The bilingual policy in education

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From four language streams to a common school

Before independence Singapore had four school systems, each teaching in a different medium. The Chinese schools, founded and financed by clan associations and merchants, taught in Mandarin from the 1920s onwards, after the dialect schools of the nineteenth century had given way to the national language movement in China.[1] By 1949 about 70 % of the more than 100,000 children of school age attended one of 319 Chinese-language schools, which received no funding from the colonial government.[2] The English schools, run by the government and by missions, prepared pupils for the civil service and the commercial houses. Malay and Tamil schools completed the picture.

The Chinese community crowned its system with a university. Nanyang University, financed by a donation of five million dollars from the rubber merchant Tan Lark Sye and built on 500 acres of land given by the Hokkien Association in Jurong, began its classes on 30 March 1956.[3] For the Chinese-educated it was proof that their language could carry a complete education. For the colonial authorities and later for the government of the People's Action Party, it was also a centre of Chinese political sentiment in a city whose future lay in a multiracial state.

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The self-governing state of 1959 retained the policy of funding schools in all four media.[4] Equal treatment of the streams was politically necessary because any attempt to close the Chinese schools would have provoked the community that formed the majority of voters. It also left the young state with a population that could not speak to itself in one language. The bilingual policy was the answer to that difficulty. It kept every stream alive for the time being, while requiring each pupil to learn a second language.

The compulsory second language of 1966

The bilingual policy took effect in 1966. The study of a second language became compulsory in all government and government-aided schools of every language stream, so that pupils in Chinese schools learned English and pupils in English schools learned Chinese, Malay or Tamil.[5] Second languages became examinable subjects at the Primary School Leaving Examination in 1966 and at the Cambridge School Certificate in 1969.[6] In 1972 English and the mother tongue were both given double weighting in the PSLE, before the weighting was set in 1980 at 25 % each for English, the mother tongue, mathematics and science.[7]

The policy had a rationale that its authors stated openly. English would be the common, neutral language between the communities and the language of science, technology and international trade. The mother tongue would preserve cultural values and give each community its roots. This division of functions, with English for work and the mother tongue for identity, has remained the official doctrine ever since. It explains why Singapore never designated English as a “mother tongue” for any of its communities, although English is today the language of most homes.

Parents drew their own conclusions from the doctrine. In a speech to Parliament on 23 February 1977, Lee Kuan Yew noted that between 1957 and 1967 some 30 to 40 % of Chinese parents had enrolled their children in Chinese schools. The share of the national Primary One cohort entering Chinese-medium schools fell from 33 % in 1967 to 13.75 % in 1977.[8] Parents chose English because it promised employment in

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the multinational companies that the Economic Development Board, examined in Chapter III of Part C, was bringing to Singapore. The language market decided the fate of the Chinese stream before the government formally closed it.

The Goh Report and the end of the Chinese stream

The decisive review came with the *Report on the Ministry of Education 1978*, issued on 10 February 1979 by a team led by the Deputy Prime Minister, Goh Keng Swee. The Goh Report found high drop-out rates and weak results in both languages. It introduced the New Education System, with English as the first language and the mother tongues as second languages. Streaming was introduced in the same year to address the drop-out problem, with the weakest pupils placed in a monolingual stream.[9]

Enrolment in Chinese-medium Primary One classes fell below 1 % of the cohort by 1983. The last pupils of the Chinese stream graduated in 1986, an event that the Singaporean historian of Chinese education Neo Peng Fu has summarised in one phrase: “Chinese education” became “teaching the Chinese language”. English was officially designated the first language of the entire school system in 1987. The Malay and Tamil streams had already disappeared. Tamil-medium education ended in 1982. By 1986 a single class of 28 students remained in Malay-medium secondary education.[10]

The university followed the schools. Nanyang University had been pressed to teach in English and lost students to the English-medium University of Singapore. Its merger with that university to form the National University of Singapore was confirmed in April 1980, after which Nanyang held its last convocation on 16 August 1980.[11] For many Chinese-educated Singaporeans the closure remains a wound. For the financial centre it meant that every graduate of the 1980s and later was educated in English, which made the workforce immediately usable by international banks.

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Mother tongue, Higher Mother Tongue and the special schools

The government offset the loss of the Chinese stream with institutions designed to keep a bilingual elite. In 1979 the Ministry of Education designated nine Chinese-medium secondary schools as schools of the Special Assistance Plan. They were to give the best primary school leavers the opportunity to study both English and Mandarin at a high level, and to reassure the Chinese community that the government was not indifferent to its language and culture.[12] Two of them, The Chinese High School and Nanyang Girls' High School, piloted the Integrated Programme in 2004, with other Special Assistance Plan schools following in later years.[13]

Higher Chinese Language was introduced in 1999, when admission to the Special Assistance Plan schools was also widened from the top 10 % of the PSLE cohort to the top 30 %. The higher mother tongue papers attract a growing share of pupils. Between 2003 and 2012 the share of the PSLE cohort taking Higher Chinese rose from 21.6 % to 27.4 %, while the share taking it at O level rose from 18.2 % to 30.1 %.[14] The corresponding shares for Higher Malay and Higher Tamil were lower but also rising. A pass in the higher mother tongue at O level satisfies the mother tongue requirement for admission to the local universities, which keeps the language relevant to the educational ambitions of families.

The mother tongue remains a compulsory examinable subject at the PSLE and at the national examinations of secondary schools. All pupils study Mandarin, Malay or Tamil according to their ethnic classification, although Indian pupils whose families do not speak Tamil may choose another language.[15] The ethnic assignment of the mother tongue is the most distinctive feature of the system. It means that a Chinese child whose parents speak Hokkien or English at home studies Mandarin as the mother tongue. The term describes a political choice about which language a community should share.

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An acknowledged limit

The government has been candid about the limits of the policy. In 2004 it acknowledged that its original aim of equal proficiency in English and the mother tongue had not been achieved. Lee Kuan Yew went further. In 2009 he said that the early policy had assumed a strong correlation between intelligence and language learning. In June 2010 he added that "Mandarin is important but it remains a second language in Singapore".[16] His late reflections on the subject were collected in *My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore's Bilingual Journey*, published in 2011.[17]

The Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism was set up in the same year to support the Ministry of Education in promoting the learning of English and the mother tongues, particularly in the early years.[18] The fund marks a shift in emphasis. After decades in which the school system aimed at balanced bilingualism for all, policy now accepts English dominance and concentrates on making the second language enjoyable and usable, starting in the pre-school years. For employers this means that the Mandarin of a young Singaporean graduate ranges from near-native to functional, depending on the family, the school and the use made of the language after school.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Singaporean Mandarin" (accessed November 2026): first Mandarin-medium classes around 1898; by the 1920s all Chinese schools in Singapore had adopted Mandarin as the medium of instruction. ↩
2. Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre, Culturepaedia, "A common mother tongue: The impact of Chinese education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): in 1949 about 70 % of the more than 100,000 school-aged children were enrolled in 319 Chinese-language schools run by civilian organisations without colonial funding. A companion Culturepaedia article on Chinese-language education from the 1920s to the 1950s reportedly gives 71,000 school-aged children of Chinese descent in the 319 schools. ↩
3. Wikipedia, "Nanyang University" (accessed November 2026): Tan Lark Sye proposed the university in 1953 and donated $5 million; the Singapore

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Hokkien Association donated 500 acres in Jurong; classes began on 30 March 1956. ↩

4. Culturepaedia, "From Chinese-language education to bilingual education system (1960s to 1980s)" (accessed November 2026): after self-government in 1959 the PAP government kept the funding policy for ethnic-language schools enacted by the Labour Front. ↩
5. Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): the bilingual education policy was officially introduced in 1966. ↩
6. Second languages as compulsory examinable subjects in the PSLE from 1966 and in the Cambridge School Certificate from 1969. ↩
7. Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): both languages double-weighted at the PSLE in 1972; since 1980 English, mother tongue, mathematics and science each carry 25 % of the weighting. ↩
8. Culturepaedia, "From Chinese-language education to bilingual education system (1960s to 1980s)", above, citing Lee Kuan Yew's parliamentary speech of 23 February 1977: Primary One enrolment in Chinese-medium schools at 33 % of the national cohort in 1967 and 13.75 % in 1977. ↩
9. Culturepaedia, "From Chinese-language education to bilingual education system (1960s to 1980s)", above: the Goh Report of 10 February 1979, led by Goh Keng Swee, introduced the New Education System with English as the first language and mother tongues as second languages; Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): streaming introduced in 1979 to address high drop-out rates, the weakest students being placed in a monolingual stream. ↩
10. Culturepaedia, "From Chinese-language education to bilingual education system (1960s to 1980s)", above: under 1 % in 1983 according to the Chinese Language Review Committee (1992); "The final batch of students graduated from the Chinese-language-stream schools in 1986"; "'Chinese education' thus evolved into 'teaching the Chinese language'"; Wikipedia, "Education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): English was "officially designated the

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first language within the local education system in 1987"; Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): Tamil-medium education ended in 1982 with the closure of Umar Pulavar Tamil High School; by 1986 only one class of 28 students remained in Malay-medium secondary education. ↩

11. Wikipedia, "Nanyang University" (accessed November 2026): the merger was confirmed in April 1980; the last convocation was held on 16 August 1980, the National University of Singapore Act taking effect that month. ↩
12. Wikipedia, "Special Assistance Plan" (accessed November 2026): introduced in 1979; nine Chinese-medium secondary schools designated; aims to let top primary school leavers study English and Mandarin to high levels and to preserve traditional Chinese-medium schools. ↩
13. Wikipedia, "Special Assistance Plan" (accessed November 2026): The Chinese High School and Nanyang Girls' High School piloted the Integrated Programme in 2004 with Hwa Chong Junior College; River Valley High School followed in 2006 and Dunman High School in 2008. ↩
14. Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): Higher Chinese Language introduced in 1999; SAP admission intake raised from the top 10 % of the PSLE cohort to 30 %; Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026), table of Higher Mother Tongue take-up: Higher Chinese 21.6 % (PSLE 2003), 27.4 % (PSLE 2012), 18.2 % (O level 2003), 30.1 % (O level 2012). ↩
15. Wikipedia, "Education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): mother tongue is a compulsory examinable subject at the PSLE and GCE N, O and A levels; non-Tamil Indians may choose Tamil or another language such as Hindi or Punjabi. ↩
16. Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): in 2004 the government acknowledged that its initial aim of equal proficiency in both English and mother tongue had failed; Wikipedia, "Speak Mandarin Campaign" (accessed November 2026): in 2009 Lee Kuan Yew said Mandarin teaching had gone the "wrong way"; in June 2010 he said "Mandarin is

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important but it remains a second language in Singapore"; Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore": "an assumption of a strong correlation between intelligence and language learning". ↩

17. Culturepaedia, "Chinese dialects in Singapore" (accessed November 2026), citing Lee Kuan Yew, *My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore's Bilingual Journey* (2011), p. 146. ↩
18. Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism was set up in 2011 to aid the Ministry of Education. ↩

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