

## *Fresh investment in bilingualism*

**T**HERE is an ancient tale of a mouse which saved her young from a fierce cat by barking. After the cat ran away, the mouse said to her offspring: "See, children, it pays to know a second language." Few would suggest that Singaporeans' proficiency in a second tongue could be put to such dramatic use one day. But the point of the story holds true: Monolingualism is not likely to get one very far in life. Hence, bilingualism in Singapore is not only a linguistic or literary reality but has been a national necessity as well.

Notwithstanding its association with colonialism, which had privileged English-speakers over others, English here

provided a racially neutral platform for communication within the country. It also offered access to the world in which the island-state was able to make a living. And it has remained the working language of Singapore. Indeed, by making English the medium of instruction, independent Singapore was able to remove the exclusivity and privilege that colonial English had conferred. But the mother tongues of the various races here also provided a sense of identity shaped by a sustaining and comforting cultural inheritance. Hence a new nation sought a niche for itself in striking a balance between using English and continuing to value the mother tongue.

But bilingualism is forever a work in progress. Therein lies the importance of the bilingualism fund behind which former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew has thrown his weight. The fund's target – \$100 million – is not a negligible amount. More than the money, however, it is the fund's intention that is crucial: to help children become bilingual early. Languages are best picked up when one is young, because that is when they are learnt most naturally and effortlessly.

If children grow up to see bilingualism as the natural state of things, much of the angst that some suffer over learning the mother tongue can perhaps be

avoided. The issue of bilingualism concerns all races and affects, particularly sharply, those in homes where English is used predominantly. The absence of a culture of speaking Mandarin, or Malay or Tamil at home colours children's perceptions of the language and their performance in the subject. This is a pity because the point is not just that it is useful to learn a language in the wake of a rising China and India, or in order to better understand and engage with neighbours such as Malaysia and Indonesia in the region. The greater truth behind bilingualism's value is that the mother tongue is a cultural heirloom that must be treasured for its own sake.