

SPEECH BY MR LEE KUAN YEW, MINISTER MENTOR, AT SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN'S 30TH ANNIVERSARY LAUNCH, 17 MARCH 2009, 5:00 PM AT THE NTUC AUDITORIUM

Thirty years ago, I launched this Speak Mandarin Campaign. Chinese students learn Mandarin in school. Unfortunately, they used to speak dialects among themselves and at home. When I watched interviews on our Chinese TV channel in the 1960s and '70s, I found students and workers speak Mandarin haltingly. They have not used Mandarin often. Mandarin has to be the common language of Chinese Singaporeans, regardless of their dialect groups. If the government had left language habits to evolve undirected, Chinese Singaporeans would be speaking an adulterated Hokkien-Teochew dialect.

To effectively promote Mandarin, we closed down all dialect programs on radio and TV from 1979. Also, I was setting a bad example making speeches in Hokkien in the 1960s and '70s to reach the largest number of Chinese. From 1979, some 30 years ago, I decided to stop speaking in Hokkien and switched to Mandarin. Had I not done this, Hokkien/Teochew will be the predominant common language for the Chinese in Singapore, not Mandarin.

The value of a language is its usefulness, not just in Singapore, but also in the wider world. If you speak Hokkien or Cantonese, you reach some 60 million in Fujian and Taiwan, or about 100 million in Guangdong and Hong Kong. With Mandarin, you can speak to 1,300 million Chinese from all provinces in China. Now, overseas Chinese and foreigners are learning Mandarin, not Chinese dialects. China is setting up 500 Confucius Institutes in different countries to teach Mandarin to many millions of people around the world.

I understand the strong emotional ties to one's mother tongue. However, the trend is clear. In two generations, Mandarin will become our mother tongue.

English is the key language for our people to make a living. It is the second language of all non English-speaking peoples. Multinational companies use English. Internet data banks are mostly in English. PRC Chinese are learning English with great effort. If Mandarin were our first language, Singaporeans would be of little use to China. They do not need more Mandarin speakers to add to their 1.3 billion. English gives us easy access to English-speaking societies and the developed world. Thus, Singaporeans bring value-add to China. If Ms Lim Sau Hoong spoke only fluent Mandarin, she would not bring added value to her work in China. It is because she also speaks and writes fluent English that she has been able to compete in both languages in the advertising sector. That made her a valuable addition to Zhang Yi-mou's team to polish up the dramatic opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics in August 2008.

To keep a language alive, you have to speak and read it frequently. The more you use one language, the less you use other languages. So the more languages you learn, the greater the difficulties of retaining them at a high level of fluency. I have learned and used six languages – English, Malay, Latin, Japanese, Mandarin and Hokkien. English is my master language. My Hokkien has gone rusty, my Mandarin has improved. I have lost my Japanese and Latin, and can no longer make fluent speeches in Malay without preparation. This is called “language loss”.

All new countries have multiple dialects and languages in their mixed populations. To become a united nation, the population must speak a common language, so that they can communicate with the government and with one another. Indonesia has hundreds of languages and dialects in their 17,000 islands. Since independence in 1949, they have been teaching and speaking Bahasa Indonesia. In secondary schools and tertiary institutions, they do their lessons only in Bahasa, and not the regional languages and dialects. Bahasa is now the language of government and business in all parts of Indonesia.

Singapore's multi-racial peoples will never be united if we had used Mandarin as our common language. All non-Chinese, 25% of Singaporeans, will be disadvantaged. The result will be endless strife, as in Sri Lanka, where Sinhalese was made the national language and the Tamil-speaking were marginalised. We made the right decision to use English as our common language. We also retained the teaching of mother tongues. Even in 1959 when we first became the Government, my colleagues and I could foresee a time when China would open up and become a huge economic power. Their common language is putonghua, not dialects. Our choice of English has enabled our fast growth. Now with China's growing economy, parents and students no longer complain of the burden of learning Chinese, a difficult language without spelling or phonetics. Dialects are being overtaken by Mandarin in the region where Mandarin is taught in all Chinese schools. Mandarin will become the common language of the overseas Chinese.

China wants to collaborate with us because through English, we are able to connect with the West. At the same time, our Mandarin is fluent enough to communicate with PRC Chinese on different topics and subjects.

The Speak Mandarin Campaign and our bilingual education policy have resulted in a growing number of young Singaporeans speaking Mandarin among themselves in schools, ITEs, polytechnics and universities. They also watch Mandarin TV more than English TV.

Quite a few Singaporeans with only "AO" or "O" level passes in Chinese have sent me emails from China to thank me for making Mandarin compulsory for them. With this basic foundation, they have been able to expand their vocabulary and increase their fluency after a few months in China. Singapore Press Holdings distributes a free bilingual newspaper called "Wobao" or "My Paper", which is bilingual in Chinese and English. They have a glossary of translations for the more difficult English and Chinese words and phrases. 250,000 copies of

“Wobao” are distributed daily, read by about 500,000. During train or bus rides or at home, you can read it and refresh your recognition of Chinese characters.

School examinations no longer concentrate on mo xie, dictation from memory, or ting xie, listening and writing. They are not needed in real life. With computer programs, you can type the pinyin and the characters will appear. Since 2007, we have allowed the use of digital dictionaries in national examinations.

Singapore’s advantage has been that we have a Mandarin-speaking community. We have newspapers, magazines, books, and television programmes in Chinese. We need some 300 Singaporean graduates each year who have Chinese language and culture at a high level, to interact with their China counterparts. The flow of new migrants from China as our citizens and Permanent Residents will help in this process.

English is our dominant language everywhere. Most students will have little difficulty in mastering working-level English. However, if parents speak in English to their children at home, learning Mandarin will be a problem. Research of American-born Chinese disclosed that when these second-generation Chinese try to learn Chinese in college, those who speak English at home found mastering Chinese as difficult as Caucasian-Americans; those whose parents spoke to them in Mandarin easily made the grade. My advice is for both parents to speak Mandarin to their children if they can. If one speaks in Mandarin and the other in English, the child will grow up speaking more English than Mandarin.

And with IT digital dictionaries that can translate from English to Chinese and vice versa and also pronounce the words, learning Chinese has become much easier and more convenient, something I did not have when I started learning Chinese in 1955 at age 32.