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Raising the Bar on Mother Tongue Language Education

Mukhlis Abu Bakar

Abstract: Singapore is well known for its bilingual policy which prescribes “English plus one of the official ethnic mother tongues”. The Ministry of Education is the primary agency that translates this bilingual policy into effect, namely in the realm of education. This paper invites readers to rethink the goal of bilingualism in education, in particular the goal of mother tongue (MT) language education and argues for the need to revisit the system of prescribing English as the only medium of instruction for all content subjects while the MT figures only as a second language subject. The new sociolinguistic landscape where English has displaced the MT in almost all domains calls for a reinterpretation of the bilingual language policy in education if the long-term goal of keeping Singaporeans connected to their cultural roots through their MTs is to be realised. It suggests putting in place a new aspiration for Singapore’s young bilinguals and offers a strategy that expands the role of the MT in education as a means to nurture balanced and dynamic bilinguals.

Keywords: bilingual language policy; bilingual education; English; mother tongue language

Introduction

Singapore is well known for its bilingual policy which prescribes “English plus one of the official ethnic mother tongues” (MOE, 2012, p.1). The Ministry of Education (MOE) is the primary agency that translates this bilingual policy into effect, namely in the realm of education. Here, English serves the mainly instrumental function of providing access to scientific and technological knowledge while the mother tongues (MTs) are designated as transmitters of cultural values and norms. I would like us to ask ourselves what would be an appropriate goal for bilingualism in education, and the more pertinent question, what should be the role of the MT in education.

Presently, the goal of bilingualism and MT education in Singapore is the acquisition of English to a level where students can study their subject matter curriculum through the language and at the same time reach a “second language” level of proficiency in their assigned official MT (Mandarin Chinese

for Chinese students, Malay for Malay students and Tamil for Indian students). In other words, studying the MT as a second language in an English-medium education. This system has served Singapore well during the initial phase of nation-building, quickly transforming Singaporeans into English-knowing bilinguals (Pakir, 1991) with wide access to knowledge and the ability to engage effectively with the outside world. The impact of such a goal, however, has its unintended consequences, in particular on the MT.

To give credit where it is due, Singaporean students generally perform well in their MT as a subject based on tests and examinations (Education Statistics Digest, 2016). However, more and more are not able to use it productively outside the context of the classroom (TodayOnline, 2013), not to mention thinking in the language or seeing the importance of keeping it alive so that it becomes part and parcel of their everyday identity. I see this as the consequence of an educational approach towards bilingualism that:

- (1) places a premium on English as the only medium to study the content subjects; and
- (2) pushes down MT proficiency to a “second language” level.

Such an approach does not develop the capacity for students to live and breathe the MTs, a prerequisite if the MTs are to be transmitters of cultural values. It is difficult to inculcate an appreciation for the MT if curriculum time and space given to students are limited and if the learning of the MT is not well supported by a set of structures using the MT, around which the understanding of the language and culture can grow organically via the students’ daily interactions (Wilson & Kawai’ae’a, 2007). This calls for a different approach that affords a greater role for the MT in the school both inside and outside the classroom.

It is essential to note that the MT is not any language; it is the students’ heritage language. Relegating it to a second language status in school in the face of an English-dominant society is detrimental to its sustainability the effect of which we are already seeing. *Learning* a language, and the culture of which it is a part, is different from *embracing* it. The former might be appropriate in acquiring a foreign language (French, Spanish, etc.) while the latter is essential in the acquisition of one’s MT (Chinese, Malay or Tamil). By presenting MT as a second language, we are unwittingly engendering in our students an attitude that treats the culture associated with the MT as mere exhibits to be studied and admired rather than an aspect of human life to be embraced.

As alluded to above, we need a new meaning to the notion of MTs as transmitters of cultural values. I propose that our education system aims for the

current generation of young people to be able to raise the next generation of children in their own MT language and literacy. Anything less than this is less than what we urgently need.

Why do we need this goal? What does it take to achieve this goal? What should be in place? How should the curriculum be redesigned? What would be the appropriate pedagogy to use? Will the increased level of proficiency in the mother tongue come about at the expense of English proficiency?

Past Linguistic Landscape

Before attempting to address these questions, we could perhaps try to review the reasons for framing the bilingual education the way it currently is. Since the earliest days of independence, the integration of the education system with the language and economic policies has been central to economic planning in Singapore. English learning was emphasised as a means to build national cohesion with English as the 'neutral' language for inter-ethnic communication. The system also positions Singapore well as a hub for business and finance taking advantage of English as the language of international trade. The MTs, on the other hand, serve to keep Singaporeans rooted to their respective cultures, values and identity.

To a large extent, this strategy has worked. Singapore has scored high in many international benchmarking tests. In a 2017 study by Education First, a global organisation founded in Sweden, Singapore is the highest ranked Asian country for proficiency in English. In the Programme for International Student Assessment, a study run by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the country's 15-year-olds were not only ranked No. 1 for mathematics, science and reading but also for the ability to solve problems in teams (PISA, 2015). Singapore students also topped the global achievement test in mathematics and science, in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS & PIRLS, 2016). These surveys put Singapore students in a good light, largely due to the education system that requires students from all ethnic backgrounds to acquire English through which the content subjects and the relevant skills needed are taught.

While English and the associated achievements in the language have been the source of pride for Singapore, the same cannot be said of the state of the MTs, even as Singapore takes pride in being one of the few countries that makes learning of two languages compulsory from as early as Primary 1. In recent years, language shift has been dramatic, especially in relation to the rising

dominance of English (Saravanan, 1998; Silver, 2005; Bokhorst-Heng, et al., 2010). The strategy of differentiating the role and status of English and the MTs in education and in the public arena has engendered a visible language shift from the MTs towards English (Curdt Christiansen, 2016; Mukhlis, 2015; Li, Saravanna & Ng, 1997; Zhao & Liu, 2008).

Despite government concerns about MTs being displaced by English in almost all domains of language use, there have been no substantive reforms in language-in-education policy that address the underlying issues. In the meantime, the language shift phenomenon continues to grow. Where previously parents were able to pass on the MT language and culture to their young, this was ironically undermined by a schooling system that curbed the role of the MT. Present-day parents who emerged from the system have now lost the ability to pass on their MT to their young due to their limited proficiency. Clearly, a radical adjustment to the system is required.

Addressing Present Linguistic Landscape

I suggest that while MOE's translation of the bilingual language policy was appropriate in the past, it is not so now. If one were to look back, within little more than one generation of English-medium education, we are already seeing children not using the mother tongue as their normal language of peer interaction. The first generation of Singaporean children who experienced the English-medium education in the 1970s came from homes where the MT was widely spoken. Yet, after going through the education system, they ended up becoming adults and parents who are comfortable with English, identifying with it more than they do with the MT such that English is the language they now use in their daily interaction with their children.

With the diminishing use of the MT, the capacity to pass on the language to the younger generation also diminished. If they, who grew up with the MT at home, have grown distant towards the language, we cannot expect their children, the second generation, whose exposure to the MT is limited to the classroom, to carry on the task of transmitting the language and culture to the third generation. Moreover, new entrants to the MT teaching profession, who similarly learned MT as a second language when they were students, were not exposed to the full repertoire of MT usage together with its cultural meanings to effectively model the language for their students no matter how dedicated they are to their profession.

We can begin to imagine what it is like for the third and fourth generations to come. We certainly will not end up like the Hawaiians or the Maoris some decades ago when they almost lost their language as a result of the language being banned in schools. But we will probably end up as communities who are alienated from our own language and culture even though we learn it in school.

However, this can be reversed if we radically adjust our approach in keeping with the changing sociolinguistic landscape, from one that limits the MT as a subject and their expected proficiency to a “second language” level, to one that treats English and the MT as equal, both as mediums of instruction. Of course, together with the change in the goals in MT education, there will also be the corresponding need to redesign the curriculum and pedagogy as well as equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills and strategies to teach in two languages at least at the preschool and primary school level. This, however, requires a new paradigm in the way we think about bilingual learners, the kind of education that supports their bilingualism, and the role of the MT in such a programme.

Theories on Bilingual Education

The present language-in-education strategy appears to be based on the outdated belief that individuals are expected to maintain cognitive separation of the linguistic systems, and that “properly” bilingual individuals are those in complete control of compartmentalised sets of monolingual proficiencies, such as English and Malay (Baker & Wright, 2017). Associated with this belief is the idea that the bilingual capacity is finite and that no two languages can reach the same high proficiency; one has to give way to the other. It is thus not surprising that the MT is held as a subject to be learnt only at a second language level in order to reach a high level of proficiency in English.

This belief is in contrast to current ideas in the field of bilingual education, in that the general cognitive skills which underpin language use operate from a common central function (Cummins, 1991), that all languages mutually enrich concept development, and that the ability to make sense of print transfers readily even when scripts are different (Cummins et al., 1984). This theoretical framework has been the basis for many of the successful bilingual approaches currently in use in the English-speaking world today where the level of development of bilingual children’s MT has a positive impact on the learning of a second language and their academic performance (Christian, 1996; Gardner, 2000; Oller & Eilers, 2002; Tuafuti & McCaffery, 2005).

The effect of maintaining a language as the medium of education can be seen

throughout the world. Where a language has been maintained as the medium of education, it survives. Where it is banned or is just partially used for the first few years in school or as a subject, it dissipates in use or disappears. The reality for MT education is that it is much more difficult to develop high fluency in the MT than in the socially dominant language which, in Singapore, is English. There have been several successful attempts to overcome this by giving a more significant role to the MT in the classroom, which resulted in a corresponding positive impact outside the classroom. A study in Miami (Oller & Eilers, 2002), a city which maintains a high-status, politically strong Spanish-speaking community within the larger monolingual English-speaking context of the United States, have compared two models of education:

- (a) English immersion programmes where children study Spanish as a subject, much like Singaporean children study the MT as a single subject; and
- (b) two-way Spanish-English bilingual programmes where children study subject-area content through both English and Spanish.

In both models, children perform at about the same high level in English, but the two-way programme produces much superior results in Spanish. Similar positive results are observed in other parts of the world where the endangered language are given more space as mediums of instruction, if not also through immersion, such as the Welsh language in Wales, the Basque language in the Basque region in Spain, the Maori, Samoan and Tongan languages in New Zealand, and the Hawaiian language in Hawaii (Gardner, 2000; McCaffery & Tuafuti, 2003; Wilson & Kamanä, 2006). These are, in Colin Baker's (2016) classification, "strong" versions of bilingual education as opposed to Singapore's "weak" bilingual programme.

It is only when children are truly able to communicate fully in two languages can they reap the cognitive benefits of being a bilingual such as having higher levels of conceptual development and stronger metalinguistic skills. These are children who have reached what is termed in the literature as the "threshold of balanced bilingual competence" (Baker & Jones, 1998).

Conclusion and the Way Forward

We know that without our MTs, we lose the more subtle features of thinking and worldview encoded in the grammar and vocabulary of the respective MTs. As the world grows smaller, Singaporeans' inability or refusal to speak the

respective mother tongue languages will increasingly lead to questions regarding their personal and group identity. This will have an impact on Singapore's national identity. There is an urgent need for MOE to review the Singapore approach towards bilingual education and make the necessary adjustments.

As a start, schools could consider introducing a set of structures where use of the MT is made more prominent such as having signs, notices and literacy materials in all four languages instead of just English. Similarly with public announcements; English could be paired with one of the MTs in rotation. A school's linguistic landscape reveals much about her language aims.

Perhaps, like the educational systems cited above, schools here could also introduce, alongside the English-medium education, a parallel dual language programme where two languages (English and MT) are used as mediums of instruction at the primary level. As in those examples, parents may choose which programme they want their children to enroll in. Earlier at preschool, a full MT immersion programme could be offered, which fits well with the dual language programme at the primary level as the transition to English is gradual and over the course of the primary school years. In this model, content subjects are taught entirely in English only at the secondary school.

With a strong foundation in the MT and wider exposure to the cultural meanings attached to their MT during the crucial early years (preschool and primary school), the youths that graduate from the programme are more likely able "to move easily and bi-culturally between the worlds of school, home and the wider community" (McCaffery & Tuafuti, 2003). Their continued learning of the MT as a subject at the secondary school will be a more fruitful and meaningful experience as they will be able to engage in a wider range of topics and activities through their MT, thus developing their MT proficiency further. This positions them better as adults to pass on their MT to their children.

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