very recently.

Item 22 was on Language Competency:

insert Table 3,  
inset chart 3,

As expected a larger percentage tended to code-mix (N=83), a smaller group (N=35) could easily express themselves in their ethnic languages, ie. home languages. a smaller percentage had some difficulty (N=37) or great difficulty (N=13). This item shows that students are not fluent in these languages and these are estimates of themselves.

Finally item 20 was on language use in various settings. Though this item does not directly refer to literacy, it shows the dominant use of English in almost all the settings compared to ethnic or home languages.

insert Table:4

insert Chart:4 scattergram

## Conclusion

Curriculum materials in the official and community languages tend to emphasise the acquisition of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. There is however a lack of culturally relevant materials and cross-cultural experiences in sufficient quantity and quality. There is potential for selecting and including the more salient aspects of multi-cultural Singapore in the Indian language materials.

The socio-cultural experiences of bilingual children growing up in a multi-cultural context, for example, childrens' games childrens' rhymes, the customs, rituals, and practices associated with ethnic festivals, that form part of a rich cultural heritage, a variety of oral, verbal and visual elements can all become part of a rich source of socio-cultural observations. These socio-cultural features have not been adequately exploited in curriculum materials.

This is important as studies on linguistic communities have shown that as long as social elitism and economic elitism is related to English language education, language communities e.g. Indian, (Saravanan 1994), Malay, (Ayyub 1994) will experience language shift leading to language loss.

One way of reversing language shift is to organise school-based and community-based literacy activities that will help increase the social-cultural status of the language (cf. Fishman 1991). This process towards reversal can be encouraged by providing community based activities that help in reviving community languages.

This recognition of the importance of community based involvement lead to the 'Speak Mandarin' campaigns organised by Chinese community organisations. They are involved in planning and implementing projects that promote language and culture in the home, school and community. Other ethnic, linguistic groups need to set up similar organisations to promote metacultural awareness within a multi-racial, multi-cultural society.

## Notes

1. Gopinathan and Saravanan (1994) note that the Indians' lack of political and economic power and the fragmentation of the community, all of which have increased pressure on the language even as the official policy promotes and supports the use of Indian languages as school languages.

2. Saravanan 1995 examined the particular strengths and weaknesses of language and cultural maintenance through the

language curriculum and concluded that the objectives of the bilingual policy to promote mother tongue education to ensure knowledge and identification with traditional cultures and their values have not been completely achieved.

3. The following statement was made in an attempt to promote Hindi as a popular language: "Hindi should be simplified and should even adopt foreign words it should be a popular language instead of pandit's language' (The Fourth World Hindi convention in Mauritius, 1993)

4. Many of the community organisations, are self-help groups involved in membership drives, fund raising and networking with community based, ethnic based, social, educational, youth and other commercial/professional organisations. They also organise cultural activities: shows/play writing workshops; drama, music, film fests; exhibitions on cultural heritage, family activities, educational activities, story telling, public education forums, talks, seminars, workshops, on issues and concerns ranging from underachievement of students to other social maladies.

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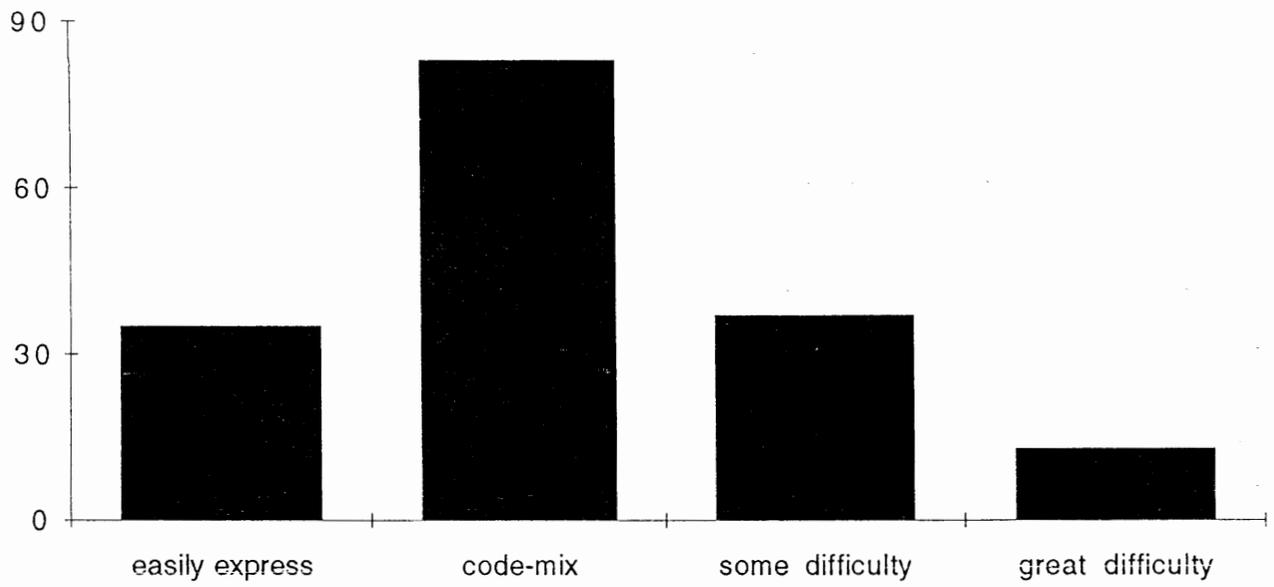
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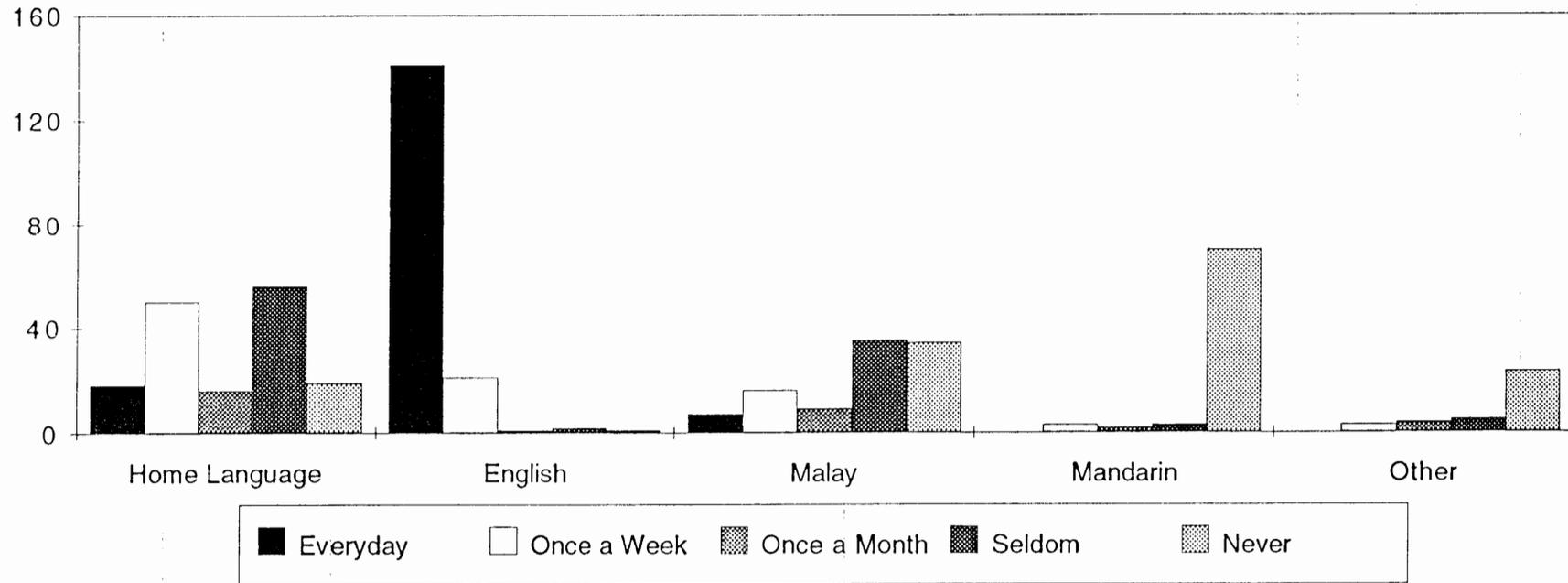
- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

competency chart

Language Competenc



Frequency of Leisure Reading by Language



### Language Use in Different Settings

