English as a common language across communities

Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland and Germany),
Solicitor (England & Wales and Hong Kong)
Of Counsel, KGP Legal LLC
alexander.ressos@kgplegal.com.sg
www.ressos.com.sg

The census record

The success of the policy is measured most clearly by the language that Singaporeans speak at home. The census and the General Household Survey ask residents aged five and over which language they speak most frequently at home. Their answers trace a transformation within a single generation. In 1990, 18.8 per cent named English. The share rose to 23.0 per cent in 2000, 32.3 per cent in 2010, 36.9 per cent in 2015 and 48.3 per cent in 2020. In 2025 it reached 58.1 per cent.[1]

Over the same period Mandarin rose and fell. It was the most frequent home language of 35.0 per cent of residents in 2000 and 35.6 per cent in 2010, before declining to 29.9 per cent in 2020 and 26.6 per cent in 2025. The Chinese dialects, still the home language of 23.8 per cent of residents in 2000, fell to 8.7 per cent in 2020 and 4.9 per cent in 2025. Malay declined from 14.1 per cent in 2000 to 7.0 per cent in 2025, while Tamil fell from 3.2 to 2.2 per cent over the same period.[2] The decline of every other language in favour of English is the most visible result of sixty years of language policy.

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English at home in every community

The shift has taken place in all three main communities. Among ethnic Chinese residents, English became the language most often spoken at home in 2020, with 47.6 per cent, whereas Mandarin had been the first choice of 47.7 per cent of them in 2010.[3] The figures for children show the direction of travel more sharply. In 2010, 52 per cent of Chinese children and 26 per cent of Malay children aged five to fourteen spoke English at home, against 36 per cent and 9.4 per cent in 2000.[4] These children are now aged between about 21 and 30 and are entering the workforce of the financial centre as native speakers of English.

The census also shows that English rarely stands alone. According to the Department of Statistics, a majority of residents who speak English most often at home also speak a mother tongue language or a dialect as a second home language.[5] The typical Singaporean household is bilingual, with English as the language of school and work and Mandarin, Malay or Tamil as the language of grandparents, festivals and religion. Chapter J.II examines the second half of this pair.

A common language in a plural society

English performs a function in Singapore that no other language could perform. It is the language in which a Chinese manager, a Malay civil servant, an Indian lawyer and a Eurasian banker speak to one another, as well as the language in which all of them speak to the expatriates and foreign clients who make up a large part of the financial centre. In the public housing estates where most Singaporeans live, an ethnic quota system mixes the communities in the same blocks. English is the language of the void deck, the market and the school gate.

The government regards this common language as a pillar of social cohesion. It is equally a condition of the open labour market examined in Chapter J.IV, since foreign professionals from India, the Philippines, Britain, Australia or the United States can work in Singapore from their first day without learning a local language.

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Few Asian financial centres offer that. In Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai or even Hong Kong, a foreign professional who speaks only English remains outside much of local business and public life.

The costs of the choice

The rise of English has costs that Singapore debates openly. The first is the loss of the Chinese dialects. Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese, the languages in which the merchant networks described in Part A did business, are now spoken at home by a small minority. Many young Chinese Singaporeans cannot converse with their grandparents. The second is the pressure on the mother tongues. The decline of Mandarin, Malay and Tamil as home languages since 2010 worries a government that regards bilingualism as a national asset, especially in relations with China. Lee Kuan Yew himself said in 2009 that successive generations of students had "paid a heavy price" for the insistence on bilingualism.[6]

The third cost concerns social mobility. A child from an English-speaking home starts school with an advantage over a child from a home where English is rarely spoken. Because English proficiency strongly affects access to university and to the best-paid jobs, the advantage persists into adult life. The fourth concerns newcomers. In February 2023 the leader of the opposition, Pritam Singh, proposed an English test for applicants for citizenship and permanent residence. A poll published by CNA in April 2023 found that a majority of respondents welcomed the idea.[7] The debate showed how far English has become part of national identity, two generations after it was chosen as a neutral language that belonged to nobody.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Languages of Singapore" (accessed November 2026), table of the language most frequently spoken at home, based on the Census of Population and General Household Survey: English 18.8 % (1990), 23.0 % (2000), 32.3 % (2010), 36.9 % (2015), 48.3 % (2020), 58.1 % (2025). The 2020 figure corresponds to Department of Statistics Singapore, *Census of Population 2020,*

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Statistical Release 1, chapter on home language. The 2025 figure is cited by Wikipedia to CNA, 30 June 2026, reporting the General Household Survey 2025. ↩

2. Wikipedia, "Languages of Singapore" (accessed November 2026), same table: Mandarin 35.0 % (2000), 35.6 % (2010), 29.9 % (2020), 26.6 % (2025); other Chinese varieties 23.8 % (2000), 8.7 % (2020), 4.9 % (2025); Malay 14.1 % (2000), 9.2 % (2020), 7.0 % (2025); Tamil 3.2 % (2000), 2.5 % (2020), 2.2 % (2025). ↩
3. Wikipedia, "Singapore English" (accessed November 2026), citing *The Straits Times*, 16 June 2021: English had become the language most often spoken at home by ethnic Chinese residents, at 47.6 per cent; in 2010 Mandarin was the first choice of 47.7 per cent of them. ↩
4. Wikipedia, "Singapore English" (accessed November 2026): in 2010, 52 per cent of Chinese and 26 per cent of Malay children aged 5–14 spoke English at home, up from 36 per cent and 9.4 per cent in 2000. ↩
5. Department of Statistics Singapore, *Census of Population 2020*, infographic on home language: a majority of residents who spoke English most frequently at home "also spoke a mother tongue language or dialect as a secondary language". ↩
6. Wikipedia, "Speak Mandarin Campaign" (accessed November 2026): in 2009 Lee Kuan Yew said "successive generations of students paid a heavy price" for the insistence on bilingualism. ↩
7. Wikipedia, "Singapore English" (accessed November 2026): in February 2023 Pritam Singh advocated an English test for citizenship and permanent residence applicants; a CNA poll published on 3 April 2023 found that a majority welcomed it. ↩

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Author contact: Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP · contact@ressos.com