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English in Singapore: Striking a New Balance for Future-Readiness

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Abstract

English in Singapore has always presented a balancing act for its founders. The colonial era saw a distinct role for English i.e. to produce English-speaking officers for the British administration while modern Singapore sees English being used as both a national and international lingua franca (Pakir, 2010) and as a major language which connects the island city-state to the world. “English-knowing bilingualism” (Pakir, 1991) has gained ascendancy in Singapore and may become a core competency for the 21st century world with the rise in status of English as a global language. However, the path to English-knowing bilingualism in the pluri-lingual and heterogeneous country was often marked by paradoxical debates surrounding the issues of language maintenance and shift, identity and the transmission of values, equity and meritocracy, as well as balancing between local versus global linguistic norms and standards. This paper focuses on the continuing debates, from the past to the present, as new challenges arise and how a new balance has to be struck in the language strategy, policy and management in a future-ready Singapore.

Introduction

The founding fathers of both pre- and post-independent Singapore have always been confronted with balancing the role of English vis-à-vis other languages spoken in Singapore. This is the case for Sir Stamford Raffles who first brought English to Singapore by establishing it as a British Crown Colony in 1819 and Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father and chief architect of modern Singapore, who led the nation for thirty years as its first Prime Minister since 1965. The colonial era saw a distinct role for English: to produce medium level service officers for the British colonial administration even as the linguistic segregation of schools, based on ethnic enclaves, became a reality. Modern Singapore sees English playing new roles for the small city-state island republic of about five million citizens and residents: as the “major language of socio-economic mobility” (Lim, Pakir & Wee, 2010, p. 5); as “a national and the international lingua franca” (Pakir, 2010, p. 13); and consequently, as its major language to connect with the world.

“English-knowing bilingualism” (Pakir, 1991) has gained ascendancy in Singapore and may become a core competency for the 21st century world with the rise in status of English as a global language. However, the path to English-knowing bilingualism in the pluri-lingual and heterogeneous country was often marked by paradoxical debates surrounding the issues of language maintenance and shift, identity and the transmission of values, equity and meritocracy, as well as balancing between local versus global linguistic norms and standards. The debates continue unabated as new challenges arise, and in going forward, a new balance has to be struck in the language strategy, policy and management in a future-ready Singapore.

This paper first presents a historical development of English in Singapore, from the time of its shared history with Malaysia, to the changes in language policy and management in post-independent Singapore. It then discusses its present-day status and discusses the issues and challenges that confront language policy and management as the city, nation state charts its growth trajectory to ensure long-term sustainability for the next 50 years and beyond.

Historical Development

Any attempt to describe the historical development of English in Singapore cannot ignore its shared history with Malaysia before each country gained full independence. There was a brief period when Malaysia and Singapore were part of the same country as the Federated states of Malaya was formed from 1963 to when Singapore gained full independence in 1965 (for detailed coverage of the historical development of English in Singapore and Malaysia, please see Low & Tan, 2016 and Low, 2010). Due to their shared historical roots, unsurprisingly, early scholars dubbed the English spoken as one entity known as ‘Singapore and Malayan English’ (Tongue, 1974; Platt & Weber, 1980). Consequently, the differences in language policy strategies and management led to the development of two distinct varieties of English in Singapore and Malaysia. The favourable geographical positioning of the Malay Peninsula made it a maritime hub attracting different ethnic groups and European traders to settle in the region.

While the first colonial masters to arrive in the region were the Portuguese and the Dutch in 1511 and 1641 respectively, it was the British who first brought English to the region. In 1786, Francis Light hoisted the British flag over Penang island and soon the British gained control over Singapore in 1819 and subsequently of Malacca in 1824. The British East India Company that

took over Singapore, Malacca and Penang formed the Straits Settlement as Presidency for ease of administration until 1889 when the region became part of the British crown colony. The British slowly gained a foothold in Malaya, with the addition of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang as part of the Federated Malay States in 1896, and by 1914, all the Malay states fell to British rule. At the initial phase of British colonization, the population was mainly made up of Malays but gradually, due to the need for labour in the tin mines and rubber estates, the Chinese and Indians came to the region. The more educated Indians also assumed professional roles such as being doctors, lawyers, teachers, clerical officers etc. When the first census of population was conducted in 1911 (see Lowenberg, 1986), there were about 1.5 million Malays, 900,000 Chinese and 267,000 Indians residing in the region who spoke a host of different native languages.

Scholars like Platt and Weber (1980, p. 5), Low (2010, p. 230) and Low and Brown (2005, p. 17) have documented the main languages spoken by the different ethnic groups living in the Straits Settlement at the turn of the century. For the Malays, the main languages spoken are formal Malay, local regional dialects and native dialects of the immigrants while for the Chinese, these would be Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, Cantonese and a slew of minority dialects like Foochow and Henghua, for example. The Indians from Southern India spoke Tamil, Malayalam and Telegu while those from Northern India spoke mainly Punjabi. The Eurasians who had mixed European and Asian parentage tended to speak the languages according to the main ethnic background. As for the Europeans, they spoke mainly British English, often associated with the upper class, and a host of regional varieties of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish. During this period, Malay still served as the lingua franca for inter-ethnic communication as documented by Platt and Weber (1980, p. 7).

English in Singapore first developed as a result of the setting up of English-medium schools to educate the local population to be conversant in English in order to fulfil the employment needs of the newly established British crown colony. Initially, English was used mainly for law, administration, in the military and in private British companies. Soon, the economic advantage of being proficient in English led to more locals wanting to read, speak and write in English (Platt & Weber, 1980, p. 5). The variety of English spoken in Singapore and Malaya, christened Singapore-Malaysian English (or SME for short) was distinct as there was evidence of sub-stratum influences from local languages like Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay and Tamil in the English spoken at the English-medium schools. The English-medium schools were considered elitist as they were mainly

attended by the wealthier Chinese and Indian children or some Malays of royal descent. Most Malay children, however, attended the Malay vernacular schools.

Proficiency in English was key to social mobility in terms of providing employment opportunities and possibilities for pursuing higher education. With an increase in the English-educated student population, the demand for higher education naturally increased. These needs were met by the establishments of institutes of higher learning with English as the medium of instruction (hereafter referred to as MoI) which in turn opened up opportunities for higher education. The Singapore Medical School was first established in 1905, which later became the King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1915 while Raffles College was established in 1905. In 1949, the College of Medicine and Raffles College merged to form the University of Malaya (UM). In tandem with the historical development of Malaya, UM split into two independent universities, the University of Malaya was established at Kuala Lumpur in 1957 while the National University of Singapore was formed in 1961.

At the point of the withdrawal of British colonial rule, English was firmly rooted in the region and it was considered a language of prestige and was often used as a lingua franca amongst the inter-ethnic population residing in Malaya. English was also the language of international trade, banking, administration and education. The expansion of the transport and communication i.e. land, rail, sea transportation; telephone, telegram and postal services also led to an increase in the number of English-speaking workers employed (Platt & Weber, 1980, pp. 28-29). Local newspapers in English also began to be published in Singapore from around 1824.

While standard English was being used in formal settings, a colloquial variant emerged through the use of English in informal domains such as the playground and at home. This colloquial variety was influenced by substratum languages spoken by the locals such as Bazaar Malay, Baba Malay (Malay spoken by the Straits-born Chinese), Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew to name a few (Gupta, 1998, p. 125).

Singapore became a fully independent nation in 1965 after a brief merger with Malaysia from 1963 to 1965. One of the greatest concerns of the newly formed government was to find a common language that is ethnically neutral while allowing Singaporeans access to learn their ethnic mother tongues so that they can remain culturally rooted. The choice of English as the lingua franca was founded on the premise of economic pragmatism (Tupas, 2011) where English would be able to provide the young nation with economic benefits in terms of international trade and access to the

wealth of research and resources written in English for educational purposes (See Low, 2017 for more details).

Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew said most poignantly, “If we are to modernise and industrialise, we must be bilingual” (Lee, 1978). The issue of linguistic and ethnic diversity was a thorny issue that concerned the newly independent Malaya. This led to the formation of the All-Party Committee in 1956 to look into and propose solutions to this issue. Arising from the recommendations of the All-Party Committee Report, learning a second language from Primary one became mandatory from the 1960s onwards. Shroud and Wee (2010) commented that “Singapore’s language policy was designed as a strategy for managing a multi-ethnic society, via a mother tongue policy that encouraged Singaporeans to be bilingual in English and an official mother tongue....” (p. 181). Pakir (1991) coined the term “English-knowing bilingualism” to refer to the language policy situation in Singapore resulting in students who are proficiency in English and at least one other language, usually their ascribed mother tongue i.e. Malay for the Malays, Mandarin Chinese for the Chinese and Tamil for the Indians.

Two other milestone language policies arose out of the recommendations of the All-Party Committee Report. The first was the declaration of four co-official languages in Singapore, i.e. English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. The second was the decision to make Malay the national language given that Singapore was nested within Malay-speaking territories geographically.

Moving beyond the newly independent phase, the Goh Report in 1979 found that only 40% of students had attained minimal proficiency in two languages. A possible challenge was the host of Chinese dialects spoken alongside Mandarin Chinese. The Speak Mandarin Campaign was introduced in 1979 as a means of uniformising the language environment of the Chinese-speaking population. Streaming was also introduced in 1980 based on academic performance of the students at the end of Primary Three. Students in the normal bilingual stream will take a further three years to complete their primary education while those in the extended bilingual stream will take four. Students in the monolingual stream are exempted from having to pass a second language and are given five years to complete their primary education. The second tier of streaming takes place when student complete their primary school education. The top 10% of the cohort are offered the chance to pursue English and their ethnically ascribed mother tongues as first languages while the majority (about 70%) will continue with English as a first language and either Mandarin, Malay and Tamil as second languages.

Two other milestone language policies that occurred during this era deserve special mention. In 1985, a pass in both English and a second language was the minimum language requirement for entry into the local universities. Today, those who have not obtained a pass in the second language are required to attend additional proficiency courses in the second language via a language camp held at the university. Another milestone language policy was the introduction of English as the MoI for all schools in 1987 and this has remained the case to the present.

Present-day Status

This section will discuss the present-day status of English that has its roots in the language policies adopted by the government in post-independent era described in the previous section. English has been successfully adopted as the official language as well as the MoI in Singapore due to the government's concern about the racial harmonization, economic development and international competitive edge. Singaporeans' high level of English proficiency has contributed greatly to the development of this small island nation state. The contributions are manifold, as Bolton and Ng (2014, p. 316) observe:

The high levels of English proficiency of Singaporeans have made them an attractive workforce for multinational companies and allow Singaporeans to integrate into the various higher education settings in the English-speaking world with relative ease, as well as giving them a passport to international employment. ... In all international measures of literacy and numeracy skills, Singaporean children are among the most competent in the world. Though an increasing number of Singaporeans are English dominant, they are able to converse in at least two languages.

Singapore's language policy is successful in building a nation of increasingly bilingual speakers. However, it does not come without consequences. One consequence is the language shift through which English has emerged as a language used at home and may even be considered *de facto* 'mother tongue' for some Singaporeans. For these Singaporeans, their designated mother tongues are now virtually becoming their 'second languages'. As shown in Figure 1, reports of English as the home language have increased from 1.8% in 1957 to 36.9% in 2015. The use of Mandarin as the home language increases from 0.1% in 1957 to 35.6% in 2010 though slightly decreases to 34.9% in 2015. This increase interacts with the concomitant dramatic decline in use of Chinese dialects (such as Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew) at home from 74.4% in 1957 to 12.2% in 2015. While the use of Malay at home relatively stays stable, the use of Tamil at home decreases from 5.2% in 1957 to 3.3% in 2015.

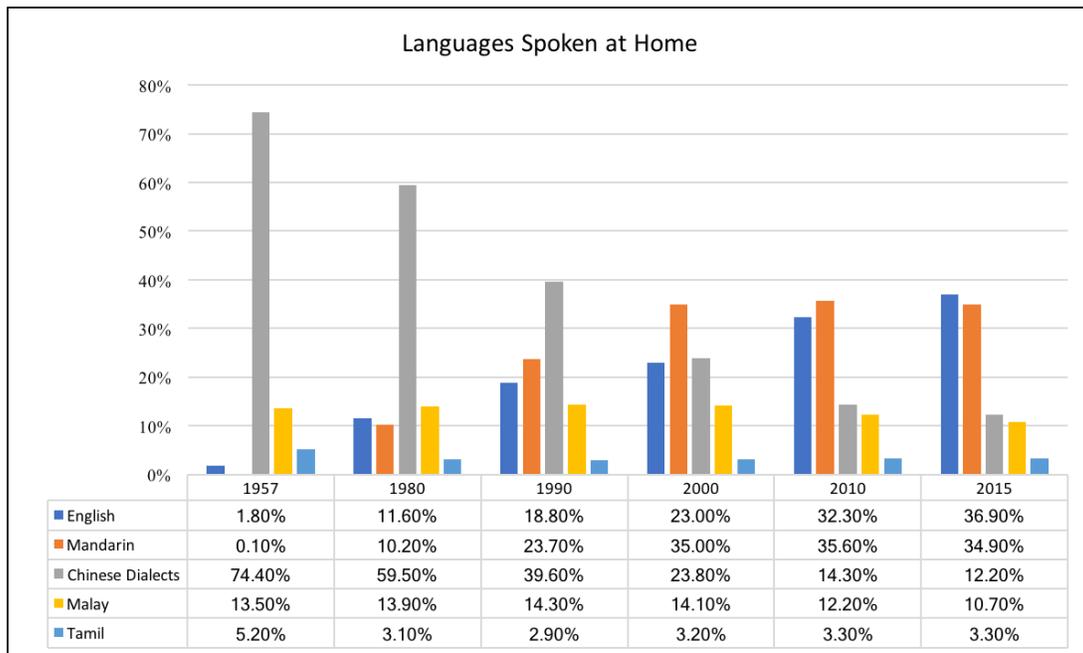


Figure 1. Percentage of languages most frequently spoken at home in Singapore (Sources: Kuo, 1980; Lau, 1993; Department of Statistics, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016; Bolton & Ng, 2014)

The degree of this language shift can also be seen from Figure 2 which shows that Singaporean Chinese have shifted to English and Mandarin from 1980 to 2010, coupled with the sharp decline in the use of Chinese dialects. For the Malays, although Malay is still the most frequently used language at home by the majority, it is noteworthy that the use of English as the preferred home language has grown from 2.3% in 1980 to 17% in 2010. English is now a more widely used home language than Tamil for Singaporean Indians. Overall, there is a tendency indicating the increasing use of English and Mandarin (the latter of which is restricted to the Chinese community) at home but a decline in the use of Malay and Tamil though all ethnic communities increasingly use English as the home language.

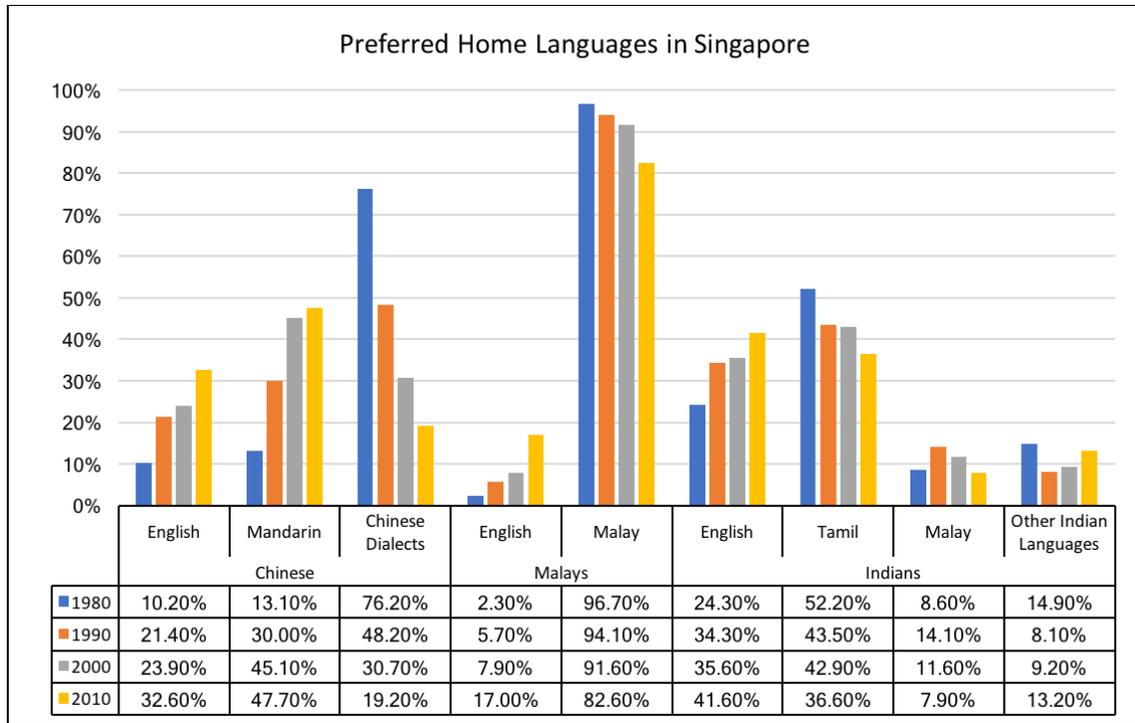


Figure 2. A comparison of the use of English and mother tongue as preferred home language in Singapore (Sources: Lau,1993; Department of Statistics, 2005, 2011; Bolton & Ng, 2014)

Research evidence (e.g. Bolton & Ng, 2014) indicates that the Singapore communities now generally compose three generation, each with their distinct linguistic profiles. The older generation tends to be monolingual in their ethnic mother tongue and their blend of multilingualism often does not include English. The middle generation is bilingual in English and their ethnically ascribed mother tongues while the younger generation tends to be more proficient in English compared than in their ethnically ascribed mother tongues. Other sociolinguistic research (e.g. Pillai, 2009; Cavallaro & Serwe, 2010) shows that younger Singaporeans are increasingly not using their ethnic mother tongues spoken typically by their grandparents. The findings of these studies (which are consistent with earlier studies e.g. Ramiah, 1991; Li, Saravanan, & Ng, 1997) all point to the fact that among their subjects aged 18-29 English is preferred in their daily lives to other languages (see Bolton & Ng, 2014). Pillai (2009) that young Malayalese Singaporeans have little interest in learning Malayalam and minority languages such as Baba Malay (or Peranakan Malay) now face endangerment in Singapore.

The language shift that has occurred in Singapore due partly to two major factors, namely the government's language and educational policies and the pragmatic choice made by Singaporeans for personal gain and social mobility (see Bolton & Ng, 2014). With its significant economic and social development since independence, Singapore has emerged as a successful trading hub and financial centre. The pragmatic Singaporeans have come to realize the important role a good command of English and Mandarin plays. In fact, the Singapore government has actively promoted speaking good English and Mandarin. Take Singaporean Chinese parents as an example. Research shows that these parents preferred to raise their children speaking English and Mandarin Chinese (see Ng, 2008). Since English was adopted as the MoI in all schools and universities, Singaporeans who are 45 years old may be considered to be English-knowing bilinguals. Additionally, English "has now replaced all other languages as a supra-ethnic language" (Bolton & Ng, 2014, p. 315).

One byproduct of Singapore's language policies is the English language variation. Scholars have recognized a more standardized variety referred to as 'Standard Singapore English' and a contact variety which has been referred to as 'Colloquial Singapore English (CSE)', 'Singapore Colloquial English (SCE)' or 'Singlish'. Singlish is the result of co-existence of English with other local varieties. However, whether Singlish should be recognized as a distinct variety has been a subject of much debate. On the one hand, Singlish has been one of the official motivations for 'Speak Good English Campaign' launched by the Singapore government in 2000 due to concerns about the negative influence of Singlish on intelligibility, national image, economic advancement, etc. On the other, some scholars advocate that Singlish be recognized due to its important role in maintaining Singaporeans' national identity and language rights. The resultant tension is still ongoing today.

While Singlish has been strongly proscribed by the government's official policy, its prevalent use in various domains of the Singapore society is evident to both Singaporeans and foreign visitors alike. Wong (2014), for example, argues that Singaporeans who can speak 'sustained' Standard English are rare, except for a limited number of elite. He points out that Singlish and other non-standard features tend to appear when Singaporeans try to speak Standard English for an extended period of time. Moreover, Wong (2014) observes that "Singaporeans do not always have access to perfect or near-perfect role models of Standard English" (p. 18), citing Farrell and Tan (2007) who notice "instances of Singlish" (p. 394) in a teacher's speech in class and Alsagoff

(2007) who notices “the inclusion of SCE [Singapore colloquial English] features in classroom teacher talk” (p. 32). In addition, Singlish and other nonstandard features are also found in the speech of tertiary lecturers of English language in local universities. Deterding (2007) also provides evidence showing that 17 Singlish features are identified in a five-minute talk between a ‘well-educated’ Singaporean and her ‘expatriate’ academic tutor in a formal situation, with an average of three Singlish features or more per minute. These and other factors lead Wong (2014, p. 23) to conclude that

... it is difficult to establish Standard English as a common language of Singaporeans; it simply does not meet the communicative and cultural needs of Singaporeans. It might thus be said that the use of Singlish is not a choice, but in fact a necessity for Singaporeans if they want their Singaporean ways of thinking and values to be freely expressed.

Challenges and Future Directions

Singapore’s judicious English-knowing bilingual language policy has played a pivotal role in its economic and educational achievements since its independence. However, this policy does not come without challenges. The main challenge has to do with the standards and norms to be adopted in the English language education at all levels. English has been adopted as the MoI since 1987 (see Low, 2013; Low & Lim, 2016). Additionally, Low (2010) showed empirically that at least in the acoustic domain of rhythmic patterning, Singapore English is indeed in a norm-developing phase of its development and moving away from the English-speaking norms dictated by the Inner Circle countries (see Kachru, 1985, 1992) like the United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Linked to the issues of standards and norms, Bokhorst-Heng, Rubdy, McKay and Alsagoff (2010) speak about the ownership of English in Singapore where they assert that as more young Singaporeans use English as their native language at home, at work or in school, their sense of ownership and authority over the English language and its norms will increase.

The government and educators alike have made every endeavour to ensure that the standard of English proficiency be up to par with those of other English-speaking countries such as UK and USA. The challenge is to maintain Singapore’s competitive edge in the international educational and economic arena. However, this has met with challenges with the emergence of Singlish which the government fears may lower the overall standards of English proficiency of its people. The Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) was therefore introduced in 2000.

The SGEM, however, has not been without daunting challenges. As mentioned in the previous section, research has revealed that Singlish is still widespread in all walks of life in the country. It is not only spoken by students in schools and universities but also by school and university teachers who are supposed to be the custodian of the 'good' standard of Singapore English. The challenge is expected to at least remain especially as technology in the form of social media is playing more and more important role in the lives of school students and even younger children. The ungrammatical text messages and chatroom hybrid sentences generated by the social media will most likely enter the school academic sphere in due course.

Given that Singlish is a variety replete with localized cultural and linguistic features, it follows naturally that the issue of international intelligibility has arisen. This intelligibility issue has ramifications on two groups of people. The first would be Singaporeans aiming to study or work abroad while the second would concern the international students and expatriates coming to Singapore to study and work. If the intelligibility of Singlish poses a problem, this would delimit the social mobility of Singaporeans and also prove to be a constraint for foreigners wanting to study and work in Singapore. One could argue that intelligibility is not an issue when we consider the use of Standard Singapore English by educated Singaporeans in formal domains. The real issue then, is not the proliferation of Singlish but the need for Singaporeans to master both Standard Singapore English and not just Singlish.

Another challenge stems from the role of identity that Singlish claims to play. Proponents of the notion of identity hold that teachers who use Singlish in the classroom, for example, can establish stronger solidarity and rapport with their students from homes where English is not the most frequently used language. However, this leads to a dilemma because if these students are only exposed to Singlish even in classroom instruction, then the fear is that they will only acquire Singlish which ultimately hampers their ability to communicate in an internationally intelligible way. Hence, by using Singlish to establish rapport, we may lose sight of the greater goal of attaining a high level of proficiency in English for these students.

The next challenge is in the form of having to strike an appropriate balance between English and the ascribed mother tongues of the English-knowing bilinguals. While English-knowing bilingualism as a policy appears to be well conceived, the reality is that with the increasing dominance of English because of obvious socio-economic advantages associated with its use, this might lead to an endangerment and even the possibility of language death of the mother tongue

languages not designated as one of the ethnically ascribed mother tongues. This phenomenon may have long-term socio-cultural consequences which are not yet completely visible. An example is cited by Bolton and Ng (2014) where the generation of grandparents who are likely to speak a host of Chinese dialects might not be able to now communicate with their grandchildren who will be only conversant in Mandarin Chinese.

Arising from the challenges articulated above, other scholars have also sounded their note of caution and proposed possible future directions ahead. Lim (2015) suggested three issues that need careful review in the coming few years. The first has to do with the urgent need to review its language policies in keeping with the times so that they remain both effective and relevant. Arising from her suggestion, there is a need to review what the ethnically ascribed mother tongue ought to be and to possibly broaden the scope of second languages being offered to the English-knowing bilinguals. Lim (2015) suggests that Malayalam should be a contender for the Indian student population. We suggest Hindi and Punjabi to be the other contenders bearing in mind the profile of the Indians living in Singapore. The next issue she raised is about the role of Malay considering Singapore's geographical location. This was also earlier shared by Low (2013) where it was mentioned that it would be prudent for Singaporeans to master conversational Malay as an enrichment programme in schools in order to communicate with our neighbours and to build strong diplomatic ties. The final issue Lim (2015) raised is the consideration of the profile of first-generation migrants to Singapore who are mainly from India and China, an observation also made by Bolton and Ng (2014). The existence of the home languages of these recent migrants, namely Mandarin Chinese and a host of other Indian languages cannot be ignored in the long-term strategic language policy planning and management of Singapore. Wee (2013) proposes that greater autonomy be allowed in language choices "to accommodate the increasingly diverse identities and experiences of Singaporeans" (p. 121) (for more details, see also Wee & Bokhorst-Heng, 2005). In order to maintain the long-term sustainability of the English-knowing bilingualism, there may be other issues that need to be reviewed in the future such as how to release the tension between English-knowing bilingualism and mother-tongue-knowing bilingualism, and raising the awareness of the differences between Standard Singapore English and CSE or Singlish.

Discussion and Conclusion

As we are fast moving into the third decade of the 21st century, the realities confronting the present and future of English in Singapore need to be carefully considered. Situated in the midst of the fourth industrial (technological) revolution, certain imbalances in the choice of our ascendant English-knowing bilingualism need to be redressed (Pakir, 2008, 2017). We need to maintain the equilibrium between many differing concerns. These include balancing the following issues: between language maintenance and shift, language as a tool or as tie, meritocracy and equity, standards and norms and finally between global competencies and local realities.

Striking a new balance between language shift and language maintenance

English-knowing bilingualism has undoubtedly led to a shift in the linguistic landscape of Singapore. At the point of independence, Singaporeans had a multilingual repertoire comprising the following languages/dialects: English, Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese, Malay, Tamil, Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Bengali and Urdu.

Today, as mentioned earlier in this paper, according to the household survey 2015 (Department of Statistics, 2016), English is now the most frequently spoken language at home with 36.9% using English. This is followed by Mandarin (34.9%), Malay (10.7%) and Tamil (3.3%). The decrease in the use of Chinese dialects is noteworthy and now stands at less than 13%. A main question that arises is the tension between language maintenance and shift in Singapore households. While English-knowing bilingualism has allowed the population to enjoy social, educational, geographical and occupational mobility, the undeniable inevitable consequence is that some languages, especially the non-ethnically ascribed mother tongues, are on the decline. There is potentially the possibility of language loss and death for these affected languages. The main issue to consider would be whether the ethnically ascribed mother tongues for each community is sufficient to help maintain the cultural ballast of Singaporeans, as per the original intentions of the English-knowing bilingual education policy. We also need to ask the question whether there is a need to strike a balance between language maintenance and shift. Specifically, language maintenance after decades of English-knowing bilingualism may now refer to the ethnically ascribed mother tongues instead. The issue then becomes one of whether Singaporeans beyond the school-going age will still have the proficiency of these languages and if so what the level of their proficiency is.

Striking a new balance between language as a tool or language as tie

English was selected as the MoI since 1987. This has allowed Singaporeans to be globally competent both at the educational and professional work space. However, we need to consider the consequences of language as an instrumental tool, i.e. language as resource and language as tie for national cohesion in Singapore. Ruiz (1984) refers to “language-as-resource” (p. 17) as one of the orientations of language planning. In the case of Singapore, we propose that what started out as language as tool has now also become language as tie. As more Singaporeans use English as the most frequently spoken language at home, it may be argued that English can also be a tie for national cohesion and identity purposes. Specifically, CSE or Singlish is an important cohesive device allowing Singaporeans to express their national identity through its rich lexicon and innovative and unique syntactic rules. We would like to propose that Standard Singapore English be Singapore’s language as tool for global competence while CSE or Singlish is the tie for national cohesion and identity and helps to reflect the local realities of language use in Singapore.

Striking a new balance between meritocracy and educational equity

Meritocracy is one of the central pillars of Singapore society along with multilingualism and multiculturalism. While meritocracy is meant to even out the disparity in socio-economic backgrounds, the fact that proficiency in English opens up educational and employment opportunities both locally and beyond leads to the inevitable consequences of inequity suffered by those who have not fared as well under the English-knowing bilingual policy. Teh (2014) has shown that students who hail from English-speaking homes outperformed their counterparts by an average of 56 points in the Progress in International Student Achievement (PISA) tests. The process of academic streaming in primary schools which has its original intentions in creating differentiated educational pathways to help students to learn at a pace suited to their progress academically might lead to the inevitable consequence of privileging early developer rather than the ‘late bloomers.’ English competence and high academic performance in the traditional disciplines of Science and Mathematics tend to ensure one a place in tertiary education. This is problematic in the knowledge-based economy as apart from linguistic intelligence and logical-mathematical intelligence, Gardner (2011) also identifies other types of intelligences much less

emphasized in Singapore's education system, namely musical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence and personal intelligences. In the knowledge-based economy, other non-academic intelligences can equally contribute to Singapore's sustainable development. There is therefore a need to re-look policy, curricula and assessment mechanisms in order to allow more equitable opportunities for all. Recent years have seen concerted efforts by the Ministry of Education in Singapore to work towards addressing educational equity for all, like the introduction of an increased proportion of students who are able to gain entry into the university based on criteria outside of academic merit such as excelling in Sports, Music and the Arts known as the discretionary intake. Additionally, more specialized schools have been set up to recognize the myriad of talents that Singaporeans possess such as the School of the Arts (SOTA), the Singapore Sports to name a few.

Striking a new balance between global competencies and local realities

The real tension faced by Singaporeans is the need to maintain a standard of English that allows them to function in global domains and that can help Singapore to progress educationally and economically. Additionally, this global competence in English can be the privilege of an elite group but has to be levelled out across the Singaporean community.

However, there is the pull towards using the local variety for the expression of cultural identities especially in familial settings of communication with close friends and family especially for a portion of society that might not have the ability to move up the cline of proficiency in English when confronted with formal situations which call for a more standard variety of English used. The arrival of the technologically-mediated age and the proliferation of social media in our lives also redefines what global competence means in an increasingly interconnected informal socially networked virtual community of English language users. It could very well be that an informal form of global English is emerging in a virtually connected society and workplace. This calls for a re-definition of the original conception of glocal English first introduced in Pakir (2001) where English used is 'globally-oriented' but 'locally rooted' as the boundaries between what is considered local in a virtually connected world are getting increasingly blurred. At the same time, virtual connectivity also means that local language can permeate into global usage far more quickly as information and ideas are exchanged at a breakneck pace in a technologically-mediated world. In the final analysis, it is imperative that the balances between the tensions we have raised in this

section be addressed in terms of language strategy, management and enactment so that Singaporeans can be well-positioned to thrive in a future that is “fraught with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA)” (Lawrence & Steck, 1991, p. ii).

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