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Title	Mind your language: immigration, English and the social fabric
Author(s)	Vasu, Norman; Phua, Joanna
Citation	Vasu, N., & Phua, J. (2008). Mind your language: immigration, English and the social fabric. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 083). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2008
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/40177
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Mind your Language: Immigration, English and the Social Fabric

Norman Vasu and Joanna Phua

6 August 2008

If Singapore is set to become a rainbow spread of peoples in the future owing to continued significant immigration to the country to supplement falling birth rates, the fostering of a common “Singaporean Spirit” well into the 21st Century may require the introduction of English language tests for immigrants.

Celebrating the Singapore Spirit – that’s the theme for this year’s National Day celebrations. It is a celebration of a spirit that has, following the official National Day Parade website, “stitched our social fabric in harmony, united us in adversity and propelled us towards excellence since independence”. Moreover, this spirit will permit all Singaporeans to “forge ahead” as a people and nation so as to arrive at a “better home for all” in a “global city of possibilities”. With celebrations soon to get underway, it may perhaps be an opportune time to reflect upon what permits the fostering of a Singapore Spirit.

What often comes to mind, and rightfully so, would be the troika of good governance, prudent economic policy and multicultural harmony. However, beyond this troika, what is often forgotten is the importance of language – particularly the English medium and its contribution to nation-building. After all, as expressed by then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in 1969, the English language would be “useful for Singapore to use, and continue using” as “it provides continuity in the records, administration, law and the medium in which all the various racial groups compete at par with each other”.

Thus, English has enabled generations of Singaporeans to access the global economy, and, more importantly, has acted as the thread to hold the social fabric together by investing individuals with a common language regardless of race or religion. More succinctly, English has been the agent that has given form to the Singaporean *geist* or soul.

English and Immigration

If the important contribution of the English language to the creation of modern day Singapore is acknowledged, it may be prudent to reconsider its role as Singapore plans for the future – especially

with regards to immigration. Singapore's future as a cosmopolitan global city of possibilities hinges – other factors notwithstanding – on its population being able to communicate with each other in a common language.

Currently, the fertility rate of the Republic stands at 1.29 (based on 2007 figures) and it is far lower than the necessary replacement level of 2.1 or 60,000 new babies per year. Inadvertently, immigrants will have to make up for this shortfall and Singapore has done well in attracting them. In 2007, Singapore attracted 17,000 new citizens and 63,000 Permanent Residents. Noting these demographic shifts, Minister Mentor Lee envisioned Singapore's future as a “cosmopolitan society”, moving from an Asian society to a “real rainbow spread”.

Following from this, the future challenge comes in managing the diversity of the rainbow. Large scale immigration may once again return Singapore to a 1965 scenario where the need to build a nation out of migrants and foster a sense of belonging was imperative. Similar to the situation in 1965, perhaps the fundamental rule to ensure the continued vitality of a common Singapore spirit is the enabling of communication between these different groups of people. Hence, English may once again have to emerge as this common tool for all citizens to be able to communicate and understand each other.

Otherwise, to borrow an analogy from then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Singaporeans may become fish in an aquarium living in separate partitioned compartments, seeing but never communicating with each other. In the long run, this would certainly be detrimental to the health of societal cohesion. A real rainbow spread of peoples will require a common unifying tool to facilitate communication and discussion if Singaporeans are to work together when facing future challenges. This will be challenging without the tool of a common language.

Why English?

Some may argue for an alternative language rather than English to act as this tool to facilitate interaction and communication. For example, it may be suggested that Mandarin may be a sensible choice to fulfill this role owing to the fact that the predominant ethnic group in Singapore is Chinese. Alternatively, a strong argument could also be made for Malay – it is the national language and the language of Singapore's immediate neighbours. However, these choices lose the neutrality of English and there will certainly be ethnic groups who will feel spited.

In addition, the various ethnic groups in Singapore should not be fearful of an emphasis on English. Singapore's mother-tongue policy will remain, facilitating bilingualism and the preservation of ethnic cultures and histories. After all, policy-makers have gone a long way to ensure that Singapore is not purely an English-educated community, but a bilingual or trilingual nation with English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil as its official languages. Possessing and enforcing the necessary ability to speak English replaces nothing, but instead, facilitates the harmony enjoyed thus far.

What can be done?

For the born-and-bred citizens, Singapore's education system should continue its fine job at equipping students with an excellent grasp of the language. As for new immigrants, there may now be a need to introduce English language tests to examine the language competency of new citizenship applicants. Furthermore, English language lessons may even be introduced for new immigrants if they are unable to pass such a test.

The argument that citizenship requires English competency is not novel; other immigrant-receiving states such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada have seen value in implementing such a policy. For example, Australia's nationality law requires people with low levels of English literacy to complete 400 hours of English language tuition under the Adult Migrant English Programme (AMEP). Others enforce a mandatory citizenship test which requires applicants to demonstrate their English language

competency before citizenship may be granted.

Fostering Spirit and Preventing Ghettos of the Mind

In a way, what we are urging is akin to how Singapore's racial quotas, as applied in its housing policy, act as a bulwark against the creation of ghettos and ethnic enclaves. The continued teaching of English in schools coupled with the introduction of English as a necessary requirement for successful citizenship application will correspondingly act as a bulwark against the creation of enclaves and ghettos of the mind. The removal of these barriers to harmonious living will go a long way in preserving the hard-fought cohesiveness of Singapore's society.

Norman Vasu is an Assistant Professor and Joanna Phua is an Associate Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. As part of the Social Resilience Programme of the School's Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), they both conduct research on issues pertaining to the social fabric.