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ABSTRACT. This paper discusses the language policy for Chinese Language or Mandarin in Singapore, with a particular focus on recent policy changes and the accompanying policy statements. The paper identifies and explores three key features in the recent language policy changes: a flexible and customized approach in the teaching and learning of Chinese, a plan to nurture a core group of bicultural elite, and the emphasis on oral communication and reading for the majority of students. The paper argues that underlying the changes is the affirmation and continuation of the government’s pragmatic approach in language policy and commitment to bilingualism in Singapore. The paper analyzes the language policy changes for Chinese in the context of recent educational reforms and the prevailing ideology in Singapore.

KEY WORDS: bilingualism, Chinese Language, English, language policy, Mandarin, pragmatism, Singapore

ABBREVIATIONS: JC – Junior College; MTL – officially designated mother tongue; MOE – Ministry of Education; SAP – Special Assistance Plan

INTRODUCTION

The Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong has stated that language policy “concerns such fundamental issues as how we see the world, how we express ourselves culturally as a people, how we ensure survival of our society, and have the confidence and identity to chart our future” (The Straits Times 27 Nov 2004). The importance of language planning in Singapore is seen in the recent changes to the Chinese Language policy. This paper discusses the language policy for the Chinese Language or Mandarin in Singapore, with a particular focus on recent policy changes and the accompanying policy statements. The paper identifies and explores three key features in the recent language policy changes: a flexible and customized approach in the teaching and learning of Chinese,
a plan to nurture a core bicultural elite group, and the emphasis on
oral communication and reading for the majority of students. The
paper analyzes the language policy changes for Chinese in the con-
text of recent educational reforms and the prevailing ideology in
Singapore.

Background to the Language Policy in Singapore

As a city-state with over 4.2 million people, Singapore is a multi-
ethnic and multilingual country that achieved independence only in
1965. The 2000 census showed that there were 76.8% Chinese,
13.9% Malay, 7.9% Indian and 1.4% other. Singapore’s language
policy is described as one of “pragmatic multilingualism” where
Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English are designated as official lan-
guages and Malay is chosen as the national language, thus ensuring
de jure equality of treatment (Ho & Wong, 2000). As a British col-
ony up to 1955, English was used as the language of government,
administration and trade. However, knowledge of English was re-
stricted to a small group of educated people, with the masses
knowing only their ethnic languages. With self-government in 1959
and merger with Malaysia in 1963, Malay was adopted as the na-
tional language. When Singapore became a sovereign state in 1965,
Malay was officially still the national language but English was
selected as the common working language. The choice of English
was due to the need for Singaporeans to communicate effectively in
a language understood by the rest of the world. English was and
still is highlighted for its economic or utilitarian value – for
employment and access to the science and technology of the West
(Gopinathan, 1998). That English, and not an Asian language, has
been chosen as the language of transactions for the Association of
Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well as for international
relations, business, education and intellectual work in the region
testifies to its importance (Pakir, 2001).

Bilingualism in Singapore is defined not as proficiency in any
two languages but as proficiency in English which is recognized as
the first language, and a second language, known as a “Mother
Tongue Language” (MTL). Three MTLs have been selected by
the government for students in Singapore – Chinese or Mandarin
(Putonghua) for Chinese students, Malay for Malay students, and
Tamil for Indian students. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in
Singapore defines “mother tongue” not by the language used at
home or the first language learned by the student but by ethnicity.
For example, a Chinese student may come from a home background where English is the only language spoken, but her "mother tongue" is officially Mandarin, not English. All students in Singapore must study two languages in schools: English and their MTL. Primary school students study their MTLs for six years from primary 1 to primary 6 (from 7 to 12 years old). At the terminal examination (Primary School Leaving Examination or PSLE), their score for MTL will be weighted equally with the other three subjects (English, Mathematics and Science) to qualify them for a place in a secondary school of their choice. Secondary school students study their MTLs for either four or five years (from 13 to 16 or 17 years old). They need to obtain a minimum grade of D7 for their MTLs at the terminal examination (GCE ‘O’ level examination) before they can be admitted to a junior college where they study subjects at the pre-university level. Throughout this paper, Chinese and Mandarin will be used interchangeably.

Chinese Language Policy in Singapore

The language policy for the Chinese language has undergone a number of changes in recent years. In 2001, MOE introduced a Chinese Language ‘B’ syllabus based on the recommendations by the Chinese Language Review Committee chaired by then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 1999 (Ministry of Education, 1999, 2004a). This is a simpler syllabus compared to the standard syllabus for Chinese which all ethnically Chinese students must take, less demanding in the sense that it emphasizes writing skills less and focuses on practical communication skills. But not everyone is allowed to take the ‘B’ syllabus; only those Chinese students who face “exceptional difficulties” in coping with the language are eligible for it. The new syllabus was introduced at Secondary 3 (15 years old) and JC 1 which was the first year of the pre-university course (17 years old). The introduction of the ‘B’ syllabus means that Secondary 4 Chinese students have to obtain a pass in it or score at least D7 in the standard Chinese Language paper at the ‘O’ Level examinations.

Three years later in 2004, MOE decided to refine the policy (Ministry of Education, 2004a, 2004b). Firstly, the ‘B’ syllabus was to be offered to students weak in Mandarin from Secondary 1 (13 years old) instead of Secondary 3 (15 years old). Weak students
were defined by MOE as students who scored a C for their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). The simpler syllabus will also be offered to students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism and hearing impairment. In exceptional cases, exemption from Mandarin may be granted to students who have re-entered the education system after living overseas for a period of time. The policy change also caters to high-ability students who are good at Chinese. These students can choose to take Mandarin at a more advanced level, Higher MTL (HMTL) at both primary and secondary school. This policy aims to produce a larger pool of Singaporeans who have a deeper understanding of their mother tongue language and culture.

The latest change was announced towards the end of 2004 (Chinese Language Review Committee, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2004c, 2004d), and was based on the recommendations by the Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee formed in February 2004. The committee conducted a comprehensive review of the teaching and learning of Chinese in schools. Its report highlighted a number of concerns that impede the effective teaching and learning of Chinese in schools. It pointed to an over-emphasis on character stroke memorization and general lack of interest among the students to read in Mandarin, especially outside the curriculum. Most students did not find the topics taught interesting. The current examination format limited the teachers’ scope for delivering engaging lessons, and there was inadequate motivation to continue learning and using the language after the students leave school.

MOE accepted the changes recommended by the committee. In terms of structure, MOE announced that a more flexible and customized approach for Chinese language curriculum will be adopted for primary and secondary schools. A streaming approach will be introduced in primary schools to cater to children who have little exposure to Mandarin, as well as children with the background or ability in Mandarin to go further. Students will be divided into streams based on their proficiency levels in Mandarin, and will learn the language at different pace. All students will take core modules which will constitute between 70% and 80% of the Chinese Language curriculum time. Weaker students will receive additional help through bridging modules in the early primary years while students with the interest and ability will take enrichment modules (Ministry of Education, 2005). The overall aim is to encourage students to develop an abiding interest in Mandarin and Chinese culture after leaving school. At the
secondary level, advanced students will have the opportunities to develop
fluency in all the four language skills (speaking, writing, listening and
reading) and a good understanding of Chinese history and culture. They
will be enrolled in the Bicultural Studies Program (Chinese). Known as
the “bicultural elite”, this initial group of 200 students will delve deeper
into Chinese language and culture, be groomed to sustain and pass on
Chinese culture in Singapore, and to engage China. Although the full
changes will be implemented only in 2008, interim changes have already
started in 2005 with a smaller syllabus load for Chinese Language students.

The content will see a shift from writing to effective oral commu-
nication and reading. The focus for the majority of students will
be on listening, speaking and reading the language. Senior Minister
for Education Tharman Shanmugaratnam explained that the objec-
tive was to encourage the students to use the language more fre-
quently and develop an intrinsic motivation to learn it (Tharman,
2004a, 2004b). There will be corresponding changes in pedagogy
and assessment methods. Suggested strategies to promote oral and
listening skills include more extensive use of songs, verse/choral
reading, and recitation. To develop students’ reading ability, the
government plans to introduce the “Recognize First, Write Later”
principle where more emphasis is placed on character recognition
and reading strategies. Teachers will be encouraged to be innova-
tive in their teaching and incorporate Information Technology
packages. The examination format will also be changed to reflect
the shift towards oral/aural and reading skills. There will be a
reduction in the discrete testing of words and phrases, and students
will be allowed to use Chinese dictionaries and handheld devices in
examinations. More changes are expected to be proposed in the
next few years. The government hopes to enlist the help of the
whole community, including parents, the media, and Chinese com-
munity organizations, to create an environment conducive to the
learning of Mandarin.

REFLECTIONS ON THE CHANGES IN THE POLICY

It is important to situate these language policy changes in the context
of recent educational reforms in Singapore. The changes in the
teaching and learning of Chinese are part of the introduction of an
Ability Driven Education (ADE) in Singapore. ADE is a new educa-
tional paradigm adopted by the government under the Thinking
Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN) vision launched in 1997. This vision aims to develop creative thinking skills, a lifelong passion for learning, and nationalistic commitment in the young. This requires a shift from an Efficiency Driven Education (EDE) to an ADE. The former Senior Minister of State for Education Peter Chen identified three phases in the history of education in Singapore (Chen, 2000). The first phase was “survival” when the aim was to produce trained workers in the early years of Singapore’s independence and industrialization. The next phase was “efficiency”, intended to fine-tune the system through measures such as streaming in order to produce skilled workers for the economy in the most efficient way. The current paradigm, ADE, aims to equip and prepare students to meet the challenges of a knowledge economy by taking into consideration their individual abilities and talents. The former Minister of Education Teo Chee Hean explained that the goal is to identify, develop and harness the students’ talents and abilities to the maximum (Teo, 2000, 2001). By inculcating in the students national values and social instincts, it is hoped that the students will be committed to the nation and actively contribute their talents for the good of the society (Teo, 1999). ADE focuses on and celebrates a diversity of talents, be it in intellect, the arts, sports, or community endeavors. It is premised on the belief that all talents and abilities are equally valuable and will be equally nurtured, and presupposes that the key stakeholders in education – students, teachers, principals, parents and community at large – support the development of a variety of talents and abilities in the students (Tan, 2005a). While MOE aims to help every child find his or her own talents and abilities, it recognizes at the same time that it is unable to tailor its educational programs for every individual. So mass customization is adopted to cater to groups of students with similar needs and abilities. This is achieved in two ways: greater flexibility and choice in the educational programs, and greater autonomy at the school level which will allow a greater variety of programs across the schools (Teo, 2002).

The flexible and customized feature is seen in the recent policy changes for Chinese. Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew explained that the wide range of options take into account the student’s ability, inherent bilingual skills, and the language environment in school, home and the neighborhood (Lee, 2004). Citing examples from other Asian countries such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, he noted that less than 10% of the population there were effectively bilingual. He concluded that very few people can be fluent in two languages.
(The Straits Times 26 November 2004) and that his early assumption that nearly everyone can be effectively bilingual was “over optimistic” (Lee, 2004). Rather than a standardized curriculum, the system now offers a flexible modular curriculum to cater to students with varying proficiency levels of Mandarin. Mass customization is seen in the introduction of the Chinese ‘B’ syllabus for weaker students, and Bicultural Studies Program (Chinese) for more capable students. Greater autonomy is given to selected schools to offer special programs for high-ability students such as Language Elective Program (LEP) and Bicultural Studies Program (Chinese). Schools will be given greater flexibility to increase Chinese Language subject curriculum time vis-à-vis English Language subject curriculum time. Selected primary schools can even choose to use Mandarin as a medium of teaching in subjects such as Mathematics. New subjects such as Literature in Chinese as a Combined Humanities Elective, and Chinese Culture and Thought will also be introduced to schools.

THE PLAN TO NURTURE A CORE GROUP OF BICULTURAL ELITE

A key feature of the policy changes for Chinese Language is the plan to nurture a core “bicultural elite” group who are effectively bilingual and bicultural. The objective is for them to understand and engage China as it grows in importance (Ministry of Education, 2004c). The Bicultural Studies Program (Chinese) is a 4-year program for students from Secondary 3 (15 years old) to JC 2 which is the second year of their pre-university course (18 years old). To start, some 200 students will be receiving grounding in China’s history, culture and contemporary developments. Schools which have a strong Chinese tradition such as Nanyang Girls’ Secondary, The Chinese High, and Dunman High Secondary will offer the Bicultural Studies Program (Chinese). These students will go on home stays and attachments to schools in China, and attend lectures at top universities in China. They will also study an advanced subject known as Higher Chinese, and take electives such as Chinese history and Chinese philosophy. SAP scholarships will be awarded to highly able students in the Bicultural Studies Program (Chinese) at the pre-university level. About 100 of these students will take Chinese Language and Literature, China Studies in Chinese, and receive funding for immersion in China for up to 6 months. Among these 100 students, the top scholars may qualify for scholarships to pursue undergraduate study in top universities.
in China and other universities. The undergraduate scholarships will be offered by ministries, statutory boards, government-linked companies or private companies with business interests in China.

The move to nurture bicultural elite group is influenced by noting that the Chinese textbooks in Singapore give little insights into the way of life of mainland Chinese. Miss Lee Huay Leng, a Singapore Chinese journalist working in Beijing, commented: “The things we knew about were all pre-communist China. It was very different in the 1990s” (The Straits Times 26 June 2004). For example, students in Singapore learn about the culture of ancient China — the world of Confucius, Chinese emperors and Chinese classics in their textbooks. There is little mention of modern Chinese history, Communist ideology and the worldview of the mainland Chinese today. This means that a Chinese student in Singapore may score high marks for Chinese in schools, and yet be out of touch with the culture of contemporary China. The former Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew agreed that the current school system only equips students in Singapore with enough Mandarin for social, not business purposes; consequently, these students cannot play in the big league in the growing Chinese economy (The Straits Times 26 June 2004). Addressing this deficiency, the shift now is from the Chinese language alone to Chinese language and culture for an elite group. This group of students should be able to relate to both China and the West at the same time. To use Mr Thurman’s’ words, they “can effectively operate in more than one channel” (The Straits Times 16 June 2004). Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong adds that this bicultural elite will be at ease with both Western and Eastern cultures, and able to help Singapore maintain its position as a bridge between East and West (The Straits Times 20 October 2004).

THE EMPHASIS ON ORAL COMMUNICATION AND READING FOR THE MAJORITY OF STUDENTS

Another key feature in the policy changes is the focus on developing fluency and confidence in oral communication and early proficiency in character recognition and reading. The government explains that a greater emphasis on these practical skills will encourage students to use Mandarin more frequently and thereby sustain their interest in the language (Chinese Language Review Committee, 2004). The shift of emphasis from writing to oral and
reading skills is prompted by the need to cater to an increasing number of Chinese students who are weak in Mandarin. The learning of English in Singapore for the past decades has given rise to a population of “English-knowing bilinguals” who are schooled in English and in their respective ethnic mother tongues (Kachru, 1983; Pakir, 1998). Official surveys show that there have been language shifts between 1980 and 1990 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 1990, 2000). In 1988, only 20% of the Primary 1 cohort came from English-speaking homes but the figure rose to 40% by 1998. Xu and Tan (1997) report that of the some 40% of the formerly Chinese-dominant homes which experienced language shift, over three quarters of them have become or are becoming bilingual, and less than one quarter have become or are becoming English-dominant. The above observations are further corroborated in a survey conducted in 2004 by MOE of 4500 students, 4600 parents, 320 principals and 1000 language teachers. The number of Chinese students entering Primary 1 who speak predominantly English at home has risen from 36% in 1994 to 50% in 2004 (Chinese Language Review Committee, 2004). The survey also shows that 59% of Primary 2 students speak English at home. Parents with higher education are also more likely to use English at home with their children. Twenty-eight percent of Primary 4 students converse with their friends and classmates in Mandarin, compared to 40% amongst secondary 4 students. The survey concludes that the trend of children entering school with little exposure to Mandarin in the home will continue. In other words, there is a generational change with more young ethnically Chinese students coming from English-speaking homes.

The language shift reflects the change in the mindset and practice of parents in Singapore. Fishman (1989) pointed out that language shift is possible when the people are open to change, forward-looking and culturally not conservative. In this regard, the parents in Singapore appear to be conscious of the need to immerse their children totally in one language during their formative years (Beardsmore, 1994). As the national working language with an ostensible instrumental value, English is widely regarded as the language of trade and social mobility.

It is likely that the learning of mother-tongues has been less favored among parents in Singapore. Pakir (1998) observed that parents in Singapore, being pragmatic, were giving up their heritage language in order to ensure that their children will survive with the
languages of the new world order. That this group of students from English-speaking homes is struggling with the Chinese Language in schools is confirmed in the 2004 MOE survey (Chinese Language Review Committee, 2004). The survey reports that about 77% of Primary 6 students from English-speaking homes find learning Mandarin difficult. A majority of them (72% at Primary 6) also need Chinese tuition to help them learn the language. The latest policy change to emphasize oral and reading skills is the government’s response to help these weaker students cope with the language. Prior to the recent policy change, the emphasis for Chinese has been on writing. Students have to reproduce from memory the character strokes of all the characters they can read in examinations. A newspaper article profiling Chinese students from English-speaking homes reports that there is a “dislike bordering on hatred for what they see as a subject taught through rote work, drills, drills and more drills, and on which they must spend a disproportionate amount of time with very little reward” (The Straits Times 26 Jan 2004). The government realizes that learning all four language skills, in particular writing skills, is too demanding for this group of students. The focus now is oral communication and reading so that this group of students can cope with the language and hopefully continue to speak the language after they leave school.

REFLECTIONS ON THE CONTINUITY IN THE POLICY – PRAGMATISM AND LINGUISTIC PRAGMATISM

Despite the reforms in the teaching and learning of Chinese Language, the recent policy changes affirm and continue the government’s pragmatic approach towards education and languages in Singapore. Writers such as Vasil (1984), Chua (1985), Quah (1990), Hill and Eien (1995), Tan (1995), Ho and Gopinathan (1999), and Ho (2000) have identified pragmatism as the ruling ideology of the government in Singapore. This pragmatic slant towards education in Singapore was reflected in a speech by then Senior Minister of State for Education Tharman Shanmugaratnam:

[An] important principle is that whatever we do in education, we should remain pragmatic, not doctrinaire, in our approach. We should, as the Chinese would say, ‘seek truth from facts’. Where the evidence shows that we are not achieving what we set out to gain, we change methods. Where the aims are no longer relevant to circumstances, we revise the aims (Tharman, 2003).
The aim of pragmatism in education is economic in nature – to ensure Singapore’s success and promote her economic growth and political stability. The approach of pragmatism in education is characterized as functionalist and utilitarian (Chew, 1998; Gopinathan, 1980; Tan, 1994; Yip, 1997). Although the policies may seem unfavorable at a particular time, the government is able to justify these pragmatic implementations by producing the results promised in terms of economic growth and political stability (Quah, 1990; Tan, 1995). Chua (1985) observes that no sector of social life, no matter how private, cannot be so administered as to harness it to serve the pragmatic goal of continuous economic growth. The global propensity of countries to capitalize on their human resource gives added impetus to pragmatism as the engine that drives the educational changes in Singapore. As Singapore is highly dependent on direct foreign investment and multinational corporations, she needs to keep up with rapidly changing technology (Low, 2003). While the Singapore school system has already attained a world-class standard in mathematics, computing and other sciences, experts have pointed out the relative poor performance in the development of leadership and managerial skills, and the capacity to encourage the emergence of creative and entrepreneurial talent (Johnston, 2003). A strong foundation in mathematics, sciences and languages is therefore crucial for Singapore to ride on the tide of economic boom in a knowledge economy.

Against this backdrop of pragmatism, it is unsurprising that language policy is influenced by practical considerations as well. Different writers have used different but related terms to clarify the pragmatic underpinnings in the language policy in Singapore, such as “linguistic pragmatism” (Ho & Alsagoff, 1998), “pragmatic multilingualism” (Ho & Wong, 2000; Saravanan, 1996) and “linguistic instrumentalism” (Wee, 2003). Ho and Alsagoff (1998) point out that linguistic pragmatism is a logical extension of pragmatism as the forces of the marketplace determine the worth and fate of languages as economic instruments. Both language and culture are valued as commodifiable resources (Ho & Alsagoff, 1998; Tan, 1995; Wee, 2003).

The government’s pragmatic approach is seen in the recent policy statements and policy changes for Chinese. A strong indication is the government’s use of economic motivation to encourage all Chinese students to take Mandarin seriously. This is linked to the rise of China which has added value to Mandarin as a global
Bilingual trade between China and Singapore multiplied sevenfold from $5.3 billion in 1991 to $36.9 billion in 2003 (The Straits Times 26 June 2004). The former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong reminded Singaporeans that China’s transformation has been spectacular since 1978 and that she could overtake Japan as the world’s second largest economy by 2050 (The Straits Times 22 March 2004). Urging Singaporeans to ride on the economic growth of China, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong stated that Singaporeans would be “silly” not to use this window of opportunity and “stupid” to de-emphasize Chinese and lose this edge (Goh, 2004). This pragmatic bent to learn Mandarin for economic reasons is also present in parents and students. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong notes that parents – both from English- and Chinese-speaking home backgrounds – will support their children learning the language as they can see how valuable it will be for their children in work to business in China (The Straits Times 20 October 2004).

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew agreed that “while parents and students wanted emotionally to keep their mother tongue, sentimental reasons are not as strong as the economic value of the language” (The Straits Times 26 November 2004). He added that parents and students are aware that the Chinese language is a valuable skill, given China’s economic resurgence. This is attested to in the MOE survey which shows that most parents and students recognize the importance of learning Mandarin (Chinese Language Review Committee, 2004). Among the students who said that they liked learning Mandarin, about half of the primary students (48.5% of primary 2 students and 51% of primary 6 students) and more than a third of the secondary students (39.3% for secondary 2 students and 35.7% for secondary 4 students) chose this reason: “Chinese is an important subject for my future”.

In terms of policy changes, the introduction of a bicultural elite group who specialize in Chinese reflects the government’s use of the language to achieve its economic aim. Senior Minister for Education Tharman Shanmugaratnam stated that those who acquire a deep understanding of Chinese language and culture, including contemporary China, would be “a major asset for Singapore” (Tharman, 2004a). The ideology of pragmatism also explains the policy of restricting the number of bicultural students, and giving them the exclusive title of “elite”. One tenet of pragmatism is the
belief in selecting students with exceptional ability as middle-level and top-level leaders to lead the rest of society (Ho & Gopinathan, 1999; Tan, 2003). Ho and Gopinathan noted that this system of selection and reward had been justified on the grounds that “given the limited talent pool because of the relatively small size of the population, those with the potential to lead must be given the widest opportunity to develop into effective leaders” (1999, p. 111). Pragmatism also influences the policy shift from writing to oral communication and reading skills for the majority of students. Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew pointed out that the goal is for students to speak, listen and read “at a working social level, not professional or specialist purposes” (Lee, 2004). He explains how the skills in oral communication and reading will also put them in a good stead should they choose to do business in China:

Those who do business in China or with Chinese speaking firms in Singapore, they can build on what they have learned in school. They do not need to write. They can get someone to do that for them. But they need to speak, to understand what is spoken and read simple notices (Lee, 2004).

THE OFFICIAL POLICY OF BILINGUALISM

Further evidence of continuity is the official policy of bilingualism in the recent policy statements for Chinese (e.g. see Chinese Language Review Committee, 2004; Goh, 2004; Lee, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2004b; Tharman, 2004a, 2004b). Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew maintained that the bilingual policy with English as the working language and the ethnic mother tongues is the practical way to safeguard Singapore’s future. While he encouraged Singapore Chinese to master Mandarin, he was careful to point out that this did not mean that English had now been replaced. He pointed out that Singapore Chinese who only know Mandarin are “of little value to China and the Chinese” since China already have 1.3 billion of them (Lee, 2004). What the Chinese in China find useful are Singapore Chinese who are bilingual and bicultural: “Because we are English-speaking. Because we have English connections with the English-speaking world. ... That’s our value-add” (The Straits Times 26 November 2004). In an age of globalization, it is expected that English will continue to be the global language used by people of different nationalities. As long as English remains the common working language in Singapore and the world, it will remain economically
important. The policy changes to emphasize the economic value of Mandarin just reinforce the belief that the Chinese students should be English–Mandarin bilinguals. Such a move is in line with the practice elsewhere where the indigenous languages are valued along aside with English (Heller, 1999b; Pomerantz, 2002; cited in Wee, 2003).

The recent policy changes also affirm the government’s view of the roles assigned to English and Mandarin. The government in Singapore has traditionally valued English primarily for its economic contribution and the mother tongues for their cultural contribution. This view of bilingualism has been described as “the functional polarization” of language (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999; Pendley, 1983). In this model, English is regarded as a neutral utilitarian language used in formal, controlling and specialized domains while the indigenous languages help the speakers maintain their ethnic identities through their cultural values and worldviews (Fishman, 1968). It is interesting to note that the government has highlighted both the economic and cultural value of Mandarin in its recent policy statements. However, it has persisted in treating English as a working language devoid of cultural value. For example, English is described as the language of global business, commerce and technology in the foreseeable future and is useful in facilitating inter-ethnic communication (Chinese Language Review Committee, 2004). On the other hand, the mother tongues are perceived as giving Singaporeans the confidence in their culture, roots and identity as a people and helping them ride the wave of growth in Asia (ibid.). Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong elaborated on the government’s position towards English and the ethnic mother tongues:

English is not our native language nor are English culture and customs, our culture and customs. But for practical reasons, and because we are a multi-racial society, Singaporeans accept English as our working language. To ensure that Singaporeans remain grounded in our ancestral Asian culture and values, we require our young to study their mother tongues in schools, be they Mandarin, Malay or Tamil (Goh, 2004).

This perceived need for Mandarin to transmit Asian culture and values to Chinese students is given a greater urgency due to globalization. Observing that many Singaporeans are traveling overseas and exposed to diverse influences in an increasingly globalized world, he pointed out that a “sturdy values system” through the learning of the mother tongues was essential. This will define who Singaporeans are and to anchor them to a place called home:
“Otherwise, we will be mocked as ‘bananas’ – yellow on the outside but white inside” (Goh, 2004).

Two observations can be made about the government’s view of the roles assigned to English and Mandarin. The first observation concerns the official status of English as purely a neutral utilitarian language. This paper shall not rehearse the objections put forward by many writers to the official view of English as the working language; readers are directed to the vast literature on this topic (e.g. see Bokhorst-Heng 1998; Gopinathan, 1979; Gupta, 1994; Kandiah, 1994; Platt, Weber, & Ho 1980; Pakir, 1991, 1992; Tan, 1995). Suffice to say that English is not a neutral language and actually brings with it certain cultural values and habits of thinking, just like Mandarin and any other languages. The Singapore government faces the fundamental ambivalence of wanting English and yet denying it its full scope and range of functions (Pakir, 1992).

Secondly, the government assumes that Mandarin provides the cultural and identity foundation for Singapore Chinese as it is their “mother tongue”. However a number of writers (e.g. Kuo, 1980; Kuo & Jernudd, 1988; Saravanan, 1996) and Singapore Chinese themselves (e.g. see The Straits Times 30 January 2004; The Straits Times 11 February 2004; The Straits Times 6 March 2004; The Straits Times 2 November 2004) have asserted that Mandarin is not the mother tongue for the majority of the Singapore Chinese. The mother tongues for most Singapore Chinese are Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew, as their ancestors hailed from southern China. Mandarin is actually a spoken language based on a dialect spoken by people from northern China. Mandarin and not the other dialects of Chinese was chosen by the government for historical and practical reasons. Externally, it connects Singapore to mainland China and Taiwan as it is the national language for mainland China and Taiwan. Internally, Mandarin is regarded as a neutral medium to overcome dialectic divisions among the Chinese, and to ethnicize and consolidate the Chinese population (Kandiah, 1994). It is also important to note that the Singapore Chinese themselves do not necessarily see Mandarin as an important factor in establishing and transmitting Chinese identity. Tan (1995) points out that studies show that descent, surname, Chinese customs and beliefs are more important to the English educated Chinese in Singapore than competence in Mandarin.
More changes in the structure, curriculum content, pedagogy and assessment methods used in the teaching and learning of Mandarin are to be expected in the next few years. While it is too early to analyze and evaluate the implications and impact of these policy changes at this stage, it is helpful to raise two issues of concern and the accompanying challenges.

One concern is that the shift towards linguistic pragmatism for Mandarin may lead to a greater emphasis on an exonormative standard of what is considered acceptable Mandarin for students in Singapore. The policy change to emphasize oral communication, coupled with the economic motivation to learn Mandarin in order to communicate with mainland Chinese, has put the spotlight on “standard” Mandarin. One possible development is for Singapore Chinese to adopt the Mandarin that is spoken by mainland Chinese as the standard. Despite the similarities between the Mandarin that is used in China and that used in Singapore, there are apparent differences as well. For example, the word “market” used by Singapore Chinese is “ba šā” which is adopted from the Malay word “pasar” but this is unintelligible to any mainland Chinese who use the term “cai shì chang”. The same Mandarin term could also mean different things in Singapore and China; for example, “mo tuo che” refers to a motor car in Singapore, but refers a motorcycle in China. If the Mandarin used in China is adopted as the standard, this may lead to a devaluation of the local variety of Mandarin, especially the colloquial form of Mandarin. Like English in Singapore, there is a “high” variety of Mandarin that Singapore Chinese learn in schools and use in formal occasions, and a “low” variety or colloquial form of Mandarin that is used in informal settings. The latter is influenced by Singlish – a local variety of English that arises due to influences of the students’ ethnic mother tongues on the lexical, syntactic and discourse aspects of English (Tan, 2005b). At the social level, Singapore Chinese students tend to pepper their Mandarin with Singlish expressions such as “pai sey” (meaning embarrass) and “obiang” (meaning awful-looking), and pragmatic particles like “ah”, “lah” and “lor”. There is already a growing debate among Singapore Chinese on whether Chinese students should learn “standard” Mandarin and eschew the localized form of Mandarin (e.g. see The Straits Times 15 October 2004; The Straits Times 29 October 2004). The challenge is...
for the local variety of Mandarin to co-exist with standard Mandarin so that the former can serve as a marker of a Singaporean Chinese identity. This colloquial form of Mandarin may well be the language for Singaporeans to define who they are and to anchor them to a place called home, to quote from Mr Goh Chok Tong. As one Singapore Chinese puts it, “localized vocabulary is a cultural asset for our identity, that rarity that I feel Singaporeans really need to hang on to, paranoid as we are about our cultural identity” (The Straits Times 29 October 2004).

The recent policy changes to Mandarin also have implications for non-Chinese students and parents in Singapore. The government is clear in its stand that different races should master their own ethnic mother tongues and students are not allowed to take the MTL of another ethnic group. However, it has been pointed out that Malay and Tamil do not offer as much economic potential as Mandarin (Wee, 2003). The government has also given the most attention to the learning of Mandarin and has made numerous references to China as a rising economic power and Mandarin as a global language. This has prompted some non-Chinese in Singapore to point out the unequal opportunities given to them since they are not allowed to take Mandarin as their MTL (e.g. The Straits Times 11 September 2004; The Straits Times 26 June 2004).

In response, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has formally assured the non-Chinese students and parents that Singapore is a multiracial society and there is a need to keep links with not just China but Southeast Asia and India as well. The government states that equal importance will be placed in the promotion and teaching of the other mother tongue languages (The Straits Times 23 August 2004; The Straits Times 24 August 2004). MOE has announced plans to set up two high level committees to review Malay and Tamil and the reviews are expected to be completed by August 2005 (Ministry of Education, 2004e; Tharman, 2004b). It has been reported that this move has been greeted with cheer by the non-Chinese who want similar recognition for their ethnic mother tongues (The Straits Times 27 November 2004). It will be interesting to see what these changes are for the other MTLs, and the challenges and implications for both Chinese and non-Chinese in Singapore.

Language policy is a complex process involving many factors and it will continue to generate discussions, debates and consequences, both intended and unintended, in Singapore. Minister Mentor Lee
Kuan Yew himself pointed out that the government cannot ever settle the issue of language policy forever. He pragmatically noted that the “value of the language will change, the emphasis that each parent wants for his child will change, so we adjust our policies accordingly” (The Straits Times 26 November 2004). What this paper has done is to highlight three key features in the language policy changes: a flexible and customized approach in the teaching and learning of Chinese, a plan to nurture a core bicultural elite group, and the emphasis on oral communication and reading for the majority of students. The paper has argued that despite the massive changes, the Chinese Language policy affirms and continues the government’s pragmatic approach in language policy and commitment to bilingualism in Singapore. Whatever the changes may be in the next few years, it is likely that linguistic pragmatism will continue to be featured prominently in the educational landscape of Singapore.

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