

# **English in Singapore - a lingua franca and a language for international communication - efforts in maintaining both functions**

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## **I. Introduction**

At the outset it is necessary to make it explicitly clear that this is not a profound doctoral thesis nor is it anywhere near the findings of a scholarly investigation.

At best this is a crystallization of the thoughts and observations of one who spoke not a word of English until the age of six and for whom English is a fourth language in order of acquisition. I am born a Hainanese, spoke Cantonese before Hainanese till the age of three, attended a Chinese-medium (Mandarin) primary school for half a year and continued in an English-medium primary school. Thereafter, English has remained my dominant language and the fact that I have used it all this while as a language of communication and taught it in schools makes it easier for me to speak with conviction regarding its status, its functions, and efforts in maintaining standards.

With a multilingual population conscious of the importance of English and the concomitant status attached to its users, it is not surprising to note a whole range of speakers using English from a very low proficiency level to a high proficiency level -

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the equivalent of native-speaker competence. These levels have been broadly classified into three levels viz the acrolect, the mesolect and the basilect. Singlish is from the basilect to somewhere near the mesolect level.

English in Singapore enjoys the status of an official language, one of four, the others being Chinese (Mandarin), Malay and Tamil. Malay (Bahasa Melayu) is the National Language. These requirements are all enshrined in the Constitution, although at the time, English usage was only confined to the English-medium schools and those privileged to have been associated with users. The number was small and to a certain extent envied by the many who viewed it as a potential for economic and social well-being. The status was further enhanced and given due recognition when the educational policy that was formulated made it explicitly clear that the objective was bilingualism - English and one other official language.

## II. Linguistic Diversity in Singapore

A step towards the understanding of the difficulties involved in bilingual education in Singapore is to take a closer look at its multi-lingualism. The difficulties are further accentuated by the need to maintain a high standard of English for international intelligibility (Tongue: 1974) in the fields of trade, commerce and industry, and political well-being.

With linguistic heterogeneity educational policy for the ultimate aim of common identity and nation-building must necessarily be problematic because it has to take account of

sensitivities to ensure cohesiveness and peace and harmony.

Singapore is multilingual. Politically, four languages enjoy official status, namely, Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English. By declaration of the Constitution, Malay is designated the National Language or *Bahasa Kebangsaan* (in Malay). The Republic of Singapore Independence Act of 1965 includes the following section that laid out the language policy of the new Republic:

- (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.* (Government Gazette Acts Supplement, no. 2, 1965, p.99-100.)

For communication purposes, among 2.986 million people, languages like English, Tamil, Hindi, Japanese, Pakistani, Indonesian, Malay and the Chinese languages (Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hainanese, Khek and Teochew) can be heard spoken.

An interesting point to note is that written Chinese has only one form and is mutually intelligible among the different Chinese groups, but Spoken Chinese is one of Mandarin, Cantonese,

Hokkien, Hainanese, Khék (Hakka) and Teochew. In other words, inter-group communication among the language groups in Spoken Chinese poses problems of mutual intelligibility. For example, a Cantonese speaker will find it difficult to understand a Teochew speaker, and those who have not been to school will not understand Mandarin. This is different from the situation in England, where, although there is one written form in English with different spoken varieties, speakers of the varieties or dialects find mutual intelligibility. That is, a Northerner and a Southerner are able to establish communication orally.

As a language, Malay has several mutually comprehensible dialects - Bazaar Malay, Malaysian Malay, Sumatran Malay, and Javanese Malay. There are two written forms, Jawi (in Arabic script) and Rumi (in Romanised script) but the latter is in common everyday use in Singapore.

The languages spoken by ethnic Indians form yet another interesting feature to note when the multilingual situation in Singapore is studied. There is no one superordinate language of this ethnic group, that is, there is no 'Indian' as a language as such. Indians speak and write one of Tamil, Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali and Malayalam. There is minimal mutual intelligibility among these groups. Tamil enjoys official status in Singapore because it has the majority of speakers among the Indians in the Republic and it is not to be interpreted as being the superordinate language with dialects like Punjabi, Bengali, etc.

Although English is used in trade, commerce, and the professions and it performs substantial roles in inter-ethnic communication in Singapore, it is a non-ethnic language. The

written form expected is that of the Southern British Standard and the spoken is a form of Received Pronunciation, only because R.P. is taught. English enjoys official status both because of its colonial history in Singapore and the increasing internationalization of English. A local variety of English exists and it has been facetiously termed 'Singlish' by pedants and has fascinated scholars and researchers. A non-ethnic language, not indigenous to Singapore, through inter-ethnic communication and widespread usage has become a lingua franca. It could be described as the phase of the indiginization of English.

Out of the multilingual conglomeration, formal bilingualism is to emerge. As this bilingualism in the main means English and any of the other three official languages, it is important to consider the status of English and gauge the pedagogical difficulties inherent in teaching it.

### III. The Status of English

English is used in administration, commerce, industry and education. In education, English is used as a medium of instruction, and where the other languages are used as media of instruction, English is the compulsory second language. English, therefore, enjoys a unique status in Singapore and it has a significant role to play in the political, economic and social development of the island republic.

Although not an ethnic language in Singapore, English is used as the lingua franca for inter-ethnic communication. Even among well-educated Chinese, English is more likely than

Mandarin (or Malay) to be used as a lingua franca across ethnic group lines.

This is obvious with a bilingual educational policy which necessitates the study of English as a compulsory language and its use as a medium of instruction in schools. Besides, English is today acknowledged to be the international language of science and technology, commerce and communication.

In the mid 1970's

*the government's emphasis on technical education and vocational training resulted in a growing preference for education in the English language stream. Enrolment in the English-medium schools has thus surpassed that of schools in the other language media.*

Comparing the dominance of the non-native language with Malay which is not only the native language but also the declared National Language of the Republic, Gopinathan (1976) states that 'it is English that has acquired enhanced importance.'

*This is justified on the following grounds:*

- 1. that it is an international language and the language of science and technology,*
- 2. its continued use meant continuity in the records, administration and law in Singapore,*
- 3. it provided a neutral medium in which all racial groups could compete at par, and*
- 4. it was the language of the investing industrialists.*

*This justification is now accepted and English is regarded by all ethnic groups as providing the best job opportunities.*

With foreign investment and the influx of multi-national enterprises it would appear that the present status of English will be sustained, especially in an international economy like Singapore, where modern management insists upon both technical competence and English skills among his employees.

Moreover, during the same period although the Chinese make up more than 75% of the total population,

*Chinese-educated youth who once could count on moving up within a family firm, regardless of formal qualifications, today compete for positions in which a working command of English is a **sine qua non** for continued mobility.*  
(Murray: 1971)

The realization of the increasing importance of English has also augmented the numbers of English speakers over the years. The literacy rate of Singapore is 91.8% (1995) and a vast majority of the population are literate in English.

The widespread use of English has also aided Singapore in becoming a major reprint and export centre: the major English-language publications - magazines and books of international repute are available in Singapore.

English is used as the medium of instruction in institutions of higher learning in Singapore. In the National University of Singapore it has always been the medium of instruction. In the other university, the Nanyang Technological University, it is vital that English be used for the acquisition of knowledge in Technical Science and Information Technology. English has always been the medium of instruction in the polytechnics.

If this does not account for the dominant status of English vis-a-vis the other three official languages, perhaps the words of the then Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew may help to elucidate,

*the facility of the English Language gives us access to the science and technology of the West. It also provides a convenient ground on which the Chinese, Indians, Ceylonese, Malays, Eurasians, everybody competes in a neutral medium.*  
(From "Lee Kuan Yew: 'Traditional Values and National Identity', The Mirror 20.11.72, published by the Ministry of Culture, Singapore.")

In the midst of all these factors which account for the present status of English, there is a growing concern that there has been a decline in the standard of English usage in the republic. This has been expressed by anxious university dons, parliamentarians and top civil servants. In fact, the National University of Singapore has initiated a minimum language requirement examination for its entrants and planned remedial courses for those deficient in the language. Whether this decline is apparent or real it is difficult to establish in the absence of empirical evidence, and, furthermore, there was never a time when the standard of English usage was at its optimum.

Nevertheless, this does indicate a desire to maintain a good standard of English for effective communication. Perhaps, English language users, particularly teachers, should be aware of the features of good English.



Having explained the linguistic diversity in Singapore and traced the status of English in this conglomeration, it is important to look at it from the perspective of inter-ethnic communication. Obviously, for there to be understanding, ethnic groups or individuals must be able to achieve mutual intelligibility through a common language. English with its long history in Singapore was the national choice and the one with least resistance having with it the inherent economic and status value. It became the lingua franca.

Extensive use of English coupled with the fact that English as a language has a high percentage of redundant features, the evolution of a less-than-standard English was inevitable. This deviant form known as Singlish emerged and it has been the concern of educationists and interested parties. Letters appeared in the daily newspapers advocating the maintenance of a creditable standard of English. Clearly an admonition had to be sent out to stem further deterioration. It was at this time that Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, when addressing university students in July 1994 said,

*Do not speak Singlish! If you do, you are the loser. Only foreign academics like to write about it. You have to live it. And your interlocutors, when they hear you, their ears go askew. You detract from the message that you're sending them.*

Implied in this message is the need for maintaining a creditable level of English for international intelligibility. The success of Singapore economically, socially and politically has

very much been its ability to communicate at a high international level. That it has retained English for this purpose is a credit to the foresight of its politicians.

International conferences of specialists, experts and professionals held throughout the year, usually with local involvement and participation, are held in English. Any slackening in standards in the language will pose an eventual handicap.

Hence, the urgent need to strike an acceptable balance between allowing English to be used, in its Singlish form, for social cohesion, and maintaining the highest standards for international communication.

#### **IV. Efforts**

What efforts then are being made to maintain these functions of English in Singapore? First, the inculcation of a correct attitude towards the desire to maintain a good standard of English and to ensure a communication competence for both functions.

The Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore which is linked to the Ministry of Education continues to monitor the needs of the students and provide the necessary teaching and learning materials for the schools. The syllabuses are accordingly revised to cope with changing needs and meet urgent demands.

Teacher-training courses continue to be provided to enable teachers to acquire the latest and most appropriate strategies for teaching English. There was, for a time, intensive training of teachers in Active Communicative Teaching.

Other courses and seminars are held as often as necessary in response to requirements of the time. There have been specific courses for the teaching of the micro skills. When it was felt that some teachers lacked the knowledge to explain the language to the students, courses on the teaching of grammar were conducted.

Multi-media presentations are in English and when undesirable deviant English is used steps have been taken to check the trend.

Newspapers, publications and radio and television broadcasts are monitored to maintain a high standard of language expression.

In short, there is a growing concern that despite the prevalence of Singlish, it is vital to preserve English as a language for international communication.

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