

■ Lee Kuan Yew did his undergraduate law studies in Cambridge and London from 1946 to 1950. In Chapter One of the book, he recounts how the experience led him to send his three children to Chinese-medium schools.

“T hough I did not spend much time in London, I frequented a place in the city’s Gordon Square called the China Institute... (It) was built by the British and financed from the indemnity China had to pay for the damage to British lives and property in the Boxer Rebellion of 1900...

“I often went there and would see Chinese students from all corners of the world. From their actions you could tell where they were from – China, Hong Kong, Malaysia or Mauritius, for example. The most pitiful were the Chinese students from the West Indies. They spoke in singsong West Indian ‘English’ and absolutely no Chinese.

“I felt very sad for them. I vowed that I would not be like them. That was when I began to feel a sense of loss about not knowing Chinese, and decided not to repeat this state of affairs with my own children.

“Some people have called me a ‘born-again Chinese’. If this is the case, my rebirth must have taken place in the late 1940s, during my time in England. People there saw me as a Chinese, and so I became a Chinese. They did not see me as a Singaporean or a Malayan.

“I once took a holiday in Switzerland. Arriving at a hotel in Lucerne, the desk clerk asked me: ‘Chinese?’ I said: ‘No, Malayan.’ His response was, ‘What’s that?’ I said, ‘Well, I come from Singapore, it’s part of Malaya.’ He said: ‘Never mind, I’ll put you down as Chinese.’ I decided I must be Chinese from such experiences...

“...All (my) three children – Hsien Loong, Wei Ling and Hsien Yang – had their first 12 years of education in Chinese-medium schools. When they grew up, I often asked them, ‘Do you regret my sending you to Chinese schools?’ They said, ‘Of course not.’

Lee Kuan Yew’s bilingualism awakening

Former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew has written a book on Singapore’s bilingual policy and his experiences with learning languages. Entitled *My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore’s*

Bilingualism Journey, it will be launched tomorrow at the Singapore Conference Hall, and will be available at major bookshops from 5pm. Below are two extracts from the book:

“In 1955, I visited Nanyang Kindergarten. Hsien Loong, then three and a half years old, thought I was there to pick him up. He grabbed his bag to get ready to go home with me. Alas, I was not there to pick him up but to observe the functioning of the kindergarten.

“The Chinese press later carried a photograph of him in the kindergarten, making it widely known that he was being educated in Chinese. This gave me credibility when I spoke on Chinese language issues.

“Hsien Loong’s younger siblings, Wei Ling and Hsien Yang, followed in his footsteps, going to Nanyang Kindergarten and later to Nanyang Primary School. After primary school, (the boys) went to the Catholic High School, while Wei Ling continued in Nanyang Girls’ High School...

“I used to speak to them in Mandarin until they got to secondary school, when what I had to say to them became more complex and I had to switch to English.

“Their mother spoke to them in English. They also had British voluntary service officers read to them novels and poems once a week. So their English was fluent with no dialect or Mandarin accent. From the age of six, they also received tuition in Malay at home.

“In 1962, while visiting Nanyang Primary, Choo said to reporters, ‘In order to let our children learn good Malay, the National Language, I let my oldest son join the

Scouts, so he has the opportunity to interact with Malay children.

“ ‘My husband and I think this way: If you only know one language, you can only have a limited social circle and have no chance to expand it. You cannot understand the lives of fellow citizens of other races. With merger with Malaysia becoming a reality, education in the three languages is very important. We put our children into Chinese schools to first learn their mother tongue, then we let them learn the National Language, and finally, English.’ ”

■ In Chapter Six of the book, Mr Lee discusses the adjustments to Mother Tongue teaching over the last three decades, particularly for the Chinese language. He also gives his view of the future of the bilingual policy.

“(United Overseas Bank chairman) Wee Cho Yaw once lamented to me that when he addressed his grandchildren in Mandarin, they replied in English. Yet their fathers, Cho Yaw’s sons, were Chinese-educated.

“I knew what he meant and how he felt. My grandchildren attended the same Chinese kindergarten and primary school as my children – Nanyang Kindergarten and Nanyang Primary School. But they speak English at home and with their schoolmates and friends.

When I press them to speak in Mandarin, they give me short answers in Mandarin and then switch to English....

“I have been asked if I crafted our bilingual policy in order to win votes. That supposition is totally wrong. Many aspects of our bilingual policy have been vote-losers, surely.

“On one hand, some families have emigrated because their children could not cope with the demands of learning Chinese. On the other, large swathes of the Chinese ground have been upset by what they saw as a lowering of Chinese language standards. The latter group greatly outnumber the former.

“What I regret is not being able to introduce the modular approach to teaching Chinese (introduced in 2004) earlier. It would have set appropriate standards and methods of teaching for pupils from different language abilities and backgrounds, without setting back the rest of their academic development.

“Parts of the Chinese-speaking ground will continue to hold the attitude that those who are ethnic Chinese can and should learn the language the traditional way, but I do not agree. Language learning is not a function of ethnicity but of the person’s aptitude and the exposure from his environment...

“The challenge is how to teach Chinese effectively as a second language to an increasingly English-speaking population. I believe the best way is to get parents to speak in Mandarin to their children at home, never mind if their vocabulary is limited. Once the sounds and sentence structure of Chinese are familiar to a child from young, he will have an easier time learning the language in school.

“The bottom line is that our education system must evolve and adjust as the situation changes. No policy is cast in stone.

“If the Chinese language grows in economic value and parents and students want to learn more Chinese, our system must accommodate them. The choice, however, must be exercised by parents and students, and not by the government.”

