

# What lies ahead in bilingual journey

**The weakening proficiency in mother tongues will continue to provoke debate**



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Former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's new book is chiefly about the road taken so far by Singapore's bilingual policy, but it will leave some niggling questions in readers' minds about the future.

While he acknowledges that the policy will evolve in line with trends like China's rise and an increasingly English-speaking population, he does not fully address the thorny issue of weakening proficiency in all the mother tongues. This will continue to provoke debate in years to come.

The policy is essentially about giving Singaporeans command of two languages through the school system: English as the common language of all races, and the mother tongue as a second language.

Launched on Nov 28, the book, *My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore's Bilingual Journey*, helps readers to understand how he steered the landmark, and at times controversial, policy over 30 years. I was part of the editorial team for the book, published in English and Chinese by The Straits Times Press and Chinese newspaper Lianhe Zaobao.

It is because bilingualism was such a hot potato among Chinese Singaporeans – divided by linguistic affiliation into Chinese-educated and English-educated camps – that Mr Lee spends most of the book talking about issues related to the Chinese language.

But make no mistake, bilingualism as he sees it matters to all races. The policy was first and foremost about national integration – to overcome the segregation of ethnic communities by language, and give them a common tongue with international economic value, English.

I think that, as a historical document, the book is significant for two reasons. First, it shows the intensity with which Mr Lee obsessed over language issues, to a degree unseen in any other People's Action Party (PAP) leader – past or present.

Fluent in English and Malay from young, he had to pick up Mandarin and Hokkien from scratch as a politician in his 30s trying to win over Chinese-speaking voters. He would continue to learn Mandarin for the rest of his life.

His interest in language policy began before he became prime minister in 1959, and continued well after he stepped down from the post in 1990 and relinquished active involvement in policymaking.

Way back in 1956, he contributed to a consensus report from all political parties recommending that schools teach two languages. As recently as 2004, he took part in a Chinese language review, which resulted in, among other things, a decision to teach the subject in a fun way and tailored to varying linguistic abilities.

Second, the book gives his account of the eventual shutdown of vernacular schools. If you consider how important such schools were to the Chinese-speaking community, and

the fact that many Chinese-medium schools still survive in Malaysia, then their decline here must count as one of the most dramatic developments in education in the last 50 years.

One conspiracy theory held by some in the Chinese community is that the PAP leadership killed the Chinese schools. Mr Lee makes it clear the Government had always supported schools in all four language streams and that, ultimately, market forces destroyed vernacular schools.

Pragmatic parents chose English-medium schools so that their children would have an easier time finding jobs. Dwindling enrolment in vernacular schools led to all adopting English as the main language of instruction by 1987.

Only from the mid-1970s, when vernacular schools were closing down one by one, did he decide that English would be the main medium of teaching, with the mother tongue taught at a lower level but no less cherished for the values it imparted.

He felt it was impossible to teach two languages effectively at the same level. Observing the high failure rates in both English and Chinese language at the time and the experiences of his own children, he concluded that the brain tended towards one master language.

That assumption is still disputed today by some from Chinese school backgrounds who have achieved equal proficiency in English. But while they question the lowering of the standard of Chinese in schools, they recognise the importance of English as a global language and for communication between the races.

Which brings us to the question, what next for language policy?

No one would dispute that being bilingual is an asset. But the pervasiveness of English means that command of all the mother tongues – Mandarin, Malay and Tamil – is slipping, to the point that it may one day be meaningless to presuppose that Singaporeans are truly bilingual, much less able to access values and culture through their second languages.

One solution to this conflicted state of affairs is to reverse the emphasis on English at the lower levels of the education system to give young children a stronger foundation in their mother tongue languages. They can catch up on their English proficiency later on.

This is already happening to some extent. The bilingualism fund that Mr Lee has started, which aims to raise \$100 million to help children become bilingual early, will help in producing engaging books and audio-visual materials in Chinese, Malay and Tamil, now in short supply.

Already, a few primary schools are teaching subjects like art, music and physical education in Chinese.

The education system can go one better, by having schools which offer such non-examinable subjects in two different mother tongue languages, say Malay and Chinese, as well as English. This would give a primary school a good inter-racial mix of students who would be together for common subjects such as English, mathematics and science.

This is a modified version of the 1960s experiment which put teachers and students of two or three different language streams in integrated schools. Mr Lee recalls in his book that the plan failed because each stream kept to itself and did not mix.

But my view is that such a scheme may work now that all can communicate in a common language, English. In that sense, it pays to look back on this "never-ending journey" – as Mr Lee terms it – that is bilingualism.

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