

# **The first fifty years of Bilingual Education Policy in Singapore: Its success and rising problems**

**Misa Okumura  
Chukyo University**

## **1. Introduction**

Singapore is a tiny city-state. Singaporeans sometimes refer affectionately to their homeland as the “Little Red Dot” on a world map. This red dot, however, is emerging as one of the shining economies on the global stage. It is widely known that Singapore’s successful economic development is largely due to its English-centered Bilingual Education Policy (BEP). Singapore celebrated its fiftieth anniversary of independence in 2015. This year, 2016, marks the BEP’s fiftieth anniversary. This is a good time to review the fruits of this policy. In this short paper, we will first introduce the BEP policy, then review its transition, and discuss some controversial issues that have been caused by this policy’s implementation over the past half century.

## **2. Bilingual Education Policy (BEP) in Singapore**

English was assumed to be critical to Singapore’s economic survival; the “mother tongues” were adopted to maintain ethnic identity and traditional values (Lee Kuan Yew, 2000).

It is often wrongly assumed that Singapore has always been an English-speaking society. Even though the British colonized Singapore, it does not necessarily follow that the people of Singapore have been fluent in English since the colonial period. In fact, only a small percentage of the population could speak and work in English in 1900, and only 0.1% could speak Mandarin (Okumura et.al, 2006). It is a great achievement of the BEP that English became the lingua franca of this city-state.

The territory of Singapore covers 710 km<sup>2</sup>. Its population is about 5.4 million, of which about 3.3 million have citizenship. The people have diverse ethnic backgrounds, with those of Chinese origin totaling 74.2%, people of Malayan descent totaling 13.3%, those

from India 9.1%, and others 3.3% (2015). Malay is the national language, and there are four official languages: Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English.

Singapore implemented its Bilingual Education Policy in 1966, one year after independence. The objectives of the policy were to build a national identity, and to establish unity among this ethnically and culturally diverse society, while at the same time preserving its multi-cultural heritage. This policy is unique, in that it designates English as Singapore's first language, and a mother tongue—Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil—as the second language. A student's mother tongue is determined by his or her ethnic origin. English is an administrative language, and it is the medium used for teaching at schools. Mother tongues are one of the subjects taught.

Why was English designated as the first language? There are four reasons this occurred. The first reason was that English had been the administrative language during the colonial period, and members of the newly-established government were familiar with this language. The second reason was that as a demographically Chinese-dominant city-state, surrounded by the Malay world, they were reluctant to declare Chinese the national language. The third reason was that in this multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, the population needed a neutral language to link the different groups together. Last, but not least, English had become a lingua franca in global politics and the global economy. The policymakers concluded that if the nation became fluent in English, Singapore could become competitive in many global activities, and attract foreign investments.

### **3. Four Periods of BEP Transition**

The BEP has experienced four periods of transition over the last fifty years.

a) From independence to the 1970s

The BEP was implemented in 1966. Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015), the first prime minister of Singapore, was called “the headmaster of Singapore's schools.” He promoted the BEP vigorously.

b) The 1980s

Singapore's economy soared dramatically in the 1980s. It became a part of “The Four Little Dragons.”<sup>1</sup> When the economy grew, the need for English in the business scene became more important. Many English-language schools had mushroomed, and parents were eager to send their children to those schools after classes or on Saturdays. Since there was such a heavy emphasis on learning English among younger generations during this period, for the first time, Chinese-speaking people expressed concern that they faced losing their Chinese ethnic heritage. The government initiated the Speak

Mandarin Campaign (SMC) in 1979. As a result, more Mandarin is heard in Chinese-Singaporean households today, which means that Chinese dialects are being lost. However, the passion for learning English was not affected at all. The enthusiasm continues.

c) The 1990s

In 1990, Goh Chok Tong (1941–) was elected as the second prime minister, and the IT revolution accelerated the dispersion of English through the society.

d) 2000 and later

In 2000, the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) was initiated, to promote Singaporeans' use of "proper" English, and to discourage the use of "Singlish." Singlish is a colloquial mixture of English and local languages. It has been developed mainly by people trading at wet markets, and is used for everyday communication between people from different ethnic backgrounds. The government, however, encourages Singaporeans to "be understood" by foreigners, in order to promote foreign investments and tourism, by using grammatically correct English. New phenomena also appeared at this time. The brain drain of young, English-fluent elites to Western countries became a serious problem. It became so serious that Prime Minister Goh made a famous speech that asked the question, "Are you a stayer or a quitter?" on National Day 2002, to appeal to the nation's sense of patriotism.

In 2004, Lee Sheng Long (1952–), the son of Lee Kuan Yew, succeeded Goh, and became the third prime minister of Singapore. ICT has developed, and SNS has expanded, as one of the major tools for communication, especially among young Singaporeans, which makes the English-centered BEP lean heavily toward an English education.

#### **4. Problems Caused by the BEP**

The English-centered BEP has served the new city-state well, and it has contributed to Singapore's economic development. Only fifty years after its birth, in 2008 Singapore became so successful that it surpassed Japan's GDP per capita. Its GDP per capita is the largest in Asia, and is the eighth largest in the world (World Bank 2014).

Domestically, however, the BEP has not turned out to be as successful as it seemed. In this regard, we can identify at least three linguistic problems. First, a problem associated with defining the term mother tongue emerged. Usually one's mother tongue is defined as the language spoken at home, among family members. In this case, mother tongue means the ethnic language. Therefore, if a student were of Chinese origin, Mandarin became their

mother tongue. As a result, most Chinese-Singaporeans have to study three languages: Mandarin and English, in addition to the language spoken in their homes such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew. They are expected to be trilingual.

Students of Indian origin might speak Tamil, Bengali, Hindi, or even Urdu at home. They are also expected to be trilingual. Although one of the main purposes for implementing the policy was to preserve the country's multi-ethnic cultural heritage, among the three major ethnic groups, only the Malays have been successful in inheriting their traditional cultural heritage in their own mother tongue.

The second problem is that not all students are able to become fluent in more than one language. Students are streamed when they reach ten years of age. At that point, the top 20% could enter bilingual schools, and most students attend a school where they learn their mother tongue as one of their subjects. The bottom 10% of students learn their mother tongues only as a subject of oral communication (Dixon, 2005:630–31).

The third problem is that the permeation of English through the society occurred much more rapidly and more successfully than had been expected. According to the national census 2010, when we compare the main languages spoken at home by Chinese-Singaporeans over five-years of age in 2000 and again in 2010, the extent of Mandarin spoken increases only a little, from 45.1% to 47.7%, whereas English increases by almost 10%, from 23.9% to 32.6%.<sup>2</sup> Use of the Chinese dialect decreases dramatically, from 30.7% to 19.2% from 2000 to 2010. The more educated the people are, the more English they use. Among Chinese-Singaporeans who have graduated from university, 49.4% use English as a main language, and 40.8% use Mandarin. It is a little awkward to compare their economic conditions, but if we compare the dwellings—the types of housing—the owners of private premises use English 2.4 times more than they use Mandarin. When comparing different generations, the stratum of those between five and fourteen years of age mainly use English at home—among Chinese-Singaporeans it is 52%, among Indian-Singaporeans it is 50%, and even among Malay-Singaporeans it is 26%. Therefore, the upper and the upper-middle classes, and also younger generations, tend to lean heavily toward using English. These groups are also the groups linked to the Internet, to SNS, and to the global English cultural sphere.

## **5. Controversies Over Approaches Taken to the BEP**

The role English played in Singapore's economic development, and all other aspects of society—including the political, social, and cultural aspects—exceeded the original policymakers' expectations. Whether or not to be fluent in English became a dominant

question. However, not all citizens could be perfectly bilingual, and the language standards among Singapore's students are falling.

There are now two types of bilingual fluency in Singapore. One is called "added bilingual." Those who have developed the capacity for abstract and logical thinking in two languages will not have any difficulty code-switching smoothly from one language to another. A second type of bilingual fluency is called "deductive bilingual" (Okumura et al., 2006). Sadly, the number of people with this type of fluency is increasing, because of the BEP. These are the people who cannot develop fluency in two languages. They become confused when studying plural languages. This is happening most often among Chinese-Singaporeans. As mentioned above, Chinese students have been burdened with the expectation that they will be fluent in two foreign languages—English and Mandarin—when they start schooling. Many Indian students also have to master three languages, but, in reference to the total population, this represents a relatively small number of people.

Now, serious controversies over the approaches taken to BEP are being expressed. During the time of remarkable economic development, especially from 1978 to 1997, the so-called Efficiency Driven Period, the "one-size fits all approach" was promoted. All students were expected to follow the same BEP curriculum. "[The policy was] based on an assumption of a strong correlation between intelligence and language learning" (Lee, 2009). In other words, intelligent students were expected and believed to be capable of mastering more than two languages. Practice has proven that this is not necessarily true. Many of the best students majoring in science and engineering are having a hard time managing two languages. Because of the complaints, the National University of Singapore no longer requires that Mandarin be one of the subjects for entrance examinations.

Recently, different approaches—such as more customized and differentiated approaches—are being encouraged at the schools (Wee, 2011). "Our citizens should be encouraged to be as bilingual as they can be, but not at the expense of acquiring relevant knowledge in other fields." "There cannot be a one-size fits all approach to education. What is certain is that the curriculum for the mother-tongue languages as it stands now, especially for Chinese and Tamil, puts an unnecessary burden on our children." ("No One-Size-Fits-All Approach to Education," Lee Wei Ling, May 21, 2010, *The Straits Times*).

It is a little ironical that Lee Kuan Yew's own daughter, Lee Wei Ling, is now criticizing her father's legacy. Interestingly enough, she does not seem to think of promoting Mandarin over English, although she is ethnically Chinese, and, to be precise, fifth generation Chinese. "Now and probably for the next fifty years, English will be the main global language. Scientific knowledge will continue to be expressed in English," she

says.

Therefore, if one has to choose one language over another, it seems there is no other choice for Singaporeans but to choose English over their mother tongues. What the Ministry of Education (MOE) has to do is cater to the needs of respective students. Sometimes, the most intelligent students perform lowest in their language efficiency studies (Guan, Jinyao, May 21, 2010, *The Straits Times*).

## **6. Conclusions**

After having implemented the English-centered BEP for over fifty years, Singapore leaned toward an English-dependent society. Choosing English now, however, does not represent merely a preference for that language, but the country's survival. Both domestically, and when Singapore competes with other economically emerging, Chinese-dominant cities, such as Hong Kong, Taipei, or Shanghai, it needs to distinguish itself from the others. Singapore appears to have chosen to do so by becoming an English-centered global city in Asia. However, this brings us back to the concerns expressed by the late Lee Kuan Yew, which are introduced at the beginning of this paper, where he asks the question of how to "maintain ethnic identity and traditional values." English, the very language that brought Singapore its prosperity, is now threatening its national identity and traditional ethnic cultural identities. We might also say that the Singapore case is representative of future problems related to languages and cultural identities that will develop in multi-ethnic global cities. Consequently, the successes and growing problems of BEP in this tiny city-state should not be treated as tiny issues, but rather as big important issues, that could be shared with other leading global cities.

## **Notes**

1. In 1980's to 90's, four emerging Asian economies, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore, are referred as "The Four Little Dragons."
2. 'Census of Population 2010, Table 47, Table 52 and Table 56', 'Census of Population Statistical Release 1, 12 On Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion,'; Department of Statistics, Singapore. <http://www.singstat.gov.sg>

## **References**

- Dixon, L. Quentin, 2005, 'The Bilingual Education Policy in Singapore: Implications for Second Language Acquisition', (ed.) by Cohen, James, McAlister KaraT., Tolstad, Kellie and MacSwan, Jeff, *ISB4: Proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on*

*Bilingualism*, Cassandra Press.

Grail Research, 'Consumers of Tomorrow: Insights and Observations about Generation Z', Nov. 2011.

Gupta, Anthea Freaser, 2010, 'Singapore Standard English Revisited' (ed.) by Lim, Lisa, Pakir, Anne and Wee, Lionel, *English in Singapore: Modernity and Management*, NUS Press, Singapore.

Ho Chee Lick, 2001, "The Cultural Grounding of Singapore English", Ooi, Vincent, B.Y.(ed.) 2001 *Evolving Identities: The English Language in Singapore and Malaysia*, Singapore, Times Academic Press.

Lee Kuan Yew, 2000, *From Third World to First: A Singapore Story: 1965-2000*, New York: Harper Collins.

———, 2012, *My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore's Bilingual Journey*, Singapore: Strait Times Press.

Wee, Lian-Hee, 2009, 'Englishization as an Aspect of Building Singapore Identity', (ed.) by Tam, Kwok-kan, *Englishization in Asia: Language and Cultural Issues*, Open University of Hong Kong Press.

Wee, Lionel, 2011, Language Policy Mistakes: Governance, Expertise and the Deliberation of Language Ideologies, '*International Journal of Applied Linguistics*' 21(2) July 2011:203-221.

Okumura, Misa, 2009, *Ethnicity as Cultural Identity: Struggle for Building National Identity in Singapore*, Kokusai-shoin.

Okumura, Misa, Guo, Junhai, Koda, Yuko Peggie, 2006, *Language Politics of Multi-cultural Society: Swaying Identities of English-knowing Singaporeans*, Hitsuji-shobo.

### **Acknowledgements:**

The author is grateful to Chukyo University Research Fund for financial assistance with this research.