

THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC SURVEY OF SINGAPORE 2006

Findings and Policy Implications

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THIS SURVEY OF LANGUAGE USE and users in Singapore sought to find out who speaks what language, to whom, in what context, with what attitude, with what level of fluency, and to what end. This project surveyed 716 students from the Primary 5 cohort of Singapore schools, randomly selected on the basis of ethnic group (i.e., Chinese, Malay and Indian) and socioeconomic status, using a bilingual survey instrument. In its qualitative phase, follow-up studies were conducted with 12 participants who were randomly selected from the three ethnic groups, across a broad spectrum of social classes.

INTRODUCTION

The Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore 2006 (Aman, Vaish, & Bokhorst-Heng, 2006) has given us an in-depth view of patterns of multilingual language use among school-going children. It has provided baseline data on languages and multiliteracies, on the basis of which inferences can be made about pedagogy and innovation in Singapore's bilingual education model. The project started in January 2006 and ended in December 2008.

RESEARCH DESIGN

SSS 2006 was divided into two phases: (1) a large-scale quantitative survey, and (2) a smaller scale, follow-up qualitative study.

KEY IMPLICATIONS

- English could be used as a resource in mother tongue language classes, as research indicates that the language of a child's home can be used as a resource to learn a target language.
- Children from lower income homes need additional language support in their primary years to make a smooth transition from home to school. An intervention plan in which bilingual support staff assist primary school teachers may be suitable.
- Mother tongue language classes should aim to inculcate lifelong reading practices.
- The development of reading materials (including multimedia texts), for children of all ages, should be encouraged.

In the quantitative phase, we surveyed 716 Primary 5 students. The sample was stratified by ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES). The survey was divided into five domains: (1) school, (2) family and friends, (3) religion, (4) public space, and (5) the media. It also had sections on fluency/proficiency and language attitudes. The survey was administered by a bilingual research assistant in the students' language of comfort at their homes.

In the qualitative phase, follow-up studies were conducted on 12 of the 716 students. We followed each of the 12 students across the 5 domains, for approximately 2 weeks. This phase involved collecting audio/video data, all of which were transcribed and translated, with detailed field notes. Language- and literacy-related artefacts were also collected from their homes.

KEY FINDINGS

Table 1 shows that English is dominant in only 17.6% of multilingual Malay homes. Even when data from monolingual homes is added, English is still only dominant in 24.1% of Malay homes. However, in Chinese and Indian multilingual homes, English is dominant for both the Chinese and the Indians. When data from monolingual homes is added, it shows that about half of Indian and Chinese homes are English-speaking.

Overall, the students showed positive attitudes towards mother tongue (MT) languages (see Table 2). We found that most of the children surveyed like studying their MT (Statement 1). The majority of Malay and Indian students said that they would like to study their MT even if it is not compulsory (Statement 2). Most Malay and Indian students also agreed that they enjoy reading in their MT (Statement 3). An overwhelming majority of the children wished that they could speak their MT better (Statement 4). Finally, for all ethnic groups, most children felt that speaking their MT gives them a stronger sense of ethnic identity (Statement 5).

The students' responses seem to indicate that they favour English. Whether it is watching television/movies (i.e., semiotic texts) or reading books/comics

Table 1. Linguistic ecology of the home.

Language	Chinese (%)	Malay (%)	Indian(%)
Dominant language in multilingual homes			
Mandarin	25.0	0.0	0.0
Malay	0.0	43.5	6.7
Tamil	0.0	0.0	16.9
English	36.0	17.6	25.8
Others	2.7	0.0	2.2
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>63.7</i>	<i>61.1</i>	<i>51.6</i>
Language in monolingual homes			
Mandarin	18.2	0.0	0.0
Malay	0.0	32.4	0.0
Tamil	0.0	0.0	20.2
English	17.6	6.5	23.6
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>35.8</i>	<i>38.9</i>	<i>43.8</i>
Total	53.6	24.1	49.4
English-speaking at home			

(i.e., printed texts), the preferred language of the majority of Singaporean children is English (see Table 3). This has serious implications for MT literacy.

Table 4 shows that, for Chinese and Malay children, English is dominant in upper income homes (high SES) but that this percentage steadily decreases as we move towards the lower income homes (low SES). We do not see such a relationship among the Indian students.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

For Mother Tongue Languages

Table 1 shows that English is very much part of the home language environment for nearly half of Chinese and Indian children (53.6 % and 49.4% respectively) and at least a quarter of Malay children (24.1%). Yet, English is not systematically used as a resource in MT classes in Singapore.

Table 2. Attitudes to mother tongue languages.

Statement	Chinese (%)		Malay (%)		Indian (%)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1 I like studying my MT.	70.6	29.4	94.1	5.9	85.4	14.6
2 I would take MT classes at school even if it was not compulsory.	60.4	39.6	84.7	15.3	78.6	21.4
3 I enjoy reading in my MT when I have free time.	42.3	57.7	63.0	37.0	64.1	35.9
4 I wish I could speak my MT better.	93.1	6.9	93.5	6.5	89.9	10.1
5 Speaking in my MT makes me feel more Chinese/ Malay/Indian.	72.9	27.1	79.4	20.6	74.2	25.8

Table 3. Results from the domain of media.

Question	Language	Chinese (%)	Malay (%)	Indian (%)
1 In what language is your favourite song?	English	39.9	66.5	36.0
	MT	35.7	10.0	40.4
	Others	1.5	4.7	4.5
	N.A.	22.9	18.8	19.1
2 In what language is your favourite TV show/ movie?	English	66.7	88.2	76.4
	MT	25.3	2.9	18.0
	Others	2.0	4.2	2.2
	N.A.	6.0	4.7	3.4
3 In what language is your favourite book?	English	89.0	91.2	95.5
	MT	1.5	0.6	1.1
	N.A.	9.5	8.2	3.4
4 In what language is your favourite comic?	English	62.8	67.6	71.9
	MT	13.1	13.5	4.5
	Others	0.9	–	5.6
	N.A.	23.2	18.9	18.0

In fact, the Core research project, conducted by the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice, revealed that the use of English is prohibited in all three MT language classes. However, research in the field of bilingualism indicates that the languages of a child's home can be a useful resource in learning

the target language (Hornberger, 2003). Thus, a pedagogy based on code-switching, designed on the basis of a continuum where the teacher judiciously allocates time to both English and the target MT and then slowly tilts the balance in favour of the MT, is recommended for MT classes.

For Singapore's Bilingual Language-in-Education Policy

Table 2 shows that a majority of Singaporean children have positive attitudes towards learning and speaking their MT. Statement 5 provides evidence that their MT does serve as "cultural ballast", which current language policy has intended. What remains to be done is to reinforce this across ethnic groups and increase students' motivation and enjoyment in learning their MT.

Table 3 has implications for pedagogy relating to literacy and multimodality in the language classroom. It is clear that more Singaporean children have favourite books and comics in English than in their MTs. One of the goals of MT classes, then, should be to inculcate lifelong reading practices. This will require the development of reading materials in Malay, Tamil and Mandarin, which should include traditional printed texts as well as multimedia texts for children.

Music (especially popular music) can also be an important pedagogical tool in MT classes. Such pedagogical innovation will make MT classes more multimodal, which the Core project has shown is not currently the case in either MT or English language classrooms.

Table 4. Dominant home language by race and SES.

Language	High SES (%)	Medium SES(%)	Low SES (%)
Chinese			
MT	21.8	36.8	71.2
English	78.2	55.4	23.1
Chinese Dialects	–	7.8	5.7
Malay			
MT	36.4	75.0	87.2
English	63.6	25.0	12.8
Indian			
MT	50.0	22.2	25.0
English	37.4	72.2	33.3
Others	12.6	5.6	41.7

For Singapore's English Language-in-Education Policy

Table 4 has implications for Singapore's English-medium language-in-education policy. The concern is that children from the lower income groups will need additional language support in their primary years to make a smooth transition from home to school. Thus, an intervention plan like the one recommended by the Swann Report (Department of Education and Science, 1985), in which bilingual support staff assist primary school teachers (using various methods, like tandem-teaching and code-switching, to target those curriculum areas in which a child is weak), might be suitable for Singapore.

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