

# LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY

## Singapore

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### 1 Introduction

The Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore, with land area of 719.1 sq km<sup>1</sup> and a total resident population of 3.9 million has undergone tremendous economic growth since its formal constitution in 1965. Its government has successfully used language policy and planning as tools to manage its highly diverse population which has traditionally comprised descendants of immigrants from China, India, and the Malays. The ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity has been further increased by immigration but the proportion of its three main ethnic groups has been largely maintained over the years.

Table 19.1 highlights the intercensal demographic changes from 1957 to 2010.

Currently, people of *Chinese* origin form 74.1% of the total population; of *Malay* or Indonesian origin, 13.4%; those of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan origin, categorised as '*Indians*' form 9.2%; and all the rest, including Eurasians, Europeans, Arabs, etc., form the '*Others*' at 3.3% (Department of Statistics 2011). Of the total population, nearly one in three is a foreigner.

In an effort to manage this diversity and in its commitment to multiracialism, the government has relied on the formative 'racial' categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO). Members of these 'races' are deemed to share a common 'ethnicity' and identify – more or less – with a common language. The CMIO categories therefore form the foundation of all social policies such as housing, immigration, parliamentary representation, and, of particular relevance to the present chapter, education.

The mother tongue policy of "linguistic pluralism" encourages bilingual proficiency in English and an officially assigned ethnic mother tongue for every school-going child: Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays, and Tamil for the Indians. The three official mother tongues are considered equal so no community can claim an advantage over the other. The category of 'Others', comprising ethnicities that cannot be accommodated in the preceding three groups, has no officially assigned mother tongue. Furthermore, while the "mother tongue" was initially determined according to the father's ethnicity, the government has had to acknowledge the challenge of determining ethnicity resulting from mixed marriages. Therefore, since 2011, citizens can opt for hyphenated identities such as 'Chinese-Malay' by which the child's assigned language is Mandarin, or 'Malay-Chinese' that results in the assignation of Malay as the ethnic

Table 19.1 Ethnic composition of Singapore residents (%)

	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Malay</i>	<i>Indian</i>	<i>Others</i>
1957	75.4	13.6	8.6	2.4
1970	76.2	15.0	7.0	1.8
1980	78.3	14.4	6.3	1.0
1990	77.7	14.1	7.1	1.1
2000	76.8	13.9	7.9	1.4
2010	74.1	13.4	9.2	3.3

Sources: Chua 1964; Arumainathan 1973; Lau 1993; Department of Statistics 2001, 2011.

mother tongue. However, a hyphenated identity does not assign equal weight to the two parts; the first member is assumed to be more dominant and becomes the basis for deciding on a child's mother tongue. In the examples just mentioned, a 'Malay-Chinese' is supposedly more Malay than Chinese, and would warrant having Malay as the assigned mother tongue. In this way, Singapore's hyphenated identities are not especially dramatic departures from its policy of English–mother tongue bilingualism.

The mother tongues and English are designated different functions: English, the ethnically neutral language, serves as the inter-ethnic lingua franca as well as the language of socio-economic mobility and global advancement. The ethnic mother tongues, necessary for intra-ethnic communication, are considered to be appropriate identity markers because they are assumed to be carriers of the ethnic culture that is deemed crucial as a buffer against the supposedly contaminating influence of the 'Western' culture associated with English. However, Malay has also been elevated as the national language in a nod to its current as well as historical position in the region before Singapore's independence from the Federation of Malaysia. While in the past it served as the most 'comprehensible' language (by 67.3% of all Singaporeans in 1978; Kuo 1980: 48), its formal status today is largely ceremonial. English, on the other hand, is viewed as the "official working language."

This policy of English–mother tongue bilingualism has helped maintain Singapore's cultural and linguistic pluralism without hindering the construction of an overarching Singaporean identity. It has also had to address changing social factors but adherence to the core ideas (homogeneous community identity and associated language) has led to problematic measures adopted by the government to reinforce and encourage the language policy.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Pre-independence milestones (1965)

The watershed in Singapore's language policy parallel those of its education system and both play integral roles in government initiatives for economic and national development.

The first of these is traceable to the recommendations of the *All party committee on Chinese education*, 1956. Formed at a crucial juncture (just before Singapore was granted internal self-government by the British in 1959), the committee aimed to investigate the state of education and employment preparedness among the Chinese who were dissatisfied with the state of both. The increasing popularity of English medium schools as a result of the encouragement offered by the British and the lack of attention to vernacular education had led to heightened social instability among ethnic groups. As Silver (2002: 108) observes: "In the post-war/pre-unification

era, the British had required that all schools devote one-third of curricular time to English, exacerbating the Chinese communities' suspicion that their language and culture were being pushed out." Moreover, the greater availability of employment opportunities for those with knowledge of English had led to a greater demand for English medium education and a corresponding decline for the vernacular.

The Committee's report highlighted the gap between the English educated versus those educated in the vernacular and strongly recommended the equality of treatment for all schools regardless of medium. To address the challenges for provision of education in the multiple dialects and languages spoken among the various communities, the report also suggested that "Mandarin should be the only language to be taught for all Chinese pupils as the compulsory second language in English Schools, and Tamil for all Indian children (or Hindi, or whatever language the Indian community chooses), and Malay for all Malaysian races. In the case of the Eurasian, since English is the mother tongue, the choice of the vernacular should be left to the parents" (1956: 40–41).

Making this case, the Committee recommended:

That at least two of the following languages, English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil should be the media of instruction in their respective schools, and that language teaching should be of the best possible standards, so that the future educational system of Singapore will produce students equally conversant in two, if not three of those languages.

(1956: 11)

The report also underscored the importance of official and/or compulsory languages for without these, "the ideal of unifying the various races into one people cannot be realised, and the links of common understanding, outlook and identity of interest, cannot be speedily forged" (1956: 9). English was recommended as the official language since it was already "a common language amongst the various races" (1956: 9). Given the commercial, industrial, and political value of English, the report encouraged the use of English to foster community integration, enhance employment opportunities, and access commercial possibilities in a globalising world. In comparison, Malay was suggested as an *additional compulsory language* given its regional importance, status in the Federation of Malaysia, and its role for communicating with neighbouring nations.

The report formed the foundation of the race–language–culture nexus that continues to inform the current national system of education. The adoption of its recommendations formed part of the policy platform of the People's Action Party (PAP) that earned a clear mandate in the first general elections in 1959.

Subsequently, plans for the merger of Singapore and Malaya were announced. Articulating its programme and policy (in areas such as education, employment, housing, etc.), in the document *The tasks ahead: P.A.P.'s five-year plan 1959—1964*, the PAP announced that the "recommendations of the 1955 all party report on Chinese education will be vigorously implemented" (1959: 10). It reiterated its commitment to the proposed suggestions: "That based on the four main languages of Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and English, primary education should be started in the language of the home, followed by English: in the case of those pupils who started with English, a choice may be given for the second language but restricted to one of the other three languages. That in the secondary (middle school) or post-primary stage, a third language would be introduced and continued for not less than two years" (*The tasks ahead, part 2* 1959: 3–4).

The government's commitment to multiracialism translated into equality of status for the three main ethnic communities: the Chinese, the Malay, and the Indians and representation of their languages in official policy. English was adopted as the official language and served as a neutral language of inter-ethnic communication. Malay was suggested as the National (and official) Language for compatibility with the Malayan education policy in view of the impending merger with the Federation of Malaysia. The expectation was that it would serve as the lingua franca as well as help connect with those across the Straits of Johore. Measures to encourage its use included

teacher training, adult education classes, establishment of a National Language and Culture Institute for the development of Malay, and the creation of scholarships, among others (de Souza 1980: 209–210).

However, after a brief period of merger with the Federation of Malaya from 1963 to 1965, Singapore separated to become an independent nation. Nevertheless, the language policy remained – more or less – the same. The Republic of Singapore Independence Act of 1965 (Government Gazette Acts 1965), highlighted that:

- (1) Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English shall be the four official languages in Singapore.
- (2) The national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in the Roman script:

Provided that –

- (a) no person shall be prohibited or prevented from using or from teaching or learning any other language; and
- (b) nothing in this section shall prejudice the right of the Government to preserve and sustain the use and study of the language of any other community in Singapore.

## ***2.2 Post-independence (1965)***

The urgent need for nation building after Singapore's departure from Malaysia in 1965 established a policy that could accommodate the sensitivities and competing interests of an ethnically diverse population as well as facilitate the creation of an over-arching national identity. The government underscored its commitment for equal treatment to all languages via the policy of multilingualism rooted in the recommendations of the report by the *All party committee on Chinese education*, 1956. Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, and English continued as the four official languages and were given an equal footing in domains such as government administration, education, and the media. While Malay continued in its status of National Language in consideration of its regional position, the focus on the language became much diluted. This paralleled an inverse attention to English, the official language, given the economic imperative of national survival and need to participate on a global stage. "English is often seen as a world language, providing access to economic development and social mobility while other languages are ... treated mainly as repositories of ancient knowledge or cultural heritage" (Wee 2003: 211). The need to balance the drive towards English while also maintaining a grasp on the ethnic languages resulted in the ideological creation of language functions that the government has regularly underscored over the years. PuruShotam (2000: 67) suggests that not only did the link between mother tongue and race become "even more institutionalised" but also became inextricably associated with specific cultures.

At the same time, the political leadership recognised the need for a medium of communication to integrate a linguistically diverse population. An assessment of the advantages associated with English over other ethnic languages as well as its ethnic/racial neutrality led to its elevated status in the education policy of the new nation. Post-1965, bilingual education – understood as English + one ethnic language – became compulsory. Students in the vernacular medium schools were required to learn English as their L2 while those in the English medium, the language of their ethnicity (Mandarin/Malay/Tamil).

Despite the focus on dual language education, a gradual shift from the vernacular to English as medium of instruction continued. This was due to parental perceptions of the value of English as well as government initiatives that gave prominence to English language education. The growth in total school enrolment (from 61.4% in 1965 to 88% in 1978) in English stream schools is testimony of the demand for English language education. The enhanced focus on English was justified given its widespread use in public and official spheres but policy assumptions that English would remain confined within the public domain (of inter-ethnic communication, work, and

technological development) and the mother tongues within the private domain (of cultural heritage and intra-ethnic community festivals and activities) respectively were proven erroneous with the irrevocable large-scale shift to English.

### 3 Policy and the modern nation

The bilingual education policy of the new nation in 1965 was intended as an instrument to preserve as well as promote the cultural pluralism and multilingual make up of its population. However, even though the official ethnic languages were referred to as the ‘mother tongue’ languages in education policies, in reality they were not so for a majority of students. Kuo (1980: 43), pointing out that the term *mother tongue* “differs from the linguistic definition” of the first language acquired at home, highlights that “for probably over 80% of school children, none of the four official languages is the language they speak at home.” The requirement to study English as well as one’s official ethnic language resulted in the burden of having to learn two ‘second languages.’

The linguistic diversity prevalent at the time of the formation of independent Singapore is evident in the 1957 census, the first to include questions on mother tongue and language use in all four languages.

Table 19.2, illustrating the languages most frequently spoken in the home, indicates that in 1957, of the overall population, 11.5% identified Malay, less than 0.01% identified Mandarin, and 5.2 % considered Tamil as the mother tongue. Among all communities, 1.8% considered English as their mother tongue.

Census data of 1957 (Chua 1964) also details that within the specific communities, the Malays were the most homogeneous with nearly 85% considering Malay as their mother tongue while the rest identified Javanese, Boyanese, etc. However, among the Chinese, only 0.1%

*Table 19.2* Languages most frequently spoken at home in Singapore

	<i>English</i>	<i>Mandarin</i>	<i>Chinese dialects</i>	<i>Tamil</i>	<i>Malay</i>
1957	1.8%	0.01%	74.4%	5.2%	11.5%
1980	11.6%	10.2%	59.5%	3.1%	13.9%
1990	20.8%	23.7%	38.2%	3.0%	13.6%
2000	23.0%	35.0%	23.8%	3.2%	14.1%
2010	32.3%	35.6%	14.3%	3.3%	12.2%

*Sources:* Chua (1964); Lau (1993); Census (1980, 1990); Singapore Department of Statistics (2001); Wong (2011). The 1970 census does not enumerate languages commonly spoken.

considered Mandarin as the mother tongue while 98.6% identified with dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew, etc. Among the Indians and Ceylonese, 59.4% identified Tamil as the mother tongue while Malayalam, Punjabi, etc., formed the mother tongues of the other Indians.

The lack of correspondence between languages commonly used and official mother tongue languages, combined with disenchantment with the vernacular medium in comparison with education in English, hastened the decline of the vernacular streams. In fact, PuruShotam (2000: 67) attributes the ultimate redundancy of Chinese – and by extension, vernacular – medium schools to the bilingual policy, asking somewhat rhetorically “Why send your child to Chinese stream schools when the timetable of an English medium school ensured exposure to Chinese for up to forty per cent of the time a child spends in school?”

Overall education standards and proficiency in languages continued to drop in the 1970s, illustrating weaknesses in the implementation of the language policy. Bokhorst-Heng (1998: 201) points to government concerns about lack of language proficiency among students who were struggling with the learning of both the ‘mother tongue’ as well as English. Much of the blame was attributed to the extensive use of Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew in domains outside education. About 10% of those preparing to enter university had failed to demonstrate adequate competence in the first language at the “O” level and 23% in the second language.

In 1978, the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew personally commissioned an Education Study Team chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, Goh Keng Swee, to review the situation. The Report on the Ministry of Education 1978 (known as the *Goh Report*) identified ‘existing problems in the education system’:

- education wastage;
- low literacy; and
- ineffective bilingualism.

Tracing many of these problems to the bilingual policy, the report highlighted the ‘unnatural-ness’ of the status quo: “It has not occurred to many Singaporeans how unnatural the present school system is. Most school children are taught in two languages—English and Mandarin. 85% of them do not speak either of these languages at home” (Education Study Team 1979: 1-1).

Among the Chinese, the dialects were identified as the main obstacles to academic success for these students had to deal with three languages (the dialect, Mandarin, and English). Changes were thus introduced in 1979. The commitment to bilingual education was retained but, in an effort to increase efficiency, the system allowed for multiple education tracks (through bilingual or monolingual streams) for staggered levels of second language competence and ability. The multiple streams of education allowed for students to progress at their own pace, recognising that “not everyone is academically inclined. It does not force bilingualism, the PSLE or the GCE ‘O’ Level course on those who cannot cope with them. Instead, it tries to seek ways of giving half a loaf when a whole loaf would choke” (Education Study Team 1979: 6–4). The ‘mother tongue’ was preserved as the L2 subject<sup>2</sup> and remained racially defined: Mandarin for those identified as Chinese, Malay for the Malay, and Tamil for the Indians.

### ***3.1 University education***

An issue of particular concern was the perception that Chinese-educated graduates were more likely to be paid lower than their English-educated counterparts because of the greater prestige and value accorded to English. In turn, the resentment felt by Chinese-educated graduates strengthened a sense of commitment to the Chinese medium Nanyang University, established in 1956 by the Hokkien Huan Kuan association.

Nanyang University was merged in 1980 with the English medium University of Singapore to form the National University of Singapore, partly due to the government’s desire to promote English as the country’s main working language as well as to avoid entrenching an income-based division arising from Chinese-educated graduates facing poorer employment prospects. This move was controversial because the Chinese-educated community feared it would undermine Chinese education and culture. It was also resented by the English-educated students, who complained that their educational progress would be hampered by the poor English of their Chinese-stream counterparts, leading Lee to remark that Chinese speakers would never have made such a complaint because of their stronger sense of community (Hill & Lian 1995: 201).

Further enhancing the status of the mother tongue/L2 in 1981, the government introduced a mandatory pass in both English and the L2 for admission into the National University of

Singapore after 1985/1986 (Gopinathan 1994: 77). However, the standards of language competence required for university admissions have been relaxed since 1989 following the poor second language performance of the English medium students in the school-leaving 'A' Level examinations. While a pass in the L2 is no longer mandatory for admission into university, students are strongly encouraged to demonstrate a minimum level of competence in the L2 before they are allowed to graduate.

### *3.2 Deculturalisation concerns*

The large-scale movement to education in English evoked other concerns that were possible to address through the language policy. The Education Study Team indicated that education in a foreign tongue ran "the risk of losing the traditional values of one's own people and the acquisition of the more spurious fashions of the west ..., raising the spectre of deculturalisation. One way of overcoming the dangers of deculturalisation is to teach the historical origins of their culture" (Education Study Team 1979: 1–5). Bokhorst-Heng (1998: 212–213) suggests that the government felt the need of a "cultural ballast to ground them and protect" Singaporeans in face of the threat of English. The mother tongue was that ballast and the education system the mechanism of its delivery.

The government embarked on a series of initiatives such as an annual Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC). Launched in 1979 to promote Mandarin among the Chinese, the campaign aimed to replace the use of dialects with a standard language. Government machinery, such as the Ministry of Education, the media, community associations, and interest groups, was harnessed to promote a switch from dialects to Mandarin Chinese. Other measures included the provision of a range of educational materials and free Mandarin classes, as well as decrees forbidding dialects and promoting Mandarin. Civil servants in positions requiring interaction with the public and those employed in public and retail services were required to demonstrate proficiency in Mandarin and discouraged from using dialects.

The rationale used was that such a shift would contribute to a reduction in the academic burden on students who would no longer be distracted by dialects. Chinese students enrolled in English medium schools would be at a reduced risk of losing the Chinese culture to a Western one. Among the larger community, Mandarin would serve to unify the community fragmented into various clan and dialect groups and form the common language – the absence of which would otherwise be filled by the contender, English. These campaigns, spearheaded by the Speak Mandarin Campaign Secretariat under the Ministry of Information and the Arts, continue to this day to encourage the use of Mandarin in both public and private domains.

Nonetheless, enrolment in Chinese medium schools continued to fall and by 1983, they attracted less than 1% of the total enrolment at Primary one level. The Ministry of Education announced the adoption of a single national stream by which all schools would offer English as a first language (EL1) and the medium of instruction by 1987 and either Tamil (TL2), Malay (ML2), or Chinese (CL2) as a second language (Soon 1988). Since Malay and Tamil medium schools had already closed (in 1979 and 1982 respectively (Wong 2000)) due to lack of enrolment, the move only affected the remaining Chinese medium schools.

Consequently, the government faced strong criticism from sections of the Chinese community who saw the move as threatening the stature and position of the Chinese languages. In an effort to reassure the Chinese and "to preserve the ethos of the Chinese medium schools and to promote the learning of Chinese Language and culture" (Ministry of Education Press Release February 11, 2008), the government reiterated its commitment to bilingualism but refused to give in to demands for dominance of Chinese in education. It did however invest in a new series of Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools from 1979 onwards to offer education in Chinese and English at first language level to exceptional students demonstrating advanced academic and language ability. Further elevating the status of Chinese education, the government announced the

conversion of some primary schools to ‘seed schools’ in 1984 that would offer the Chinese language as L1.

In 1986, the top scoring Malay and Tamil students were also allowed to opt for their languages at a higher level (Higher Mother Tongue Language) in secondary schools. These measures aimed to “give pupils more flexibility in the study of two languages and thus help to produce a greater number of effectively bilingual pupils in the future” (MOE website).

## 4 Issues and debates

### 4.1 Language shift

The current linguistic landscape is testimony to successful planning and implementation over the years. In particular, language campaigns have been instrumental in minimising linguistic diversity among the Chinese and, to an extent, the Malay communities. Notwithstanding the success, language engineering has indirectly contributed to some of the issues and challenges facing language planning. The declining numbers of Tamil speakers among the Indians, the large-scale shift to English among all ethnic groups, and the emergence of a spoken vernacular English (variously referred to as Colloquial Singapore English or Singlish), are direct or indirect consequences of language planning as the subsequent discussion on language campaigns illustrates.

Predominantly driven by policies for the education system as well as aggressive language campaigns, the linguistic homogeneity engineered among the main ethnic groups is illustrated by census data (Table 19.3).

However, among the three ethnic groups, only Malay can claim natural predominance given that it has served as a lingua franca over the years not only among the Malays but also among the general population (48% of the overall population were proficient in the non-standard form of Bazaar Malay in 1957, according to Kuo 1980). Data indicate that where 97% of the Malays considered Malay as the principal language of the home in 1980, the numbers have declined to 83% in 2010. The decline in the use of Malay among the non-Malay communities may be attributed to the loss of status and function but among the Malays is escalated by a shift to English given the increasingly prominent role it has been given by the language policy. This is evident in the overall ascendance of English from 1.8% in 1957 to 32.3% in 2010 (Table 19.2)

Table 19.3 Predominant household languages by ethnic groups 1980–2010

<i>Ethnic group</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>1980*</i>	<i>1990*</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2010</i>
Chinese	English	10.2	21.4	23.9	32.6
	Mandarin	13.1	30.0	45.1	47.7
	Chinese dialects	76.2	48.2	30.7	19.2
Malays	English	2.3	5.7	7.9	17.0
	Malay	96.7	94.1	91.6	82.7
Indians	English	24.3	34.3	35.6	41.6
	Tamil	52.2	43.5	42.9	36.7
	Malay	8.6	14.1	11.6	7.9
	Other Indian languages	14.9	8.1	9.9	13.8

Sources: \*Lau (1993); Singapore Department of Statistics (2001); Wong (2011).

as well as in its unrelenting gain across the three communities with 33% of the Chinese, 17% of the Malays, and 42% of the Indians (Table 19.3) preferring it as the main language of communication.

Among the Chinese, the radical language shifts demonstrate the artificiality of the linguistic identity associated with the ethnic group as well as success of governmental language campaigns in engineering this. While less than 1% spoke Mandarin at the time of independence in 1965, census data indicate that 48% of the Chinese reported Mandarin as the predominant household language in 2010. Correspondingly, while Chinese dialects continue to be spoken in certain segments of society today, the 2010 census suggests a drop in dialect speakers to 19% among the Chinese in comparison with 97% in 1957 (Chua 1964).

Among the Indians, the shift to English is the most marked with 42% using it predominantly at home in 2010. Tamil, the official language of the community, used by nearly 60% of the Indian population in 1957, is today the common household language only among 37% of the Indians. Other Indian languages such as Malayalam, Hindi, and Punjabi (as discussed above) count among the 13.8% other languages commonly used.

#### *4.2 Campaigns and consequences*

However, in an expansion of its earlier argument for the mother tongue as a buffer against the erosion of ethnic identities and culture, the government began to highlight the economic value of learning Mandarin in light of the economic rise of China in the mid-1980s. This appeal to the utilitarian value of Mandarin education further encouraged the use of and enhanced the status of the language among both the Chinese and non-Chinese. To allay fears about the prominence given to Mandarin, and to underscore its commitment to multiracialism, the government has made an effort to promote the languages of the Malay and Indian communities as well. This latter move has met with limited success given that arguments about the economic value of learning Malay and Tamil are much harder to make (Wee 2003).

Currently, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and the Language Councils Secretariat supports the various community language councils as well as oversees the development and execution of the various language campaigns: the Promote Mandarin Council, the Tamil Language Council, the Malay Language Council, as well as the Speak Good English Movement.

The Malay Language Council, constituted in 1981, promotes the use and appreciation of the Malay language. Nonetheless, despite initiatives such as allowing Malay to be an optional third language in the education system, the language is increasingly becoming confined to the Malay community as the younger non-Malays find little incentive in taking it up.

Similarly, the Tamil Language Movement promoted by the Tamil Language Council (formed in 2001) aims to foster the use of Tamil among the Indians. Other than social initiatives such as the annual Tamil Language Festival, the government also invests in the teaching and learning of the language in schools.

Across all communities, language standardisation has been considered imperative to ensure the promotion of the 'acceptable' form of the languages, and has influenced the choice of the variety among the various communities. In this regard, there are two major issues that the current language education policy faces. The first concerns the teaching of English and the second the notion of a single official mother tongue for an ethnic community. We first discuss the teaching of English.

#### *4.3 English language teaching*

Not surprisingly, in the early days of Singapore's history, British English was treated as the reference (Chew 2005: 4). This meant that mastery of English was understood exonymously as

the ability to approximate, if not reproduce, the speech and writing associated with the British English. Even up until the 1980s, the policy was that “the English taught in Singapore should be British Standard English with an RP accent” (Gupta 2010: 57). In the 1990s, however, the popularity of Singlish, the colloquial and nativised variety of English, alarmed the government, who felt that it was threatening the ability of Singaporeans to learn good/proper/standard English despite the fact that there is no evidence to suggest that acquisition of a non-standard variety in any way impedes the acquisition of Standard English (Siegel 1999). Moreover, as Kirkpatrick (2010: 33) points out, the adoption of a local variety of English is actually the result of the “successful adoption of English as the major language of the majority of Singaporeans.” English, especially in its colloquial form, now fulfils for many Singaporeans the identity function that is supposedly the province of the official mother tongues. Rubdy (2001: 347) therefore suggests that Singlish is likely to flourish, despite the official attempts at discouraging its use:

... the willingness of the population to defend and stick to Singlish is remarkable, especially so in the light of the government’s stern rejection of this speech variety... and observes that there is considerable pride in Singlish, with many Singaporeans seeing it as ‘an icon of national identity.’

For many Singaporeans, Singlish is valuable as a national identity marker that can help foster a sense of unity across ethnic and class divides. Nevertheless, the government in 2000 decided to launch the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) in order to promote Standard English and discourage the use of Singlish. As Gupta (2010: 58) points out:

... the SGEM was promoting a narrow concept of Standard English, which did not allow for anything local, or informal, rejecting even words that had been unproblematically accepted since the 1980s ... Once again, Singaporeans are being told to look overseas for correction of their English, and are being given advice that is often based on the strictest possible concept of correctness. Even the notion that a Singaporean accent is wrong has been resurrected.

Thus, in addition to the misplaced concerns about the supposedly deleterious effects on Singlish on the learning of Standard English, the tendency towards exonormativity is also problematic in that as a global language, English is constantly changing and shifting so that ownership of the language no longer resides with its traditional native speakers (Widdowson 1994). Moreover, the educational focus of English language teaching needs to be on the ability to negotiate such changes and shifts in norms across different contexts and with regard to different communicative demands rather than steadfast adherence to an idealised norm.

#### ***4.4 Intra-ethnic heterogeneity: the Indians***

Concerning the notion of a single mother tongue, we can illustrate the issues involved by looking at the Indians in Singapore. The decline among users of Tamil can be attributed to two main causes: the diglossic nature of the Tamil language and the increasing linguistic heterogeneity of the Indian community resulting from large-scale immigration.

Discussing the former, Schiffman (1998, 2003) highlights the extreme divergence between Literary Tamil (LT) used by the educated and Spoken Tamil (ST), a low variety that is not comprehensible to those who use the LT. Nonetheless, Schiffman (2003: 106) argues that guardians of Tamil education almost always insist on the literary, formal variety that bears little communicative value, and shun the popular, spoken variety as corrupted and ‘ungrammatical.’ Therefore, support for the institutional variety does not translate into language use among young learners who even otherwise see little value in the language in comparison with English. Given

that many students of Tamil come from Telugu or Malayalam language backgrounds, the insistence on the LT in education and the media further deters informal use of the language.

Discussing the implication of linguistic heterogeneity for the status of Tamil among the Indians, Jain and Wee (2015: 75) highlight:

While Malay served as the common language in the past (Kuo 1980, 51), the immigration of educated and upwardly mobile Indians has led to a shift to English as the lingua franca. Among the newer diaspora, Tamil holds neither an instrumental value (that Mandarin does among the Chinese) nor serves an integrative function (served by Malay among the Malay people).

Acknowledging that this diversity was contributing to the academic underperformance among the non-Tamil Indian students, and responding to community appeals, the government has since 1990, agreed to accept candidature in the Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Urdu, and Bengali languages at second language level for the O-level examinations and since 1994 for the PSLE.

The five languages have been made examinable at all terminal exams but the government stops short of offering any institutional or pedagogical support. Instruction is organised by the various community groups, who hold classes, employ teachers, design curriculum, and set assessments. The Board for the Teaching & Testing of South Asian Languages (BTTSAL) oversees the delivery of non-Tamil Indian languages instruction by these community groups and standardises all examinations other than those at the national levels. The popularity of these options is evident in the 8,074 students who were examined in the five languages (from years ones–11) in 2014 (Jain & Wee, forthcoming).

*Table 19.4* Number of students annually examined in non-Tamil Indian languages

<i>Languages</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2015</i>
Hindi	3581	3880	4432	5052	5875	6466
Bengali	629	691	759	840	925	1011
Urdu	311	311	322	329	318	325
Gujarati	154	144	142	129	120	108
Punjabi	1111	1031	958	869	836	758

*Source:* office of the BTTSAL.

## 5 Future of languages in Singapore

An evaluation of the historic and current trends of the various languages suggests a continuation of the diverse trajectories. The linguistic homogeneity that has engineered Malay and Mandarin as the representative community languages for the Malays and the Chinese is expected to remain undisturbed so long as the policy maintains the *status quo*.

Among the Chinese, a continual slide in the use of dialects and the dominance of Mandarin can be confidently predicted given the push factors such as the government’s continual campaigns as well as its incentives in education. Additionally, the economic position of China and the robust demand for Mandarin will continue to attract both the Chinese as well as those from other ethnicities (who may obtain dispensation to study Mandarin) to study the language.

Similarly, the position of Malay is expected to remain secure given its national and regional stature but as among the other communities, a shift to English is equally certain. Among the Indian

community, the future of the languages is less easy to anticipate. While subsequent generations of Singapore-born Tamilians are expected to maintain Tamil, the influx of Indian immigrants from India and elsewhere is likely to continue to weaken its linguistic dominance. Among the other Indian languages accepted by the government, the stature of Hindi as an institutional language is bound to grow given the attraction of its national status in India to an increasing number of transmigrants with uncertain future plans. The institutional vitality of the other Indian languages will probably diminish given the trend illustrated by Table 19.4. Of these, Punjabi is most likely to endure given the history of community effort in maintaining the language in education, religion, and in the community. Bengali and Urdu, attractive to students from India as well as Bangladesh and Pakistan respectively, can be expected to thrive in small numbers. The language with the lowest enrolment, Gujarati, will in all likelihood dwindle further to become a place-holder in the education system.

Given the demand for the English-educated in the workforce and the role of the language globally, the shift to English can safely be expected to escalate across the population. However, there is no sign that Singlish is decreasing in popularity. On the contrary, a nascent but burgeoning local film industry and other cultural activities provide domestic and international markets for cultural products where the use of Singlish and other local languages such as the various Chinese dialects are considered valuable markers of cultural authenticity (Wee 2013). The government therefore has to come to terms with the fact that Singlish is in all likelihood here to stay.

Finally, given the nation's reliance on immigrants as well as its robust 'non-resident' population (population other than citizens and permanent residents) the proportion of local born Singaporeans is likely to reduce as that of immigrants increases. The acuity with which the government anticipates and accommodates the needs of the diverse population and the nimbleness of its responses to the shifting societal landscape will determine the success or limitation of its future plans.

## Notes

1 Dept of Statistics, Singapore: <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/statistics/latest-data#14> (last accessed December 13, 2015).

2 In the Singapore context, the L1 (English) refers to the first language at school while the mother tongue carries the status of the second school language.

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