

The Chinese in Singapore started out speaking a variety of dialects, not Mandarin. Chinese immigrants began arriving in Singapore from China in large numbers in the early 19th century... Most were poor and uneducated peasants from the southern Chinese provinces in China, such as Guangdong and Fujian, who came to Singapore to look for work as coolies or tradesmen.

A large number spoke Hokkien, the dialect of Fujian province. Four other major dialect groups here then were the Teochews, the Cantonese and the Hakkas, all from Guangdong province, and the Hainanese from Hainan Island, off the southeastern coast of China...

When I led the People's Action Party (PAP) to power and formed the government in 1959, the Hokkien group was the largest, forming just over 40 per cent of the total ethnic Chinese population. The Teochew group was next with nearly 23 per cent, the Cantonese third with 18 per cent, and the Hainanese and Hakka groups followed with about 7 per cent each. Mandarin was spoken only by a few educated people, such as schoolteachers, journalists, writers and artists, who had come to Singapore to teach or work.

The different dialect groups were divided not only by language but also by geography. They congregated, worked and lived in different parts of town. The Hokkiens, for example, lived and operated their businesses trading spices and other goods in the Telok Ayer area. The Teochews made Hong Kong Street, the present Clarke Quay area, their base, while the Cantonese occupied Kreta Ayer or Chinatown, and the Hainanese, the North Bridge Road area.

Well into the 20th century, Chinese dialects were used widely in Singapore, in homes and marketplaces, offices and even the army camps. The dominant dialect was Hokkien. This was also the language of the Chinese business leaders, most of them from the Hokkien clan. Hokkien was in fact the lingua franca at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, now known as the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Its meetings were conducted in Hokkien.

In business houses and offices set up by Chinese businessmen... dialects, mainly Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese, were the most common medium of communication. Likewise for the more than 300 Chinese clan associations. Most of their members were speaking in their respective Chinese dialects till the late 1970s.

When the PAP took over the government in 1959, we inherited an education system that was a mish-mash of schools run not by a central authority but by various interest groups, and teaching in four language streams. The colonial government ran a number of schools that taught in English, Malay and Tamil. Religious bodies ran a smattering of others that taught mostly in English. Chinese clans meanwhile had set up a number of Chinese-language schools that were highly popular and successful. Some of these schools even taught in Hokkien.

One of the problems that this polyglot situation presented to the PAP government was a population that lived in language enclaves. Those who studied in English-stream schools did not mix with those in the so-called vernacular streams, and vice versa. We sought to... make the study of a second language compulsory in all schools, whether they taught in Chinese, English, Malay or Tamil, to promote bilingualism. The Chinese-, Malay- and Tamil-stream schools were to teach English as a second language, while the English-stream schools could offer students the choice of Chinese, Malay or Tamil as a second language.

Our ideal was that the Chinese would be able to speak English and Mandarin, Malays would be able to

Out with dialects, in with Mandarin

In chapter four of his new book, *My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore's Bilingual Journey*, former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew looks at the Speak Mandarin Campaign.

He launched it in 1979 to nudge Chinese families to speak Mandarin at home instead of dialects. In the following extract, he explains why.



Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew at the launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979. Dialects were dividing the Chinese community as those who spoke the same dialect tended to band together, he says in the book.

speak Malay and English, and Indians would be able to speak Tamil and English. Alas, the situation did not develop as we had hoped.

It was only 15 years later, in the mid-1970s, that we realised we had failed to grasp the heart of the problem, which was that dialects were hindering students' ability to learn. This was an expensive lesson for a young nation with scarce resources.

For much of the 1960s, a large proportion of the ethnic Chinese student population was in Chinese-language schools. They spoke Mandarin during class, but most switched to dialects once out of class. They spoke little English save during English lessons. Ethnic Chinese students in English-language schools were no better: most switched to dialects once out of school and spoke little or no Mandarin. It was the same with Malay and Tamil students. All lived in their own language enclaves.

As a result, ethnic Chinese students who dropped out of school before completing primary or secondary education ended up speaking only Chinese dialects. Most spoke Hokkien. So prevalent was Hokkien that taxi companies such as Comfort conducted their training for taxi drivers in Hokkien right up to the late 1970s. Hokkien was common even among those who completed their education.

When an English-educated person met someone from the Chinese stream, chances were that they would converse in Hokkien, simply because they had inadequate command of their respective second languages – Chinese for the English-educated and English in the case of the Chinese-educated.

A rude discovery

I was Education Minister for four months from June to October 1975, as an interim measure before appointing a full-time minister. Close scrutiny of the education sys-



tem led to a rude discovery – the years of promoting bilingualism in schools were not having their desired effect.

The majority of students, far from becoming bilingual, were failing in their languages. Only 19 per cent of primary one students made it to secondary four with passes in both first and second languages. The majority of students graduated with the ability to speak and write only in their first language. Even graduating from an English-stream school did not imply a good command of the English language.

I decided to ask Dr Goh Keng Swee, who was then the Defence Minister and the ablest of my ministers, to look into the problem. He was already troubled by the large number of dropouts, whether from Chinese-medium or English-medium schools at that time since, as Defence Minister, he was familiar with the quality of our National Servicemen.

Among the English-educated dropouts, many reverted to illiteracy after graduation because their families spoke no English. Dr Goh



A screenshot from a 1988 Speak Mandarin campaign television advertisement. Mr Lee says in the book that dialects were interfering with bilingual education.

said with his usual pungency: "If we make calculations of how much money we spend to produce this enormous number of illiterates, the sum must come to well over \$1,000 million. Most countries produce illiterates without spending any money."

That year, the Ministry of Defence did a study of its National Service recruits from English-medium schools who had not passed their O-levels. Only 11 per cent were found to have a working knowledge of English. This suggested that regression had taken place since they left school.

To train those recruits who could understand neither English nor Mandarin, the Ministry of Defence formed Hokkien-speaking platoons. These servicemen were known as Hokkien *peng*, or Hokkien soldiers. But there was an unintended consequence: Hokkien crept up the seniority ladder as officers used it to communicate with their men during training. When Hokkien found its way into the officers' mess as officers used it among themselves, I decided enough was

enough. We abolished the Hokkien platoons, just three years after they were formed. From October 1978, we insisted that instruction would henceforth be only in English, Mandarin and Malay.

The Goh Keng Swee Report which came out in 1979 was a watershed. Popularly it became known as the report which introduced ability streaming in the education system, a move which provoked a massive public outcry as no parent wanted his child placed in a stream seen as being for the less capable.

Less well-known was that the Goh Keng Swee Report was also a milestone in our bilingual policy. It pinpointed the "unnatural" conflict between the languages taught in school and those that students spoke at home as a key factor behind the poor showing in language examinations.

Not mincing words, it said: "It has not occurred to many Singaporeans how unnatural the present school system is. Most schoolchildren are taught in two languages – English and Mandarin. Eighty-five

per cent of them do not speak either of these languages at home... If, as a result of a world calamity, children in England were taught Russian and Mandarin, while they continue to speak English at home, the British education system would run into some of the problems which have been plaguing the schools in Singapore..."

Replacing dialects with Mandarin

I concurred with Dr Goh that the prevalence of dialects was hindering students in their study of English and Mandarin. If our students were learning English and Mandarin in school, and also learning dialects at home, they were in reality learning three different tongues. Given that their exposure to dialects at home was longer than their exposure to English or Mandarin, it was not surprising that their command of dialects was stronger than their command of the latter two.

Parents, on their part, were not averse to having their children learn Mandarin, but the motivation was weak. This was the 1970s after all, when China was not yet open to the world, far less the economic powerhouse that it is today. Singaporeans respond best to economic incentives.

I remember a conversation with some parents who could speak Mandarin but chose to speak to their young children in dialect. I asked why. They said: "Ah well, our children are not of school age yet. They will learn Mandarin in school."

I felt they were on the wrong track. If their children were speaking dialect as toddlers, chances were that they would continue doing so as adolescents. If they could get by at home and outside school without Mandarin, they would soon feel that Mandarin was not relevant to their lives.

From the time we started our bilingual policy in 1959 until 1979, we found that only an estimated 3 to 5 per cent of students could be effectively bilingual, able to speak, read and write two languages. The majority, 50 to 60 per cent of them, would be effective in one language, while having a middling knowledge of a second language. The remaining 30 per cent would be monolingual.

In 1978, the failure rate among Chinese-medium school students taking the Primary School Leaving Examination was 28 per cent, and 32 per cent for English-medium school students. This meant that of the students who entered primary one, about 30 per cent did not make it to secondary school. It was an unacceptable attrition rate. I felt that with better teaching methods and the right policies, we could reduce the rate to 20 per cent.

For that 20 per cent, I decided that since they could master only one language, rather than let a watered-down Hokkien patois become their everyday language, why not promote Mandarin among them instead? Indeed, why not let Mandarin become the common language of all Chinese Singaporeans, including this group?

Singapore's mishmash of dialects had no written equivalent; those who could speak only dialect were as good as illiterate. If I could get them to know Mandarin, they would be able to communicate with some 80 per cent of Singaporeans. Dialects were not only interfering with bilingual education, they were also dividing the Chinese community as those who spoke the same dialect tended to band together. The divisions could be seen every time elections for the leadership positions within the Chinese Chamber of Commerce came round. If I could get Mandarin to replace dialects, there would be less division within the Chinese community.

Not that I did not know I would be bucking conventional wisdom if I pushed for Mandarin to replace dialects. Many people – then and now – think they can learn English and Mandarin, and still keep their Chinese dialects. Yes, a small handful can. But for the vast majority, it is just not possible.