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Mother tongue: A hot button issue

The intimate link between Singapore's bilingual policy and the island's political, economic and social fundamentals, influences and constrains the direction of language planning



EUGENE K B TAN

Language policy planning is taken very seriously in Singapore.

Given the island's multi-lingual make-up, language is both a socio-economic and political resource.

So, it is no surprise that language policies require a delicate balance of competing — and sometimes, conflicting — objectives, interests and expectations.

Among the mother tongues, the teaching of and perceived emphasis (or lack thereof) on the Chinese language continues to arouse strong emotions among Chinese-Singaporeans, who are in fact more

heterogeneous than widely perceived.

This can be seen from the recent heated public reaction, especially in the Chinese language media, to the Education Minister's remarks that his ministry is considering a reduction in the weightage given to mother tongue languages at the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE).

Currently, mother tongue languages are given a 25-per-cent weightage, the same as English, mathematics and science.

The strong reactions for, and against, reducing the weightage of mother tongue languages at the PSLE, are not new. They resurface and get an airing whenever reviews of the teaching of Chinese language are conducted.

The heart-felt emotions revolve primarily around the perceived waxing or waning of the importance of the mother tongue in

our education system and, by extension, in our society.

English-speaking ethnic Chinese are generally inclined towards less emphasis on the importance of the Chinese language. They see no reason for weakness in the Chinese language to hold back students in their academic progress.

For Chinese-speaking ethnic Chinese, any attempt to make the subject "easier" is seen as inflicting a mortal wound to the importance of the Chinese language. Their concern centres on the perceived dumbing-down of what is seen as the already-low standards in Chinese, as well as fears that making the subject easier or less important compromises efforts to nurture a core group of Chinese cultural elites.

DON'T EXPECT MAJOR POLICY SHIFTS

Success in Singapore's education system has been largely predicated on academic ability and one indicator of academic ability was bilingual proficiency — doing well in the mother tongue language.

The bilingual policy was first premised on the belief that nearly everyone could be effectively bilingual.

Since 1999, the focus has been to encourage students to learn as much of the language as possible but doing away with the one-size-fits-all approach.

More significantly, since 2004, the Government accepted that not all students can be effectively bilingual.

With more students coming from English language-dominant homes, the Government has been increasingly cognisant of the challenges that some students face in learning their mother tongue.

The Prime Minister's statement on Monday sought to reassure all stakeholders that the Government has heard the public outcry and would address it. He reiterated that "emphasis on mother tongues is a vital feature of our education system".

For critics, pragmatism in language policy is seen as expediency and detrimental to the well-being of the Chinese language.

In contrast, the Education Ministry views language pedagogy and policy as doing what is necessary to attain the objective without being overly encumbered by tradition, ideology or convention.

The big debate revolves around how to ensure that Chinese language remains a living language (widely used, appreciated and of social relevance) rather than being a mere examination subject.

Given that Chinese is not yet the "natural" mother tongue for many Chinese-Singaporeans, the Education Ministry's focus in recent years has been to develop



Not all students can be effectively bilingual and the Government has been increasingly cognisant of the challenges some students face in learning mother tongue. TODAY FILE PHOTO

differentiated teaching approaches and customising learning for students of different abilities in the Chinese language.

What can we expect when the Prime Minister and Education Minister meet the media, possibly next week?

We can expect a reaffirmation of the foundational principles in Singapore's language policy.

One, the fundamental commitment to bilingualism will be reiterated.

Two, that the mother tongue languages are vital vehicles for cultural transmission, providing ethnic groups with the critical ballast to keep their cultures alive and thriving.

Three, that the policy of nurturing a group of cultural elites remains unchanged.

Four, that a pragmatic approach to the learning of mother tongue languages is necessary to keep them alive and relevant at the cultural and economic level. This means enabling each student to develop as high a level of mother tongue language proficiency as possible.

A reassurance of the commitment to excellence in mother tongues is also likely to be a salient message.

There are unlikely to be any major policy shifts. Singapore's bilingual policy, with its intimate links to the island's political, economic and socio-cultural fundamentals, intimately influences and constrains the direction of language planning and development of the mother tongue. ■

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