

PEOPLE have asked me why I embarked on this book, which I consider my most important book. The reason is simple: I believe bilingualism to be a cornerstone of Singapore's success story. Singapore was not always the way it is today, where people from all over the world can come and find themselves at home here because English is spoken so widely.

When I first became Prime Minister of Singapore, the majority of people here could not speak English. In Singapore, English is the important language without which you cannot get to the top of any profession or job. They spoke many Chinese dialects, Malay, Tamil, other languages. They were like tanks of fish in an aquarium, together and yet apart, each community in its own world. I made it my mission to bring them together in real, meaningful ways.

Very few countries have embarked on a bilingual policy with two completely divergent and unrelated languages, English a North European language and Chinese, mono-syllabic, tonal, no spelling but made up of either pictographs or ideographs.

Why have we chosen this bilingual combination?

English is the working language of Singapore from the time of the British, with the laws and all official records including births and deaths in English.

Next, Singapore is multi-racial, and English does not put any group, Chinese, Malays, Indians or others, at a disadvantage. All have to learn English, the language that much of the world speaks either as the first or second language.

For Chinese Singaporeans, they have to work hard to maintain their mother tongue for their sense of identity, especially when more and more homes are speaking in English. In 1980, one in 10 Primary One students came from predominantly English-speaking homes. This proportion increased to nearly six in 10 in 2010.

My maternal grandmother first sent me to a Chinese school near my house, in a little wood and attap hut, the home of a middle-aged Chinese-language teacher. I did not understand what the teacher was saying. He spoke in a strong dialect accent, not Mandarin. I pleaded with my mother to leave the school and went on to Choon Guan School in Joo Chiat Terrace. I still could not understand the teachers, and my fellow students spoke little or no English. So I persuaded my mother to allow me to go to an English school. I enrolled at Telok Kurau English School, from Primary 1 to Primary 6. I did not then know that to learn languages, the best time is when you are a child. Then you can be exposed to one, two or more languages. Unfortunately I learned my Chinese only when I was an adult.

In 1955, I contested the General Elections as a candidate for the Tanjong Pagar constituency. My opponent challenged me to a debate in Mandarin. I naturally refused to debate with him in a language I was completely unable to speak. His intention was to show my ignorance of the language to the majority of the people who were dialect and Mandarin-speaking. There were then few English speakers. I started learning Mandarin but discovered that it was spoken by only a small proportion of those who have gone to Chinese schools, but who often switched back to dialect when they leave their Chinese schools. The most understood language for the majority of Chinese back then was Hokkien. So I started to learn Hokkien. For more than 20 years I spoke Hokkien.

Over time, parents saw how graduates from the English stream schools got the better jobs. So an increasing number of them sent their children to English schools over time. Nanyang University had been founded in 1956 for graduates from Chinese schools. Naturally their numbers declined over time. They admitted students with poor grades but still graduated them with degrees that had little market value.

It made no sense to have "Nantah" or Nanyang University, teach Chinese at tertiary level when the Chinese primary and secondary schools had switched to English. The quality of students applying for admission was dropping precipitously,

but they were allowed to graduate. I consulted our Nantah graduate MPs, including Chng Jit Koon, Ho Kah Leong and several others on what should I do to avoid wastage of young lives. They urged me to change Nantah into an English-speaking university. That was not possible because the teachers, who despite having PhDs from American universities, had lost their fluency in English as they had been teaching in Chinese.

I did what was practical, which was for Nantah to conduct joint courses at the University of Singapore's Bukit Timah Campus. This brought an English-speaking environment to Nantah, and laid the foundations for the eventual merger be-

tween the two into the National University of Singapore. It was a crash course for both teachers and students of Nantah. Fortunately, given an extra few years, 70 per cent of the Nantah students graduated. When asked on graduation whether they wanted a Nantah degree or a University of Singapore degree, the vast majority opted for a University of Singapore degree. That was how the market rated a Nanyang degree.

In December 1983, we announced that in 1987, all schools would use English as the main language of instruction. It is unavoidable in multi-racial Singapore that English has to be our common and therefore our master language. Our laws inher-

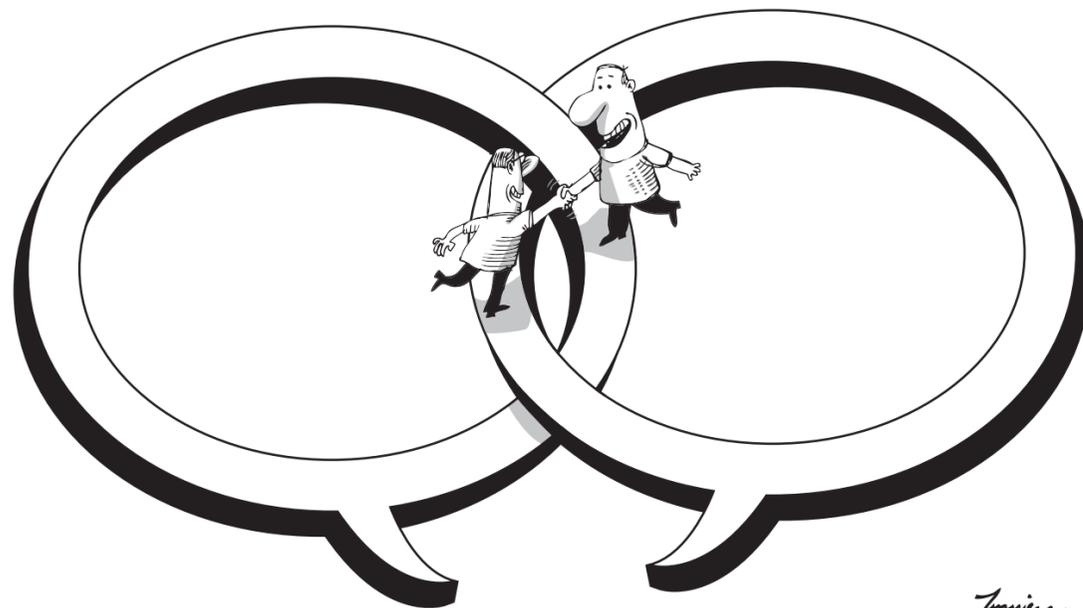
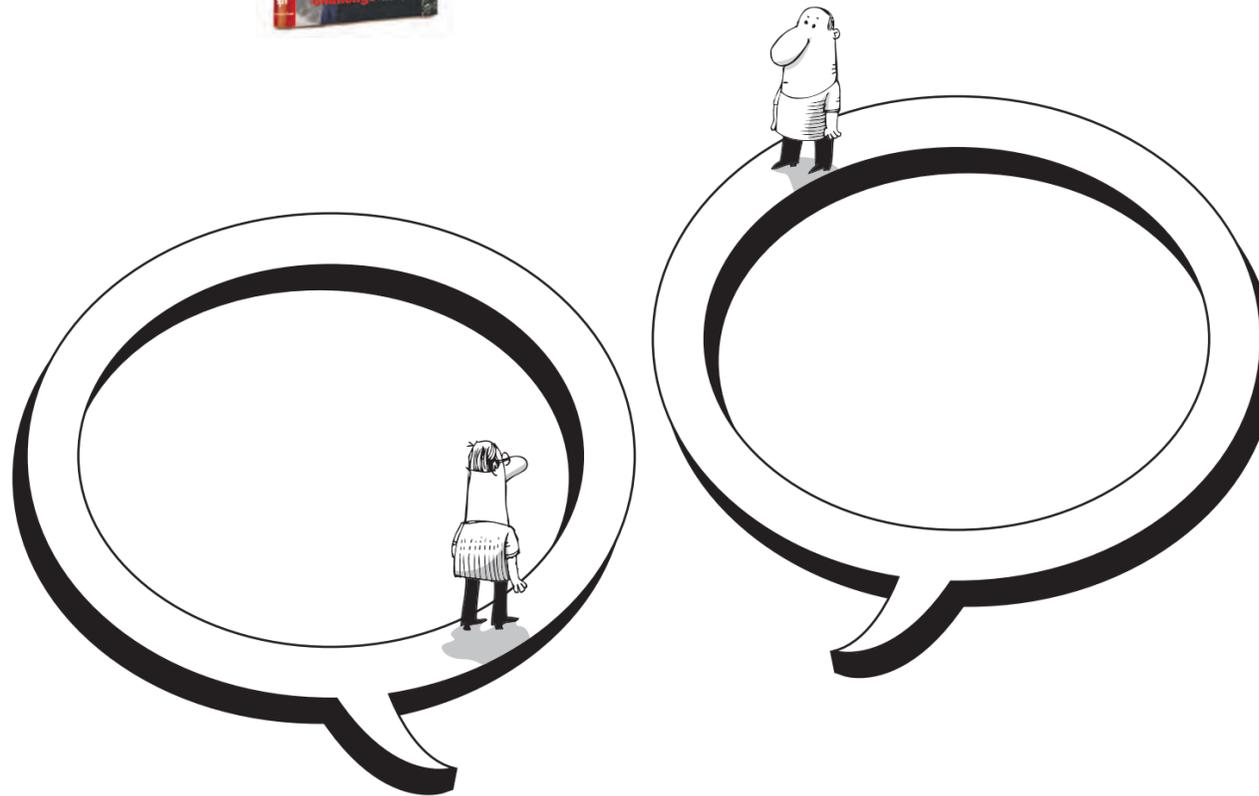
ited from the British were all in English. All records are in English, land titles, registers of births and deaths and every single documentation one can think of. English is the world's dominant language, either the first or second language of all countries. And it is easier to learn than Chinese. Chinese is a most difficult language because it consists of pictographs and ideographs, and is tonal, without any spelling.

Despite the unpopularity at the time of closing Nantah and switching all into the English medium of instruction, Singaporean parents and students decided that they were better off with a bilingual education system.

Baby steps to bilingualism



Mr Lee Kuan Yew launched his book *My Lifelong Challenge - Singapore's Bilingual Journey* on Monday. This is the speech he gave at the launch



English links us up to the world. Chinese links us up with the Chinese-speaking world of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Chinese diaspora in America, Europe and the world.

On the other hand, I had a high regard for the discipline and seriousness of purpose in life Chinese school students displayed compared to English school students. One of my most unforgettable memories was when the Chinese High School was having a sit-in led by my left wing pro-communist activists in October 1956 to protest the arrests of student leaders and closure of Chinese High School and Chung Cheng High School. The Chinese school students camped inside the school.

After watching this drama of the sit-in at Chinese High School, I passed by the University of Singapore's student hostel on Dunearn Road, just around the corner from Chinese High. The contrast was stark. I could see the students - the English-educated students - enjoying themselves. They were laughing and blowing whistles, regarding the clash between the Chinese students and the police a big joke. I thought to myself that if Singapore students all turned out like those in the university hostel, Singapore would fail. I vowed then to change this state of affairs.

This was why I decided to save the good Chinese language schools as Chinese schools switched into English as the main medium of instruction. The Chinese schools taught students to be bilingual, disciplined, and have self-confidence. The best Chinese schools thus became Special Assistance Programme schools.

Over time, the English language schools like Raffles Institution, Victoria School and others have also become effective in teaching Chinese to their students. We have unified the system but in the process, also preserved some of the values and virtues of the old Chinese school system.

Several studies have shown that the best time for a child to learn another language is in the first few years of life, where it is the most absorptive period of the mind for learning languages. This begins to tail off progressively until the age of 10 or 12. So by secondary school, it is difficult to start learning a second language. Therefore, my advice to parents is that if you want your children to be bilingual, you should speak to them in two languages right from birth, whether it be English, Chinese or Malay or Tamil or any other Mother Tongue.

If possible, one parent should speak to the child in English, the other in the Mother Tongue. Then they get used to hearing both English and the Mother Tongue at home. This will complement teaching in schools and they will become effective bilingual speakers when they grow up.

However difficult it is to learn the Mother Tongue, especially Chinese and English, if children start early enough from Kindergarten 1 or even Nursery, by Primary 6, they will be bilingual, with a strong foundation in the Mother Tongue for life. After Primary 6, at age 12, they can concentrate on their master language which is English in Singapore. But their strong foundation in Chinese, Malay or Tamil can be built upon in later years with increases in vocabulary and fluency when the need arises, especially when they do business with China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Tamil Nadu or India.

However, I am concerned that with more and more parents speaking English with their children at home, fluency in the Mother Tongue, especially Chinese, will decrease. To promote bilingualism in our young, I am proposing to raise money for a bilingualism fund which I hope will reach over \$100 million over time. This fund will spearhead initiatives to teach children the Mother Tongue and English, especially in their pre-school years, to help them build firm foundations in being proficient listeners and speakers of the two languages.

I will take \$2 million from the sale of my new book which is being launched today and add \$10 million to that, to start the fund with \$12 million.

The book, published by Straits Times Press, a subsidiary of Singapore Press Holdings, is available at major bookshops at \$39.90.

James