

National Identity and the Choice of Official Languages: A Case Study of Bilingual Education in Singapore

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1. Introduction

Official languages reflect a country's people and cultures, and the process by which they are formulated provides insight into the country's historical development. In multi-ethnic countries, the diversity of languages represents rich cultural deposits, and each language has become a symbol of its people. However, such diversity can make the formulation of official languages challenging. Singapore serves as a compelling example of this challenge. In this research, I will examine the advantages and disadvantages of adopting English and Mandarin as official languages in Singapore, a multi-ethnic country with a complex linguistic landscape. I will also explore the negative outcomes that can arise from overemphasizing Mandarin in bilingual education. This research will demonstrate that mandatory implementation of a language cannot necessarily improve citizens' national identity, and may even exacerbate centrifugal forces.

Singapore is a diverse and multi-ethnic country. According to Liu (2014)^[1], the vast majority of Singapore's early Chinese immigrants were from South China. During the "Sailing to the South" movement, Minnan and Guangdong people migrated to the Malay region in search of economic opportunities. Additionally, indigenous people from the Malay region have contributed significantly to Singapore's population. Due to historical factors such as colonialism, Singapore is home to a considerable number of people of European descent. Rubdy (2005)^[2] provides a rough overview of the proportion of main ethnic groups in Singapore in the 1980s, as illustrated in the table below. This complex demographic landscape has significant implications for language policy in Singapore, as different groups have different linguistic preferences and abilities.

Race	Proportion
Chinese	75.5%
Malayan	13.6%
Indian	8.8%

Table 1: The proportion of ethnic groups in Singapore in the 1980s

2. The choice of official languages

When the Singaporean government considered official languages, Mandarin and English seemed like a logical choice. China is the ancestral home of most Singaporeans, and a common cultural background makes Chinese an obvious consideration. However, due to the existence of

various Chinese dialects in Singapore, communication between different Chinese groups posed a challenge, and sometimes even led to conflicts. John Clammer aptly noted that “Chinese are the most heterogeneous community in Singapore, divided by dialect, place of origin, class and most certainly by religion” (Clammer, 1980, p. 19).^[3] Singaporean Chinese use different dialects depending on their origins. In addition to Mandarin, there are many southern dialects, commonly known as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hakka. Therefore, a relatively common language within the ethnic groups was needed to connect them and represent Chinese culture. This raised the question of which language should act as the medium.

According to Goh (2002)^[4], “Mandarin is more than a language. It not only allows the Chinese to communicate more easily with one another, but also opens up many chests of treasures” (p. 6). The main function of the Chinese language in Singapore is not only to inherit the Chinese culture. Mandarin Chinese also holds economic value, which indirectly increases the interest of local students and workers in learning the language. More and more foreigners are making learning Mandarin a requirement to improve their abilities.

In China, Mandarin has been the official language since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Furthermore, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was attracted to China's ongoing economic reforms, as he believed that it was crucial to understand China's changing political economy and its relationships with neighboring countries (Liu, 2014, p.1227).^[1] China's rapid rise in comprehensive national strength through the Reform and Opening policy has made Mandarin Chinese the second most powerful language in the world, after English. As a result, more and more foreigners have taken learning Chinese as a condition to enhance their competitiveness (Wong, 2016, p.27).^[5]

English, on the other hand, has always been the high and dominant language in Singapore's public areas such as politics, economy, science, and technology. English is widely regarded as the working and business language around the world. It has the highest economic value in Singapore, and people must master it if they want to improve their social status. Compared with the "mother tongue" of the other major ethnic groups, English is a "neutral" language accepted by all ethnic groups, and thus a common language across ethnic groups. It is no accident that English still stands out as the dominant administration language, as it has historical roots in the early British colonial empire. Moreover, the government did not have to choose between the language of the native peoples as "English did not confer economic advantage on any one ethnic group" (Rubdy, 2011, p.59).^[2]

After more than 40 years of efforts, English has become the dominant working language, cross-ethnic language, and "national language" in Singapore. In the future, it may replace the "mother tongue" of the ethnic group and become the first official language of Singapore.

3. Bilingual education

Singapore's bilingual education policy has played a vital role in promoting language proficiency, cultural understanding, and national identity. Bilingual education has been a crucial aspect of Singapore's educational system since its inception. This policy reflects the government's recognition of the importance of language as a crucial tool for nation-building, social cohesion, and economic growth. The bilingual policy aimed to provide students with proficiency in both English and their mother tongue, which were seen as complementary rather than competitive languages. As such, the government hoped that bilingualism would serve as a bridge between different communities and enhance cultural understanding and appreciation.

The bilingual policy's origins can be traced back to the 1950s when the government recognized that English was becoming an increasingly important language in the global economy. "According to which Singaporeans were to speak both English and an official 'mother tongue', each language envisioned as serving different functions" (Wong, 2017, p.20).^[5] At the same time, there was a need to preserve the cultural heritage of Singapore's diverse ethnic groups, which were predominantly Chinese, Malay, and Indian. As such, the bilingual policy was established to promote the teaching of English as the main language of instruction, while also ensuring that students had a firm grounding in their mother tongue.

Singapore's bilingual policy is unique in that it is not merely a matter of providing instruction in two languages, but rather a holistic approach that emphasizes the development of both languages and their integration into everyday life. The policy requires that all students learn a second language alongside English, which is taught from a young age. The mother tongue is taught as a separate subject, and students are also encouraged to use it in their daily lives.

The policy's success can be attributed to its holistic approach, which emphasizes the development of both English and the mother tongue, and its focus on promoting social cohesion and economic growth. As Singapore continues to evolve as a global city-state, its bilingual policy remains a crucial aspect of its educational system and its national identity.

The proposition that mother tongue should be taught as a separate subject and promoted for regular use represents an important and necessary step towards preserving linguistic diversity and cultural heritage. By providing students with a comprehensive education in their mother tongue, they are afforded a greater understanding and appreciation of their own cultural identity, as well as the opportunity to engage more fully with their community and broader society. Moreover, encouraging daily use of mother tongue can promote social cohesion and unity by fostering a sense of shared experience and common identity among speakers of the language. However, it is important to recognize that the implementation of such policies requires significant resources, including qualified teachers, curriculum development, and adequate funding, and that there may be challenges in balancing the promotion of mother tongue with the development of proficiency in a common national language or languages. Therefore, careful consideration must be given to the implementation of policies that prioritize the teaching and use of mother tongue in order to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability.

4. The influence of the mandatory promotion of Mandarin

The mandatory promotion of Mandarin in Singapore was implemented with the belief that it would enhance the national identity of Singaporean Chinese by connecting them with their ancestral roots in China. As Wong (2005) ^[5] pointed out, the government believed that each ethnic community needed to find anchorage in its own culture and traditions in order to foster a sense of self-assuredness (p.24). "National identity increasingly prevails over ethnic or sub-ethnic identity in the established groups" (Liu, 2014, p.1231).^[1] The study further revealed that only 78% of Chinese respondents identified with their race, while 92% of Malays and 82% of Indians did so. Even more strikingly, 12% of young Chinese expressed a desire to be white, indicating a decline in ethnic pride among this group. The trend of national identity prevailing over ethnic or sub-ethnic identity was also noted (Liu, 2014).^[1] Despite the government's intention to promote national identity through language education, younger Chinese Singaporeans appear to identify more as pan-Singaporeans rather than as pure Chinese or with their ethnic group. Therefore, it seems that teaching language as a means of preserving national identity has not been successful.

As Liu (2014)^[1] argued, integration should not equate to assimilation, and identity-building is a long-term process that requires efforts from all sides. Bilingual education is an effective way to balance national identity and international cooperation, where English education connects Singaporeans economically with the world, and Mandarin education keeps them in touch with their own nationality. However, the emphasis on Mandarin in Singapore may have contributed to making the younger generation feel inferior and separated.

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