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SPEECH BY DR LEE CHIAW MENG, THE MINISTER FOR EDUCATION, AT THE FOUNDER'S DAY CEREMONY OF THE ANGLO-CHINESE SCHOOL AT LEE KUO CHUAN AUDITORIUM, BARKER ROAD ON FRIDAY, 1 MARCH 74 AT 8.00 P.M.

1           Eighty eight years ago, Anglo-Chinese School was founded with the primary objective of teaching a second language to the local people. In the year 1885, a young English surveyor-turned-pastor, Rev William Fitzjames Oldham, came to open up Christian work in Singapore. Soon his activities and interest extended beyond his clerical work. Among his many friends were a group of Chinese merchants whom he met while lecturing on Astronomy at the "Celestial Reasoning Association", a society for young Chinese who wished to improve their English. Although he declined to tutor them, Rev Oldham persuaded them to send their sons to him to study the language instead. So, on March 1, 1886, the Anglo-Chinese School was formally opened in a shophouse at No 70 Amoy Street with 13 pupils. Eighty eight years later, with opportunity for education available to every child of school-going age, the study of a second language in Singapore has assumed an importance that could not be envisaged by the founder of A.C.S. Every school is to be a bilingual school in the real sense.

2           Our bilingual policy is not new. It was introduced in 1959, when the present Government assumed office. But many developments have taken place, and bilingualism in schools today is quite different from what it was a few years ago. I should like to explain as simply as I can what the differences are, so that misconceptions about our language policy may be removed once and for all.

3 In the beginning, bilingualism was conceived of as the study of two languages, one more important than the other. The more important of the two, called the first language, was also the medium of instruction for all the other subjects in the curriculum. The less important of the two, called the second language, was studied as though it was a foreign language, and not used as a medium of instruction for other subjects at all.

4 One consequence of this concept of bilingualism was that second language teachers had to be specially trained, since the methodology of teaching a second or foreign language is different from that of teaching a first language. But in Singapore the first language is not necessarily the mother tongue. For example, in the English schools we have the unique situation of Chinese pupils studying English as their first language and their mother tongue as their second language. The same situation applies to Malay and Tamil pupils studying in English schools. And so we were faced with the unusual problem of devising a method to teach pupils their mother tongue as a second language.

5 Our concept of bilingualism today is completely different. It consists of two languages of equal importance, and both are used as media of instruction for other subjects in the curriculum. The two languages are the pupils' mother tongue and English. They cannot be anything else because we want to preserve our moral value and cultural heritage through the mother tongue and, at the same time, take advantage of English as the language of science and technology, of trade and commerce, of international communication.

To make these two languages of equal importance, we give them almost equal time in the timetable or as nearly equal as our staffing resources permit. This year, many primary I and II classes are already devoting 57% of teaching time to one language and 43% to the other.

6           One possible consequence of this fundamental change in future is that there will no longer be any need to train second language teachers as such. When the exposure time for the two languages is about equal, then the methodology of teaching English to English schoolchildren and the methodology of teaching English to Chinese schoolchildren would not differ much from each other. Similarly, the methodology of teaching Chinese to Chinese schoolchildren and the methodology of teaching Chinese to English schoolchildren would be similar. What we did at the beginning of this year, is to transfer teachers from Chinese, Malay and Tamil schools to English schools to teach these languages and transfer teachers in English schools to Chinese, Malay and Tamil schools to teach English. In this way, the pupils' second language is in fact taught by teachers who have been educated and trained in that language as their first language. Eventually, the distinction between first language and second language will disappear altogether. The pupils will simply learn two languages and other subjects taught in these languages, while the teachers will be equally at home teaching in either language.

7           Against this backdrop, I hope the passage of time will blur the distinction between pupils educated in the different streams, and thereby eliminate the unfounded prejudices, the difference in sense of values and outlook

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of life, characteristics of products of the past school system. It is not uncommon for people to regard themselves as 'Chinese-educated' or English-educated'. This artificial distinction creates a barrier between people and forms a hindrance to social cohesion.

8           In making such fundamental changes involving so many teachers, teething problems are inevitable. But I am glad to say that these problems become fewer and fewer day by day. As of 15 February 1974, out of a total staffing requirement of 11,445 teachers in Primary schools, the actual staffing situation showed excesses of 3 teachers in Malay schools and 5 teachers in Tamil schools, and shortages of 3 teachers in English schools and 1 teacher in Chinese schools. Overall, there was an excess of 4 teachers. This was achieved by deploying some primary teachers in the English stream, who had the requisite basic qualifications, to teach in lower secondary classes, and by asking a small number of teachers, about 1% to teach in their second language. In the latter case, only those who had claimed to be able to teach in that language were given the assignment. Some of them have since changed their minds, and adjustments are being made wherever possible. Against this, we must remind ourselves that only a couple of years ago, we have to employ hundreds of relief-teachers to man these classes.

9           In an exercise of this magnitude, there are bound to be some undesirable side effects and problems. For example, we have underestimated the "cultural shock" experienced by teachers transferred to another language stream; principals and teachers have not fully prepared themselves psychologically

for these changes; the Ministry has over-posted English teachers to non-English stream initially resulting in a slight shortage of English teachers in certain schools. We are ironing out these problems. Various in-service courses are being conducted for those affected. Meanwhile, we are planning and making preparations for the second and last massive transfer exercise at the end of this year to complete these developments in primary schools.

10           This brings me back to my starting point, which is that A.C.S. was founded with the primary objective of teaching a second language to local Chinese. I hope that it will also live up to its name by becoming a truly bilingual school. If it succeeds in doing this, I have no doubt that A.C.S. will continue to enjoy the reputation of being one of the finest schools in the Republic.

11           It now remains for me to wish your school a very happy 88th birthday.