

# Becoming proficient in English has come at a cost for many Singaporeans

Use your mother tongue – or lose it.

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Singaporeans pride themselves on their bilingualism. From the 1960s, our schools have taught us English along with a mother tongue language – Mandarin for Chinese, Bahasa Melayu for Malays and Tamil for Indians who speak the language. Other than language lessons, the main language of instruction in Singapore schools is English.

It goes without saying that in a world where English is such a common currency, this has given us a competitive edge. One can even argue that learning and speaking English has helped to integrate our multiracial society.

But, it is also fair to say that we have paid a price for this policy over the years, and our population has become more proficient in English while losing its grip on mother tongue languages.

It is time to count the cost and see if we have the balance right.

## WHAT WE LOST

Two surveys by the National University of Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies on race, religion and language, conducted in 2013 and 2018 separately, found that while proficiency in English has risen, all ethnic groups have become less proficient in mother tongue languages.

These changes may be the result of decisions taken when the bilingual policy was first implemented, including the shutting down of vernacular language schools in Singapore. This was an emotionally charged point in Singapore's history.

The decision to teach Mandarin as the main mother tongue language to Singaporean Chinese also meant that mastery over dialects was lost.

More significantly, the English-educated found that they enjoyed better job opportunities after graduation. In other words, there was an "English premium" in the minds of the population, which has had long-term effects that can be felt even now.

Changes in education policies have further cemented this



In a world where English is such a common currency, proficiency in the language has given Singaporeans a competitive edge. However, a decline in mother tongue language competencies signals that the knowledge we hold about our own identities is getting diluted, says the writer. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

growing preference for English.

While English continues to be taught as a first language in schools, simpler "B" syllabuses for Mandarin, Bahasa Melayu and Tamil were introduced in the late 1990s after feedback that the original textbooks and lessons were too difficult for some students.

It is possible that some students could not cope because the languages spoken in their homes were not fully compatible with their assigned mother tongue language. But it is equally true that even Singaporeans with no such issues seem to be getting less proficient in their heritage languages.

Many Singaporeans may be able to handle basic, everyday conversations in their mother tongue languages, but they do not seem confident in anything more complex, like reading novels or communicating more complicated ideas.

What is more, the trend seems to be gathering pace. Compared with 2013, lower proportions of the survey respondents indicated in 2018 that they were able to speak their mother tongue languages well enough to discuss ideas like religion, politics and technology.

Even taken on their own, the results of the 2018 survey were sobering.

Only 39 per cent of Chinese respondents in 2018 said that they were able to speak Mandarin very well, whereas 66 per cent of Malay respondents and 45 per cent of Indian Tamil respondents indicated the same about their respective mother tongue languages.

These trends suggest that mother language competencies are declining quickly, reminiscent of the way that Chinese dialects declined.

This is a cause for worry. Understanding multiple languages

and being competent in them would be a valuable skill in today's world.

Translations may be readily available for most languages of the world, but they would not be able to provide more nuanced appreciations of each language. This can be a disadvantage, especially in the case of languages in which context is important.

But let us go beyond the practical advantages that bilingual or multilingual individuals enjoy.

A decline in mother tongue language competencies also signals that the knowledge we hold about our own identities is getting diluted. Language is an important repository of one's culture and heritage.

The way phrases and terms are expressed reflect a specific cultural understanding of the world.

Understanding such nuances can be a way of emotionally connecting with our own heritage.

These would be lost to us if we retain only basic conversational competencies, or worse, depend on English translations to understand these languages.

## WHAT WE GAINED

All this is not to undermine or downplay the advantage that learning English at a relatively high level has brought to Singaporeans.

On a practical note, Singaporeans' English skills have helped the country on its path of economic growth.

In today's global order, English appears to be the default language of choice in international business, diplomacy and technology.

Multinational companies generally require some knowledge of English in their employees. For example, foreign banks in Japan tend to prefer candidates who can at least manage an interview in English.

Even in China, where English classes in schools were reduced, parents resorted to tuition to help their children learn the language – despite the crackdown on private tutoring.

This means English-speaking Singaporeans can have an edge in the job market over their peers from other countries who learn the language later on in life. It also makes the country attractive to foreigners from English-speaking countries.

For the multiracial population, English is a common language that is also seen as neutral, because it is not assigned to any of the official racial categories as a mother tongue language. It can bring Singaporeans from different races together.

The issue is whether this must be at the expense of the mother tongue language.

## EFFORTS TO RETAIN BILINGUALISM

As more families speak English at home, it becomes harder for children to be effectively bilingual. Thankfully, steps are being taken to arrest this trend.

Education Minister Chan Chun Sing announced the launch of the new 2024 mother tongue languages curriculum at the 2023 Mother Tongue Languages Symposium that aims to make learning more enjoyable.

It will also provide opportunities to use the languages outside the classroom.

Practical Singaporeans also realise that being proficient in more than one language could give one an edge over those who just speak English. Language enrichment classes for children also seem to have become more popular.

For example, many markets are emerging in South-east Asia, where English is not the first or even the working language. Speaking the language most common in these countries would be a definite advantage.

But above all, we must seek to hold on to our mother tongue languages beyond practical reasons alone. They are a part of who we are and where we came from.

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