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Language in Education: A Singapore Perspective*

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Introduction

Language policies have always figured prominently in the concerns of Singapore in general and of education in particular. Indeed, Singapore's founder, Raffles, held that Raffles Institution should offer instruction in the native languages and in addition, some instruction in English not only because he thought the study of language and culture valuable in itself but because "education must keep pace with commerce in order that its benefits may be assured and its evils avoided".[1] A further clue to its importance is available in the fact that whenever major decisions on education policy had to be taken these were expressed in terms of language rather than objectives, content etc. In the twentieth century, especially after 1920 the major watersheds in the development of education in Singapore had also to do with language. Indeed, it may be said that the major feature of the separate school systems that evolved in Singapore was differences in media of instruction.

Constraints and Opportunities in Policy Formulation

It is easy enough to see why language policies merit so much attention. Language, after all, has consequences for the nature and extent of political and civic participation, ethnic equality and social mobility, for both ethnic identity and inter-ethnic relations, increased individual competence in a multi-lingual state, to name a few.

If, however, the subject has been one of considerable concern and experimentation it is also true that the attention paid to it has not resulted in any unanimity of agreement except perhaps in the area of objectives. Though there is a consensus for a widely acceptable and

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efficient language policy and the need for bilingualism in particular, there, however, continues to be considerable disagreement over strategies proposed for the achievement of objectives. It is perhaps inevitable that this should be so for an analysis of some of the major factors influencing language policy in Singapore will show just how complex the situation is.

In the first instance Singapore's ethnic heritage has resulted in a situation of severe linguistic heterogeneity. Consideration as to what constitutes language is inevitably involved when mapping linguistic diversity.[1] One study (Kuo, 1976) proposes the following classification: five major (English, Malay, Tamil, Mandarin and Hokkien) and three minor (Teochew, Cantonese and Hainanese) languages. Yet another scholar (Lee S.L., 1972) has suggested that a student in school could have as many as eighteen potential linguistic environment that he could have come from. The convenient formula of four official languages with one as the national language is therefore a generalisation of a complex situation and more importantly a hindrance to our understanding of the pedagogical consequences of our language policies. For example, the Indian ethnic group, in a more acute way than the Chinese, is also confounded by the problem of dialects/languages. The existence of sub-groups speaking Malayalam and Punjabi (whose scripts are different from Tamil) ought also to be borne in mind in compiling a picture of linguistic diversity.

A second major factor is the fact that in Singapore linguistic cleavages are accentuated strongly by ethnic and religious cleavages. In seeking often to underplay the aspect of linguistic differentiation in national life, admittedly one way of managing linguistic diversity, reference is often made to other multi-lingual communities in Europe, especially Switzerland. It must however be noted that in these communities race and religion do not significantly add to the language problem. In Switzerland, linguistic variety has a geographical locality dimension to it, and many other features unique to Swiss social and political life help explain the language situation. In the Singapore context, Chinese, Tamil and Malay have to be seen as more than means of communication but also as symbolic of ethnicity and supported by weight of historical and cultural tradition. Consequently, the formulation of policy has had to take into account the fact that cultural and political issues are interwoven with language policies.

The aspect of politicization needs further clarification, for the sources of current difficulties could lie here. The politicization of

education, which in Singapore has its roots in the evolution of different media of instruction school streams, is not a unique phenomenon in the post-colonial development of plural societies. Education, firmly established as a means of defining a political identity and as a key to occupational mobility and elite status, has been looked upon as follows:

> In all cases of inter-group adjustments problems of educational policy are central and upon arrangements made for the control of schools and curriculum will depend the success or failure of the whole policy ... the subordinate groups ... watch the schools with hope and suspicion. (Yearbook of Education, p. 4)

One study (Yeo, 1973) of the 1945-55 period showed how language and education issues in Singapore were inseparable from political issues. The roles played by teachers' unions, newspapers, confederations of commercial organizations such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, are significant, now as then, organized as they are on linguistic lines and acting as pressure groups on behalf of their communities and language groups (Gamer, 1969). That the roles they play and the pressures they exert are often deserving of official disapproval is seen in the handling of the newspaper crisis of 1970 and the Malay Teachers Union National Schools proposal, 1970. Another case in point of the influence of pressure groups is the introduction, and subsequent withdrawal under teacher union pressure, of the 1968 move to introduce the teaching of some subjects in the second language. Complaints voiced by teachers' unions were one reason for withdrawal. That such groups can complicate the formulation and implementation of policies is beyond doubt.

The roots of politicization point to the third aspect of the problem - the existence of a four stream model,[2] with separate streams, seen in some quarters as symbolic of the equal treatment principle. The fact that considerable cultural pride was invested in these separate language streams complicates the issue because language policy has to be formulated and operated within the four media framework. Though schools of all media are treated equally, in recent years there has been a pronounced swing towards English medium schools. However, since the bilingual policy is applied equally to all schools and ample opportunity provided for the learning of mother tongues this trend should not be a matter for concern.[3] Nevertheless, it poses a problem in that it has now to be shown that English medium schools can teach mother tongues equally well since it is probable that the context in which a

language is learnt is significant for some pupils. The Prime Minister was reported in 1974 as advising English educated Chinese parents that they should send their children first to Chinese schools as the atmosphere and environment in a Chinese school were such that given six years of primary education their children would be effective in Chinese for life, provided they continued learning it at secondary level.

Finally, there is the pedagogic aspect, unfortunately in Singapore the poor cousin to all the above. The ideolization of language continues to persist, causing the formulation of problems and policies to be very often a matter of politics rather than that of pedagogy.[4] The professional's role is seen as being primarily one of implementation. In these circumstances the invaluable expertise and insights that are needed in the formulation of policy get short shrift. It is, for instance, clear that many hasty and ill-prepared decisions have been made with regard to language, as witnessed by the many reversals and changes in strategies but the lessons seem to have been poorly learnt. Research evidence, experimental try-outs, impartial assessment etc, which would indicate that pedagogic concerns are paramount, are not prominent features of the way language policy is arrived at or implemented; claims to a particular policy's political and social value and the urgency with which the said policy must be applied - to all - is highly visible in policy statements. Even a casual look at the way bilingualism has been justified in the last decade will show that the pedagogic implications did not get the attention they deserved.

The factors outlined above all have had, and will continue to have, significant roles to play in the formulation and implementation of language policy in Singapore. They underline the fact that many aspects of language planning are inter-related in nature and that their consequences spill over into areas not related to education. It should also be noted that developments in non-educational areas can also affect language policy - the spread of industrialization and, in particular, the fact that multinational corporations were the prime investors gave an unexpected boost to the demand for English medium schools and to the acceptance of English. Thus language policy-making often entails a compromise between the needs of political, social and economic objectives. With that said to acknowledge the complexity of the situation, it needs to be also pointed out that in so important an area to the

national effort, and in spite of some modest achievements, there is little doubt that there is considerable dissatisfaction over the results.

If the recounting of the above factors seems to indicate largely constraints under which policy must operate, the fact that there have been opportunities must not be lost sight of. It should be noted that by and large a situation of linguistic tolerance prevails in Singapore. This is to be seen at the non-formal level where a sort of folk bilingualism prevails, responding to immediate situational needs and allowing for considerable linguistic variation which is accepted without fuss. At the official level enlightened and firm leadership brooks no chauvinism and any attempt to use language and culture issues for sectarian purposes is harshly dealt with.

The second point to note is the physical scale involved. The physical geography of Singapore - and the recent shifting of population as a result of urbanisation - is such that no linguistic enclaves exist to give linguistic heterogeneity a geographical identity. Lines of communication are short and mass media influences are uniformly felt; hence the political authority has no difficulty in making its views heard.

It is also true that an evolving political identity grounded on Singapore has effectively, amongst the young, loosened social and cultural ties with 'parent' nations. This is to be seen in the fact that acceptance of Malay as the national language is not questioned, and in the acceptance of bilingualism as a necessary social skill. Indeed it may be confidently stated that the goals of language policy which, as pointed out earlier, are stated largely in political and social terms, are not in question but rather the strategies employed to achieve them.

Policies and their Rationales

Four major policies may be identified at work in the school system:

i) The first, a legacy of the 1956 All Party Report is that the four languages designated as official languages, English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil are available as media of instruction and in some cases, only for some subjects, even at tertiary level. Further, the languages can be taught as subjects and pupils can choose to be examined in them. The rationale is

clear cut. It is stated that in a multi-ethnic community with major languages, anything less than equal treatment would be tantamount to discrimination.

ii) The policy of bilingualism is justified on the following grounds: it enhances national integration by making inter-ethnic communication possible; it enables the continuance of the multi-cultural polity; it gives the individual, and his ethnic group, a sense of identity and community and finally, makes possible wider employment opportunities. Thus, bilingualism is a goal that every pupil should attempt to attain to the best of his ability. Specifically, the only languages that may be chosen are English and the pupil's mother tongue, which for the Chinese is Mandarin and for the Indians, Tamil. English is to be learnt for its utilitarian value, for employment and for guaranteeing access to the science and technology of the West. English, though a non-native language, is consequently a major language, of dominant administrative, commercial, educational and social status.

iii) The rationale offered for mother tongue learning is that it would give pupils insights into their ethnic and cultural identity and thus enable the maintenance and development of multi-culturalism. The loss of identity - de-culturalisation - and the consequent rootlessness, seen in the acceptance of some western values and life styles is regarded as a consequence of the loss of mother-tongue competence.

iv) The role of Malay as the sole national language is accepted as being largely symbolic in nature. Nevertheless, significance is given to the language in school by providing a place for it in the timetable at the lower secondary levels.

A brief summary of the major strategies in the last 15 years will indicate that movement has been swift. The establishment of integrated schools was a major structural change designed to encourage inter-ethnic mixing and enhance language competencies. In integrated schools, two or more language

streams share a common administration and common facilities. From 1960 onwards, the learning of a second language became compulsory at primary level and from 1966 at secondary level. In 1966 and in 1969 the second language became a compulsory examination subject at primary and secondary levels, respectively. A start was made in 1968 on teaching Science and Mathematics in English in a number of non-English-medium primary schools. In 1969 and 1970 respectively, Civics and History were taught in the mother tongue of the pupil in some English medium schools. The teaching of history in the mother tongue was begun in Primary 3 but the policy was withdrawn a year later. In 1969 the teaching of woodwork, metalwork and basic electricity in English in Malay and Tamil medium Secondary 1 classes began.

In 1969 it was decided that second language papers would be set and marked at a level two years lower than the first language. The following year the integration of the secondary level examination system was announced and since then the subject taken, the language used, the grading obtained and the grading authority have been recorded in a single certificate, common to all schools, irrespective of medium. Second language papers are also available at the sixth form and at tertiary levels. In 1973 the weightage given to the second language paper in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) was increased to first language level. Each of the two languages carries twice as much weight as Mathematics or Science.

Three further moves in the seventies underscored the urgency felt to make language policy more effective. One was the decision in 1972 to move, for primary schools, from an exposure ratio of 82% : 18% teaching time between the first language and the second language to 60% : 40% by 1975. It was a decision that reflected the assumption that exposure time in school was an essential element in the attainment of bilingual competence. Such exposure time increases were to be attained by increased subject teaching in the second language. Secondly, a new subject, Education for Living, an integration of Civics, History and Geography, was introduced in the schools in 1974, to be taught only in the pupil's mother tongue. Art and Crafts were also to be taught in the mother tongue while the use of the mother tongue for Physical Education and Music was made optional.

A third measure, introduced in 1974 is the strategy of block time-tabling at Primary 1 and 2 in which closely related subjects like Science and Mathematics taught in English were grouped together to reinforce content and language learning. In 1975 and later in 1978 policy was altered to allow schools greater flexibility in implementing language exposure and language instruction time requirements.

Though many aspects of Singapore's language policies have been open to criticism - it is not to be assumed that only insubstantial benefits have accrued. It is possible to make out a case for success on at least three levels:

i) It should be stressed that the tolerance exhibited towards users of other languages in Singapore, the willingness to take on the learning of non-ethnic languages, the efforts to give minority languages a valued place in educational and social life among other things, are a consequence of the firm and even-handed nature of major government policies. Singapore is both a plural society and in a geo-political area where language and culture are the badges of ethnicity and it could have been so easy to lose the balance over language. That it has not happened is worthy of greater praise.

ii) The second major area in which success may be reasonably claimed is in the areas of literacy and increased bilingualism. Kuo (1974) has shown using the 1957 and 1970 Census data, that there has been a 20 per cent growth in literacy in the inter-censal years and that differences in literacy among various ethnic-sex groups is decreasing, thus equalising opportunities between groups educationally, economically and politically. Kuo also notes that the population as a whole continues to become multilingual since all languages, except Tamil, have gained higher percentages of speakers over the years. In so far as examination results are acceptable as an indicator of bilingual attainment, examination results at the PSLE indicate that second language competence has risen in some areas, and that standards are improving faster at the secondary level. In 1974 there were 58.9 per cent passes in Chinese as a second

language and 52.3 per cent in English as a second language in the PSLE. At the GCE "O" level, there were 59.8 per cent passes in Chinese as a second language and 36 per cent passes in English as a second language. The relevant figures for 1969 were 59.1 per cent and 52 per cent in the PSLE and at "O" level, 10 per cent and 32 per cent.[5]

iii) Although it is official government policy to give equal treatment to all languages it is also clear that English is seen as having a key role in increasing levels of modernization and development in Singapore. This view is justified on the grounds that English is a world language and the language of science and technology, that its continued use will mean continuity in administration and law, that it is the language of our multi-national investors and that it provides a neutral medium in which all racial groups can compete at par. Widespread acceptance of this view is one reason for the lopsided ratio or enrolment in the English as opposed to the non-English stream. In this context Kuo's finding that English has been making the most progress in literacy, that such growth was evenly distributed among the three major ethnic groups and that these trends will be maintained, augurs well for the role of English as a vehicle of Singapore's modernization and also as a vehicle for inter-ethnic communication. In general terms, increased acceptance of English available to all the ethnic groups is likely over time to narrow socio-economic disparities based on language, and thus make language a less sensitive issue.

Problems and Prospects

Though there is consensus about the broad aims of language policy in Singapore there has been no end to criticism and anxiety over strategies proposed from time to time to achieve these goals. While, on the one hand such sustained reaction is evidence of lively concern on the part of parents in education, it is also proof of considerable dissatisfaction with Ministry proposals.

In a previous study (Gopinathan, 1970) it was pointed out that problems over implementation could have arisen from the failure to obtain relevant and detailed socio-linguistic information about the language situation upon which realistic educational strategies could be formulated - and equally important, realistic goals could be set for language attainment. Though bilingualism has been a central feature of Singapore's education policy for at least two decades, much of the discussion has been on its political and social relevance, not on its pedagogic consequences. Indeed, there has been no precise formulation of the objectives of the bilingual policy beyond stating that it would help inter-ethnic communication and provide cultural ballast. There has been little critical examination of what the two concepts mean and of the curriculum proposals for achieving these through the school system. Too little attention has been paid to the detailing of behavioural objectives and the relative importance of the various language skills within the two languages.

Illustrations of micro-level problems caused by such an approach are easy to find. For instance, pupils of Chinese ethnic origin using a variety of dialects all have to learn Mandarin as a 'mother tongue'. There is merit in the argument that this means in effect that they are tackling two foreign languages at primary level (English is compulsorily learnt either as first or second language), beginning in the first year of primary school but to date very little has been done to examine the consequences of such a strategy for language learning, retention and subsequent use.

Further, though there was evidence aplenty that bilingualism in education, interpreted as facility in the second language at a level two stages below the first language requirement, was making excessive demands on the average pupil, little was done to re-examine attainment requirements. Indeed, it was asserted at one stage that since bilingualism was of such social significance, it was preferable for a pupil to know two languages imperfectly than to know only one language well. Though, it is now a goal that at a minimum pupils achieve literacy in at least one language plus a limited ability to speak and understand a second language, it is necessary to stress the importance of a clear definition of terms relating to achievement levels, and indeed that these levels are realistically set. Meaningful

levels cannot be set without some understanding of the relative importance of various languages and language skills in such a multi-lingual society as Singapore. It is obvious that language is learnt for its functional potential, that it is meant to be used and that such use does not take place 'in vacuo'. To choose skills and establish competence levels without sure knowledge of their functional range is wasteful and inefficient and likely, eventually to frustrate the learner.[6]

Further, language competence is judged by means of conventional oral and written tests but knowledge does not always imply effective performance or behaviour. It is a pity also that to date no review has taken place of the two-level difference in language attainment vis-a-vis first and second language. The basis for such a level has not been made public and it is likely that it seemed a reasonable level and not based on any study of actual language use in Singapore. The continued use of this device and other measures of attainment needs to be carefully evaluated in the light of the objectives of language teaching, and of its validity.[7]

The point about the importance of thorough and reliable evidence about language status and use in Singapore cannot be over-stressed. It is a pity that though language policy is a basic corner stone of educational policy and widely regarded as being of paramount political and social importance, so little has been done by way of research. In the Primary School Leaving Examination, only the first and second languages, Science, and Mathematics are examined, and language, both as a subject and as a medium of instruction has a prominent place in the primary school curriculum. Indeed, since a PSLE pass is necessary for promotion to the secondary level, language competence is a key determinant of progress up the educational ladder. Yet, in such areas as the acquisition, retention and use of language, the nature and place of motivation in the learning of English and the mother tongue, the nature and scope of language interference in the Singapore context, influence of home linguistic environment upon readiness for language learning in school, nature and effects of language learning at kindergarten level, effects of exposure time and length of schooling upon language attainment, optimal time for increases in exposure to the second language, the influence of school types (integrated, single-stream, Chinese and English) upon motivation and language

learning, the cultural and political framework of language policy-making, to name only a few, we need to know far more than we do at present.[8]

It has been pointed out earlier that the content of language courses has to be organized in relation to the functional range of the language in question in the society concerned. It should be possible to identify, in general terms, the complementary or competitive functional ranges of different languages in a particular multi-lingual society and to postulate also, different levels or degrees of proficiency required for the active use of the languages for the different functions (Gorman, 1967). Rubin (1972) has pointed out that in the specification of language skills, both skills (ability to speak, read, write, translate and/or understand aural material) and aspects of language to be measured (phonological, lexical or grammatical) must be precisely stated. The language mix in Singapore, as pointed out in the earlier section, is a highly complex one, and the psychological and pedagogical consequences of language policies need to be carefully understood. At the social level it needs to be remembered that languages officially equal need not be socially equal, and that some hard won language skills may have only limited functional use. What is needed is a continuing awareness, a sensitivity to such problems and a refusal to seek comfort in expediency. All these are only possible with knowledge that only research can provide. The failure to commit resources to research will continue to lead to strategies founded on intuition and inadequate experimentation.

If there is one area in which no complaint can be voiced it is in the number of initiatives to improve language learning. These have ranged from prestigious awards (named after the Prime Minister) for outstanding bilingual attainment to the proposal that prizes be given to the schools which managed to so order their timetable that the twin goals of sufficient exposure time and block timetabling were achieved. Almost every strategy has had its share of detractors, and the pattern is for the several teachers' unions to publicly approve but counsel caution when a new strategy is announced.

The strategy of subject teaching in the second language and the related consequences of increased exposure time is worthy of closer examination. The strategy was justified on the grounds that by using the second language as a medium of instruction, children would be exposed to the language for a much

longer period and moreover would be compelled to speak it, write it and use it as a tool of communication. Subject teaching in the second language implied increased exposure and it was also confidently asserted then that there was no basis for fears that this policy would lead to a lowering of standards in the first language and in subjects taught in the second language. In 1972 a time-table for increases in exposure time for the second language was announced. This was to be increased from 18 per cent to 25 per cent in 1973, 33 1/3 per cent in 1974 and 40 per cent of curriculum time in 1975. In 1974 the schedule was given a boost with the introduction of Education for Living, to be taught only in the pupil's mother tongue. The present policy is to allow schools some flexibility in teaching in the second language (except for EFL) and in exposure time requirements.

It should be borne in mind that quantitative increases in exposure time through the use of second language in subject teaching need not lead to significant increases in proficiency and that other related factors need to be taken into consideration in assessing the usefulness of such a strategy. If such a strategy can be shown to lead to increased competence in the two languages, the 'costs' of such improvement ought to be considered in evaluating success. No hard evidence is available from Singapore as to just how much such a strategy has contributed to increasing second language skills. Research evidence elsewhere on consequences to attainment in the various subjects points to what the 'costs' might be. MacNamara (1969) has indicated that the teaching of Mathematics at least through the medium of the second language does not benefit the second language while it has a detrimental effect on children's progress in Mathematics, while Mallerbe (1965) has shown that in subjects like Geography and History where language plays a greater role both in communication to and in expression by the pupil, some loss of mastery is to be expected. As the need to learn English and the mother tongue is expressed in terms of their usefulness in employment and identity formation respectively, the possibility that the strategy adopted might paradocically lead to decreased competence both in valuable content and language, needs careful study. (See page 21)

Two other related questions, answers to which might provide alternatives to present strategy, need also to be examined. The practice in Singapore is to begin the study of the two languages in the first year of school and to

regard each pupil's readiness for language learning as being the same. Teachers have been given no means with which to gauge language competencies at the entry stage even though early grouping on such a basis would make possible the adoption of more suitable teaching methods. Also, it has been postulated (Giles 1969) that there is an optimal period of readiness to learn a second language based on the child's conceptual ability to handle the two language systems. If this assumption is valid, current practice in starting second language instruction from the first year may be causing unnecessary difficulties. It is not proposed that policy be altered on the basis that this assumption might well be true, but it does point to a possibility and it ought to be kept in mind.

A policy change proposed in 1977 offers another case in point. The change allowed pupils to be retained at any of the six levels of primary education and moved to a Basic Course with a simplified vocationally-biased one-language curriculum (plus oral fluency in a second language) if they failed three times during the six-year course. Promotion in the normal course was based on success in the following subjects - Language 1, Language 2, and Mathematics in Primary 1 - 3 and Science as well in Primary 4 - 6. There was a strong possibility of pupils being sent to the Basic Course largely on the basis of poor language ability, with pupils studying Mathematics and Science in their second language being twice handicapped. Is the implied assumption that poor language skills mean cognitive deficiency valid? Is there justification for testing second language competence so early? These and other questions raised earlier underline the need for hard evidence on which to base policies and strategies.[9]

The increased exposure time strategy has had consequences in another area - on the teachers. The pressure on teachers (those not teaching in the medium of English) has come about through two causes. One cause has been the decline in enrolments in non-English medium schools causing a surplus of teachers trained to teach in the mother tongue, and the other the need to have teachers able to teach English, Science and Mathematics in English, and Education for Living in the mother tongue. There was the inevitable movement of some teachers between the media of instruction and some have had to teach Science and Mathematics in English in non-English medium schools while others had to teach Education for Living in the mother tongue. The situation that prevails is that

some students are thrice-handicapped - learning a subject in a second language, often their weaker language, being taught by a teacher in what is often the teacher's weaker language and having (for Science and Mathematics) to use textbooks prepared for pupils learning the subject in the first language. The amount of dissatisfaction that this situation must generate must be considerable and the consequences for pupil mastery of content and language equally serious. The vast majority of teachers teaching under such conditions inevitably prove to be poor models for the speaking skills required to pupils. It is commonplace in Singapore to blame pupils when they are found wanting in skills; given the circumstances detailed above it is a wonder that they do well at all.

One further example of failure pertinent to the problem of language acquisition and use needs to be mentioned. Very little attention has been paid, to date, to the problem of text materials. Syllabus revision to date in the non-language subjects has concerned itself with content revision and little attention has been paid to the language dimension, even in subjects to be taught in the second language. For example, publishers to date have had no guidelines on the preparation of textbooks intended for use among pupils learning the subject in their second language. The one experiment that sought some matching between language level and content presentation, the Primary Pilot Project was phased out, without the reasons for its supposed failure being clearly examined. A related problem is that the range of non-textbook materials available for pupils who have taken one of the four languages as a second language is limited. The need is greater in the mother tongue languages. Language skills atrophy without use and printed materials provide opportunities for practice in reading and comprehension skills. As a result of the use of simplified Chinese characters and the use of the reformed Malay spelling in our schools a lot of existing material has become unreadable for our pupils. Even at present most existing materials are only partially useful for they were meant for first language readers. This is thus clear evidence of the need to tackle language problems on a broad front.

The practice of setting language goals with political and social considerations in mind has given rise to another problem. The particular Singapore variant of bilingualism is English for its usefulness for employment and as a language of science and technology and the mother tongue for cultural

identity and roots. There is apparently a good precedent for such an approach. A Chinese saying states 'Chinese learning for foundation, Western learning for use'. What is also true is that among the Chinese-educated there is likely to be an ambivalence in the attitude they have towards English; Kuo (1977) suggests that there is a love-hate relationship with English seen as being both modern and decadent. Something of this dualism may also be found at the political level. At this level, nation building is to be managed through the inculcation of non-culture-specific values such as loyalty, discipline, effort and a commitment to the triumvirate - multi-racialism, multi-culturalism and multi-lingualism. The emphasis here is forward-looking, modernistic. English, in this context, though foreign, is encouraged for its utilitarian value, for progress and modernization. At the same time, there is the policy of encouraging a sense of ethnic identity for the purposes of cultural ballast, talk of Asian values, and further, of regarding these values as being inherent in the pupil's mother tongue. There is the insistence that efforts must be made to avoid deculturalization - in the Prime Minister's words ... 'we understand ourselves, what we are, where we came from, what life is or should be about and what we want to do'. And speaking of the mother tongue '... it's not just learning the language. With the language go the fables and proverbs. It is the learning of the whole value system, a whole philosophy of life that can maintain the fabric of our society intact ...' (Lee, 1972). This is unmistakably a 'great traditions' approach and in the context of multi-cultural Singapore this particular view of language roles had considerable educational significance.

The syllabus and medium of instruction used for Education for Living illustrate some of these problems. The assertion that 'it is difficult to pass on these values through a second language ... if we want to use the existing traditional cultures as our 'base' we should use the mother tongue as the medium of instruction for only in this way can the essence of these cultures be absorbed' needs more evidence of its validity than is currently available. The neat balance such a strategy provides for exposure time between first and second language makes it appear a convenient timetabling exercise. As a large number of pupils learning the subject are doing so in their mother tongue, which for many pupils in the English stream is the weaker language, it is likely that harm is being done both to content and

language acquisition by pupils. Is this 'cost' an unavoidable consequence in the road to effective bilingualism? Even if this is accepted, it is necessary to ask, if, in deciding upon and recommending teaching methods of English and the mother tongue, whether such methods as have been recommended have taken note of the different goals for which these two languages are being taught in our school system. The syllabus is silent on goals, and it is to be doubted that systematic efforts have been made to match the linguistic component and teaching method to objectives. And as the learning of the mother tongue is both through study of the language itself and through subject teaching, it would be useful to know what modifications have been made to teaching methods to accommodate this approach.

Indeed it might be pointed out that in the particular way in which the policy for the learning of English and the mother tongue is justified an important element is missing. In a plural society like Singapore, inter-ethnic mixing and cross-cultural communication are important goals. It is surely not enough to be aware of one's ethnic roots - there are dangers in that too (Gopinathan, 1976 ii, iii). What is also necessary is an ability and, more importantly, a desire to know and understand other ethnic groups. It would appear that English, with its future status as a common language known by all, could serve to bring about the ability to know about other ethnic groups but if Lambert (1967) is correct about his distinction between instrumental and integrative approaches to language teaching and their consequences for attitude formation, it would appear in the Singapore context that the desire to know may be absent. Education for Living could be said to have met the content requirement for knowing something about other groups but the requirement that it be taught in the pupil's mother tongue means classes segregated along language lines and such a context can hardly be called integrative. Further, the absence of literature in a course intended to promote cultural identity needs explanation.[10]

This paper began with the assertion that language policy has always had a central role in education and that the goals set have had larger political and social consequences. It was pointed out that the politicization of language was an inevitable consequence when access to political and economic power was founded on language ability. It was also noted that language policy cannot be considered in isolation and that the solutions proposed should

therefore note the multi-dimensional nature of the problem. Such an understanding is however only likely to come from trained educationists and it is in this context that the continued politicization of language is likely to prove most troublesome. Given the history of our segmented educational system, there is, of course, a need to move with tact and consideration but it must be equally clear that political authority must see its way to giving a much greater role to pedagogic expertise. Equally, while the views of vested groups such as teachers' unions must be taken into account as their claims to be heard are not entirely without foundation, the roles they should be allowed to play must be decided with reference to the nature of their vested interest.

It is perhaps time for a complete review of the strategies involved in language teaching. In such an important area of education with its manifold consequences, there is need to involve a wider spectrum of expertise and interest in reviewing policy. Such a review undertaken either through the setting up of a special commission of inquiry or specialist committees can only begin work when detailed socio-linguistic information on the language situation is available. Efforts to obtain such information must be begun without delay - and any further initiatives in language policy must await the accumulation and consideration of such information. Professionalism and expertise are the only possible answers to our language problems.[11]

Postscript 1979

Since the above paper was written in mid-1977 new initiatives in education have continued unabated and these have had consequences for language policy. Innovations made prior to the publication of the Report on the Ministry of Education, 1978 (Goh Report) have been discussed in another paper (Gopinathan, 1979) and are only briefly dealt with here. The Goh Report as it relates to language policy is however discussed.

In order to facilitate Singapore's development as a major industrial and financial centre the Ministry of Education has extended the number of languages students may study. Pupils will now be allowed, if they are sufficiently competent in the two official languages to study a third language. French, German or Japanese are the designated languages and any one of these may be offered as a second language in the Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' level

examination.

At the school level, in order to ensure bilingual competence and as a response to the danger of deculturalization, seen as being posed by the drift to English medium schools, and to keep at least some Chinese schools an attractive option to pupils the government moved to keep alive and enhance the traditions of the premier Chinese schools. It is hoped that the characteristic ethos of these schools strengthened by an infusion of good teachers and the cream of pupils who passed the PSLE would provide an environment that would aid both bilingual attainment and the inculcation of a stable and relevant value system. The government has selected nine premier Chinese medium secondary schools to be attended, by invitation, by pupils in the top 8% of the PSLE. It should be noted here that the overwhelming majority of students in these nine schools would be ethnic Chinese. A Special Assistance Plan would allow pupils from these schools to attend additional ("immersion") classes conducted in English in other English medium secondary schools, a move that underlines the current emphasis on English competence. It was reported that a higher level of language competence in two languages was to be expected from these chosen few.

Major changes have also been made at the sixth form and university levels. Bilingualism will continue to be expected at primary and secondary levels, and indeed promotion from primary to secondary, from secondary to pre-university and from pre-university to university will depend upon good grades in language. From 1979, pupils will be required to have obtained a pass (Grade S8) in the second language in order to gain admission to Pre U classes. Emphasis at the sixth form and tertiary level has however now switched to the use of English as the main medium of instruction. Students in pre-university classes will now be assessed as to their levels of competence in English and much of pre-university teaching in the first year, at least for those weak in English or come from non-English medium secondary schools, will be on language studies. The pre-university course has now also been extended from two to three years for students weak in English and the junior colleges will now be reserved exclusively for students in the two year course. The aim is to prepare these pupils for common university examinations, a consequence of the Joint Campus programme (JCP).

Under the JCP all first year matriculated Nanyang University students from the Faculties of Arts/Social Sciences, Science and the Schools of Business Administration, and Accountancy will have common syllabi, attend common lectures, tutorials and sit for common examinations with their counterparts at the University of Singapore at the campus of the University of Singapore.

These significant structural changes outlined above underline the commitment of the government to make the bilingual policy and its implementation more effective. The Goh Report is outstanding for the frankness with which it details the problems of the system and in particular the effects of various language policies and implementation strategies. It is now realised that in spite of earlier sanguine assurances of maintenance of standards, language standards had in fact fallen both in English and in non-English medium schools and that solutions needed to be urgently formulated.[12] The Prime Minister himself has described bilingual achievement among pupils as "patchy" - he felt that only about 20% could be termed bilingual, defined as 'very much at home in one language and perhaps adequate in the second language'. The Goh Report found that more than 60% of pupils failed to attain minimum competency levels in one or both languages; that regression was likely to have taken place after pupils left school; that functional use of languages in terms of reading newspapers and books was low and that standards in English had fallen in both non-English and English medium schools.

There is now greater awareness of both the persistence and range of dialect use and the problems this posed for the learning of the school languages, Mandarin and English. It is now accepted that pupils would be unequally endowed as regards language learning abilities and that the home environment of pupils can have a significant effect on efforts made by schools to teach languages. The government however feels that Singapore has no choice but to pursue its bilingual policy and that while concessions may be made for weaker pupils, those capable of high bilingual achievement must be identified, provided special opportunities and challenged to do their best. It is for this reason that government has risked criticism with its "super schools and super pupils" policy - a policy which the Malay Teachers' Union (Straits Times, 29/12/1978) described as "tarnishing" the government's policy on equal opportunities and treatment in education.

Unfortunately, while the Goh Report's proposals are an improvement on the Basic Course solution to the problems of poor language attainment they do not effectively remove the handicap a vast number of pupils face in dealing with school languages; the Report notes that for 85% of the pupils the languages of the home are not the languages of the school. Only adequate diagnostic procedures, a compensatory programme aimed at reducing language deficits and postponement of streaming on the basis of language attainment until after the fourth year can make the system more equitable. Though there is little disagreement both with the need to identify linguistic talent and provide varied options to meet ability differences it seems to this writer that the policies and strategies have not been considered carefully enough. The integration principle has been sacrificed at the secondary level in the case of the nine schools, curriculum differences have emerged between various groups of pupils at the same level, and the damaging spectre of examination failure continues to reign at the primary level. While the acceptance of lowered levels of language attainment for the majority of pupils and the extension of years in school are likely to be beneficial to language attainment current efforts have introduced a large measure of differentiation within the school system, thus affecting progress towards a unified school system.[13]

There is now, as mentioned earlier, a greater awareness of the complexities of the language learning situation. One major strategy in second language teaching has been the steady increases, since 1972, to Language Exposure Time (LET). Principally, this has meant increases to curriculum time alloted to teaching of and teaching in the second language - and in the pre-primary classes[14] there is now both an earlier start and equal exposure. The point made in the earlier section about too much dependence upon increases in exposure time to improve second language achievement bears repeating. Increased exposure alone cannot do much to improve proficiency if due attention is not paid to other features of the language learning situation. Earlier increases in exposure time were attained by the policy of subject teaching in the second language. As pointed out in the earlier section such a policy is likely to have consequences on achievement in the subjects taught in the second language, and on pupils from different language streams. The Goh Report's finding that Science results suffered with no improvement to second language

justifies the earlier criticism.

The latest innovation in language teaching strategy is "immersion". This concept takes the practice of increased exposure to language a step further. Its use as a strategy is seen in the Joint Campus Programme and in the "immersion" classes for the top 8% of PSLE pupils. What can be said at this early stage of this innovation? The immersion strategy can be considered a variant of the integrated schools policy which sought, through combined language streams under a common school administration, to provide opportunities for increased use of language in informal contexts. The few studies that have been done (Tan and Chew, 1970, Tan, 1978) indicated little significant improvement in second language proficiency as a consequence of this variant of the immersion strategy. Tan states "that the integration of the Chinese and English media secondary schools ... yielded no significant effect on SL proficiency. School integration as currently practised does not in itself improve SL abilities or use substantially." Early feedback from the Joint Campus Programme indicates much the same thing (Straits Times). Against this evidence must be set the rationale the Prime Minister has offered for the immersion policy (Ministry of Culture, 1978). Mr Lee draws his examples of the success of the immersion strategy from 3 groups - Chinese stream scholars sent abroad to do Science courses, Science students from the Chinese stream attending the University of Singapore and the performance of Singapore Armed Forces officers. He himself points out that for the first two groups, the students were those with better results in their 'A' levels. It must be noted further that these students have had six years of secondary education and are older - the latter factor would imply a clearer perception of goals, higher levels of motivation and greater capacity to ensure the inevitable difficulties and frustrations. For these reasons it is doubted that their experiences and successes can be attributed primarily to their immersion in an English-speaking environment and that such evidence is adequate for a policy of immersion at lower secondary level.

There must be adequate appreciation of the psycho-linguistic and sociolinguistic features of language acquisition and use if solutions are to be effective and the implementation strategies must be carefully prepared for. Above all there must be careful and adequate research done about the language learning situation in Singapore. The immersion strategy as currently

implemented at the secondary level needs re-examination. It makes far too great a demand on the pupil. It is not sensible to expect even bright, and enthusiastic 12 and 13 years olds to complete a full day in school and then proceed to a different school for some three hours of immersion, 5 days a week. Such a strategy is even less acceptable when it is noted that in many schools immersion consists primarily of sitting in on lessons in a regular classroom and listening to subjects taught again in English. It has already been noted that in some instances the language standards of the 'host' school are in fact lower than that of pupils sent for immersion while in others teachers have had to slow down and simplify lessons to accommodate the 'guest' students. It is unlikely that the personal and administrative 'costs' entailed in this strategy will be justified by the benefits to be accrued.

The 1956 All Party Report laid the foundations of the education system on the basis of equal treatment, and language policies were seen as crucial to this goal. The intervening years have seen numerous initiatives to arrive at an efficient and fair policy on language. Language goals continue to be important but it could be asked if the relentless pursuit of the bilingual goal is not distorting the system and leading us to ignore other equally valid objectives of the system. It was noted earlier that major structural modifications have been made on the basis that they would promote language goals better and that this was cause for concern. It is to be hoped that with new hands at the helm greater consideration will be given to those fundamental issues.

The consequences for curriculum too need examination. Considerable increases have been made to language periods (English) at the sixth form, resulting in fewer periods for subjects like Geography, Economics, etc. Recent press reports quoted the Ministry as stating that "instead of teaching the content of the subjects, teachers should concentrate on vocabulary, sentence construction, language usage and meanings of different terms used in the subjects." (T. Ooi, New Nation 17/1/1979). Yet another proposal is that geography in Chinese secondary schools - except in the top nine - should be taught in English in order that standards of English can be raised. (Straits Times 13/1/1979). An earlier curriculum emphasis on Science and Mathematics

at the primary level has led to a reduction of both time and quality of work in such subjects like History and Geography. The current proposals for down-grading content in favour of language at the sixth form will in their turn affect achievement as well.

It is clear therefore that though the Goh Report is an important milestone in the evolution of Singapore's education system many difficult challenges lie ahead. The promise of greater flexibility and caution is to be welcomed. The proposed census to be undertaken in 1980 will provide valuable information on language distribution and use and will provide an accurate base on which realistic policies can be formulated. It is to be hoped that "a quarter century of political battling /which/ has roughed up the education system" (Ministry of Culture, 1978) is at an end and more national policies with an appreciation of pedagogical considerations will become the hallmark of a reformed education system.

1. Singapore has four official languages (English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil) and one National Language (Malay). All four are available as media of instruction and as second languages at both primary and secondary level. Although English is at present the major medium of instruction at tertiary level, it is possible to study Chinese Language and Literature and Malay Language and Literature as courses.

   Kuo provides the following figures for those claiming to 'understand' English (56.6%) Malay (61.3%) Mandarin (59.4%) Tamil (6.7%) Hokkien (73.7%). Another study quoted by Dr Toh Chin Chye (Straits Times 29/3/1979) gives the following figures for main languages spoken at home: Chinese dialect (64.8%) Mandarin (1.3%) English (5.2%), Malay (7.8%), Indian (1.8%) two languages (8.2%), others (0.7%), no details (10.2%).

2. The Singapore system is better described as a two major (English and Chinese) - two minor (Malay and Tamil) stream model. This was certainly the case up to 1959. In the context of obvious parental preference for education in the English medium schools, (enrolment in non-English medium schools fell from 45.9% in 1959 to 11.2% in 1978) it can now be termed one major (English) and one minor (Chinese) model. There has been no enrolment in Tamil medium Primary One classes since 1975. Residual Malay medium primary education exists on the off-shore islands. Equal emphasis on two languages at the primary level has however made such media distinctions less useful.

3. The terms 'bilingualism' and 'mother tongue' have distinct meanings in the Singapore context. The first refers to the study, not of any two official languages, but of English and a mother tongue. For a pupil of Chinese ethnic origin, Mandarin is decreed to be the mother tongue (though for a majority of the Chinese ethnic group the home language is Hokkien) for the Indians, Tamil and for the Malays, Malay. The term 'mother tongue' is thus used to indicate ethnic affiliation rather than the pupil's actual home language. It is possible too for pupils to learn a mother tongue that is not their own - it is estimated that some 40 per cent of pupils from Tamil-speaking homes have opted for Malay as their mother tongue.

4. The best illustration of this is the fact that though there was considerable criticism and evidence that the implementation of the bilingual policy needed a thorough review, it took the Prime Minister's active involvement in the MOE and Dr Goh Keng Swee's concern about educational wastage and the production of semi-illiterates in the school system to bring about the necessary review. A decision on the Primary Pilot Project was also taken only after MPs in Parliament complained about it.

5. However, even these figures may be misleading. Murray (1975) noted that in the English stream many more students could speak Mandarin than could read Chinese but substantially more Chinese stream students could read English than speak it effectively - a finding that points to the need for more detailed and useful measures of language competence.

6. The point made in this paper about community attitudes and actual language use being at times at variance with prescribed use is seen in the fact that the Indians prefer English medium schooling and are represented in English medium schools far in excess of their proportion in the population. A recent report indicated that many Indian pupils were now offering 'Malay and even Chinese as a second language' (New Nation 11/8/1976). When equal exposure time was first announced, the Malays complained that their need was for more exposure to English, not equal exposure to Malay and the policy was relaxed for them. Civil servants were at one stage required to pass Malay at the Standard One level for confirmation, an attainment that must for many have now lapsed through little use.

7. This criticism was validated by the Goh Report. The general conclusion stated in the Report is that the education system made too great a demand, language-wise, on a majority of students, thus leading to failure and wastage. The Goh Report concluded on the basis of a survey carried out that the differences in actual attainment was in fact wider than the two-level difference assumed by the Ministry.

8. It is of course true that some information is available from other countries, but Singapore's multilingual mix is unique as are its socio-cultural situation and education policies. We need to know, for instance, how

differential goals for language learning affect motivation to study the two languages, the relationship between teacher attitude to language and pupil attainment and subsequent use, to name only two.

The Basic Course reforms were criticised just 2 years later in the Goh Report; principally, it laid the blame on inadequate planning and appreciation of the language potential and needs of pupils sent to the Basic Course. It supported the view that "students leaving the Basic Course would regress quickly to illiteracy." The Goh Report's proposals appear however to be based on similar assumptions - that a lack of bi-lingual proficiency is enough reason to stream pupils into sub-streams with different curricula. Assessment of bi-lingual attainment is to be done at the end of the third year and calls by education to postpone assessment and streaming to a later date have been rejected.

10. The Goh Report found itself critical of this too. It found much of the content "irrelevant and useless" though the Report stressed the value of moral education. The Report however accepted the premise that "cultural ballast or historical origins of their culture" ought to be taught in the mother tongue. Thus the criticism that this would lead to classrooms segregated on the basis of language during lessons intended to promote cohesion under stress and "a commitment to a common set of values ... " remains unanswered. Indeed what is proposed is not just ethnic groups be taught in their mother tongue but that they be taught 'ethnic history'.

11. The Goh Report which offers a substantial review and makes far-reaching proposals for both language policies and the reform of the education system is the first systematic review since the 1965 Lim Tay Boh Report. It is clear from the Report that even though it had access to all Ministry of Education studies it still had to generate several studies to evaluate the effectiveness of various policies. The proposal to use the 1980 Census to obtain more detailed information on language attainment and use is welcome news and underlies the recognition that language planning cannot be effective without detailed information.

12 There has been in particular concern that the standards of English as a first language have fallen. The Institute of Education and the English

Language and Literature Department of the University of Singapore have had to institute proficiency tests. The head of the Civil Service has blamed bilingualism for this state of affairs. One proposed solution to the problems of falling standards has been an attempt to recruit 'native speakers' from the United Kingdom to teach in Singapore schools, a move prompted in part by fears that standard English was losing ground to 'Singapore English'.

13. The distressing tendency towards segregation of pupils either for effective "culture teaching" noted above, or for a high standard of bilingualism (super schools plan) or to ensure effective literacy (as indicated by the proposal that the Chinese in the slower 20 per cent should seek to be literate in Chinese but that Malays and Indians should aim for literacy in English) ought to be reviewed. Differentiation, grouping or streaming may well be useful in reaching language goals but the other consequences are equally important. Socialisation of the weakest and brightest pupils in segregated settings must hinder progress towards instilling a sense of common identity.

14. In an effort to sustain Chinese medium primary education the government had since 1973 allowed enrolment at the half year mark in the Chinese medium primary schools. In 1979 it allowed an estimated 4,000 pupils of Chinese ethnic origin to begin schooling at 5 years of age in a pre-primary programme. The pupils will be exposed to a curriculum which for the first time equalised exposure time between first and second languages. The scheme will involve all 5 year olds by 1983.

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