

TRANSCRIPT OF “BILINGUALISM” – A DISCUSSION WITH THE
PRIME MINISTER

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Announcer: In tonight’s television discussion on bilingualism, we have in the studio the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew. Seated in the studio is also an audience made up of parents who serve on parent-teacher associations, school advisory and management committees, undergraduates of Nanyang and Singapore universities and teaching staff from the two universities and the Institute of Education.

Questions on bilingualism will be put to the Prime Minister by a

panel of four:

- (i) Dr. Gwee Yee Hean. Dr Gwee has been a teacher, a teacher-trainer and he has lectured at both the Universities of Singapore

and Nanyang. He is currently Senior Lecturer in the History Department of Nanyang University.

(ii) Dr Ruth Wong. Dr Ruth Wong has had teaching and research experience both in the United States and in Singapore. She served as Director of the Institute of Education from 1973 to 1976. She is currently doing a research project on pre-school education and is a part-time student counsellor in the University of Singapore.

(iii) Brother Patrick. Brother Patrick has taught science and mathematics in schools and has served as principal at St Patrick's School and St Joseph's Institution. In 1975 he was appointed principal of Catholic Junior College. He is a member both of the Teachers' Union and the Science Council.

(iv) John Drysdale. Mr Drysdale has lived in Singapore for seven years. He has had diplomatic experience. He is an author of books on Africa, including a grammar book in a northeastern African language. He now edits and writes for the Asia Research Bulletin and the Asean Business Quarterly.

Tay Seow Huah is the chairman of tonight's discussion. He has had extensive administrative experience in the civil service. He rose to the rank of Permanent Secretary in which capacity he served the

Ministry of Home Affairs and later Defence. He now has teaching and research duties as a Visiting Fellow, History Department, University of Singapore.

Tay Seow

Huah: Mr Prime Minister, in your recent speeches on education in Singapore, you described the last 20 years as a messy, massive exercise involving the mass production of schools and teachers and a juggling of languages of instruction. This situation, in your words, has resulted in unbelievable wastage. Such an assessment is brutally frank. And the panel would like to know your reasons for describing the working of our bilingual education policy in such terms.

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Minister: First, because I set my targets very high. I like to achieve the best possible. And I think we have not achieved what we could have for several reasons. First, because education was political football and, therefore, had to be handled not as a non-political issue on how best to bring up children to meet the problems of life in Singapore. And secondly, because of the curious mixture of our society with people

whose mothers and fathers speak some 20 to 30 different dialects and languages, we did not realise the complexities involved in getting them to speak one common language and keeping one language which they are accustomed to before they went to school – the language of the home. And we ended up with four language stream – English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. And really, for the majority of the population, 75% or a large part of the 75% who are ethnic Chinese, we are taking them into schools and teaching them in three languages – trilingualism: dialect at home, Mandarin and English in schools. And the result, of course, because of poor feedback, because of our preoccupation with the politics of Singapore, was considerable wastage in those critical language learning years of the child, the best years being the primary school or, in fact, between birth and primary school. The government's contribution is from primary school onwards, and we could have done much more and I think we can do much more, and will, I hope.

John

Drysdale: What is the present stage of bilingualism, would you say, Prime Minister?

Prime

Minister: It's a very patchy, uneven achievement. At the top part of the segment of the educated in our schools, we would have about 3% to 5% who are effectively bilingual in that they can speak, understand and respond to, two of the languages we teach in schools and read and write in them effectively. These 3% to 5% are the most successful ones. I believe that usually, unless they have very deprived homes, the bright students will make it despite the disadvantage of the home. Of course, if you have very well-endowed homes linguistically in that you have got parents and brothers and sisters who are extremely felicitous in their command of words in two languages and you can speak to your parents in Mandarin and your brothers and sisters in English, then even though you may not be outstanding, you would make the top slot of about 3% to 5%. Then you would have about 10%, maybe 15%, who are very much at home with one language and perhaps adequate in the second language. Then you will have the bulk, the majority, who would be adequate in one language. They can speak it, they can write it, but they are unable to have that same command, that same facility in the second language. They can understand it because understanding is easier than articulation. They can read because reading is easier than writing. They can write but very patchily and

not as well or anywhere as well as their first language. This would be the bulk. I would say about 40% to 50% would be in this category. It would range from very good in one language and adequate or barely adequate in the second, to fair in the first to nearly adequate in the second. Then we have the ones who are unable to make it from the primary to the secondary school. And last year, 28% in the Chinese stream failed to make it from Primary VI, failed their Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination, and 32% failed in the English stream – which is something perhaps, we should have expected because it is easier for a dialect-speaking boy to try and master Mandarin. So the failure rate is lower in the Chinese primary schools than in the English primary schools where most of them are trying to master a foreign language for the first time from Primary 1. So it is a very uneven, patchy result. I don't think we can make it even, because human endowments are not equal. But we can make it less of a waste of effort which I think has taken place.

Dr Ruth

Wong: Prime Minister, I detected a note of regret just now in what you said about not having achieved the best possible standards. Now, given

the conditions that we have – the multilingual society and the variations in the language pattern and also the variations in capacity for language – there is a sort of a population profile that you have just outlined. How would you then try to, without making everyone homogeneously equal, how would you expect the shift?

Prime

Minister: Well, the shift has taken place naturally, by 90% of parents opting for the English stream schools. The problem is how do we work out a system of instruction which, given the endowment of a child at the end of six years – and perhaps later when we have adjusted the number of teachers, extra classrooms required, from 5½ or even 5 years so we can make the primary stage a seven-year spell, seven-year term – they are able to converse, to listen, to read and to write very simply, one language at least with facility. And perhaps for the average, for the bulk – not for those who are finding it difficult to pass the Primary VI examinations into Secondary 1 – but for the majority, an adequate understanding of the second language even if it is not totally adequate capacity to express themselves in the second language either orally or in written form.

I think what has happened is that the bright ones have looked after themselves despite the disadvantages of the system. What we can do more for is the average ones and those who may not be fortunate enough to be as good as the majority.

Dr Gwee

Yee Hean: Mr Prime Minister, I think probably at some point of time, we may have to intervene to say that for the good of the child's education, it might be better that you go into a certain stream of education and receive that education in a certain language. You know, at the moment, it is entirely left to the parents. And, from what you say, it would appear that certain parents have high aspirations but do not realise the limits which their children are capable of attaining. And I think it would also imply why the sort of educational system some people are thinking of having – 50% English, 50% Chinese or 70% , 30%, you know, that sort of magic formula – may not work in terms of the realistic needs of Singapore.

Prime

Minister: It is a topical subject because the Chinese Teachers' Union, both the primary school teachers and the secondary school teachers, are

naturally upset at the falling enrolment and the implications of Nanyang University teaching in the English language. And they see a fall in enrolment. And so they have come out with a formula which the Malay Teachers' Union came out with in 1970 or 71, seven, eight years ago. Let us obliterate the differences by just calling it "Singapore-type national school". But have we solved the problem? They are suggesting that in the primary schools and in the secondary schools up to secondary four, we can have the teaching divided into half – half in Chinese, in Mandarin, half in English. Well, this is politics; this is not education. And I think if I were to put it to a referendum of the parents and if the parents were adequately informed after a long and serious debate – not one which appeals to their emotion but one which presents the realities of what can be achieved by teaching a boy or a girl for five hours a day for 200 days of a 365-day year – I don't think the result is going to be "Yes, I agree with the Chinese Teachers' Union". And if ethnic Chinese parents say yes, that is what they want ... If I have read the Malay Teachers' Union and the parents right and perhaps also the Indians, they say, "No, we don't want 50% of our time for our children in Malay or Tamil." In fact, they have petitioned the Ministry of Education to cut down teaching the Malay language in

schools in order that their children can learn more English. So when the Chinese Teachers' Union put forward these proposals, I think they are only valid for Chinese stream schools. They are proposals which can bring the Chinese stream schools more in keeping with realities. But for them to suggest that that's what the English stream schools should do – and English stream schools include today 25% non-ethnic Chinese, Malays and Indians and others, and 65% ethnic Chinese – I don't think we are going to solve the problem. But let's say we put forward this as a proposal for the Chinese stream. Will it attract growing support from ethnic Chinese parents into the Chinese stream – which will happen if, in fact, the proposal is a sound one and proves over a period of time to be successful in producing bilingual children.

I think yes, the proposal is a sound one for the bright students. And, in fact, for bright students – by 'bright' I would say those who will make it into 'A' levels, who will score 20 points and below for their five 'O' level subjects – I would go one step further and say for those who come from English-speaking homes, they could well have 70% Chinese-medium instruction and 30% English-medium instruction right up till secondary four and switch over into English-

medium instruction in pre-university one and two. So that is feasible. But the average parent, as I understand it, wants his child to have no obstacles in getting a good job. First get into secondary school, get to junior college, get to university; if you can't get into junior college, get into the polytechnic or Ngee Ann – and in fact now, prospects for Ngee Ann and polytechnic graduates are so good many students are turning down offers of junior college places – which means that they want their children to have complete mastery of English and adequate Chinese. I don't think the average parent has reconciled in his mind – when I say 'his' I mean 'her' each time – what is adequate Chinese. They want the maximum, really. If confronted with the choice, “Do you want 90% time in English so that your child will make it into the university, rather than 70% English and 30% Chinese and your child may miss the university?”.

I think the answer would be, “Could you make it 90%?”. So they have not reconciled in their minds what it is they want to achieve. And they have not reconciled themselves to a further uncomfortable reality, namely, that if they want their child to be tutored in Chinese and to find it part of his living life, then it must be the Chinese he speaks outside school, namely, the dialect he speaks at home. But that is not acceptable because to speak a dialect is, amongst the

ethnic Chinese, to be really uneducated. So somehow, that's brushed aside, they say, "No, no, teach him in Mandarin. I'll keep the dialect alive at home for the child." The result is what we have had. Because parents want so much for the children, because the schools tried to accommodate these natural ambitions, and because we did not realise the complexities of trilingualism – speaking dialect at home – so the patchy results. The fortunate thing is, of course, that for the Malays and the Indians, they don't face this problem. Otherwise, we might be in a worse position today.

But I think your point is valid for those who cannot make it from primary into secondary school. And even though the parents send their children into an English stream Primary 1, at the end of the third, maybe fourth year, we may have to decide that the child is likely to be literate in one language if we concentrate in Mandarin because it is closer to the language of the home dialect, and just try and teach him enough oral English, comprehension and expression, to get by for ordinary social purposes. In which case, although the boy is sent to an English stream school, it may well be that 20% -- I hope with yearly retention plus an examination each year, we will cut down the failure rate from the present 30% to perhaps 20% -- but for those at this difficult group, it may be better for them, if they

are unable to cope with two languages, to at least have literacy in one, maybe 1,500 words, simplified Chinese characters.

Dr Wong: But then, the parents will be interested in knowing ... Of course, all parents will want their children to be bilingual in a bilingual society. And if we say that the child has to pass the second language at a certain level to be admitted to the junior college and so on and so forth, parents would like to know how you could lend functional significance to the second language, that is the Mandarin we've been talking about, so that there will be some attempt on the part of the learning individual to identify and say, "This is something I would like to have". Otherwise, the other language which is so obviously important would take over very easily.

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Minister: Well, this depends so much on the attitudes of the home, the family, the extended family and the neighbourhood and society in general. I think in Singapore we have general acceptance that you ought to know something of your past, if for nothing else because you have got to identify yourself, you have got to know why these words and phrases occur. Well, the child hear these words and phrases and he

sees the realities of what is happening around him. Surely it is of relevance to his life to know what these characters are, what they signify and how it formed part of his culture. And it is part of his culture whether he likes it or not. He was born into a home, born into society where these things became part of him. Whether we sustain that right into university now, is I think the problem. It cannot be sustained at university other than for those who want to pursue the learning of Chinese language and literature as a career in itself. I think we can sustain it right up till secondary four because, not only is it part of present day Singapore where up till only ten years ago, 50% of the students were in Chinese stream schools and he has got to communicate with them in Chinese, and there are Chinese newspapers, there are Chinese cinemas and there is Chinese on TV.

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The problem is not that he does not see the significance of learning Chinese, but why should he learn Mandarin when he can get by with Hokkien or some other dialect? And I fear if he can get by in dialect, he will see no sense in his having to learn a complete total set of consonant and vowel values and total changes and

expressions in order to satisfy the Ministry of Education. That is our dilemma.

Dr Gwee: I think Mr Prime Minister, the second language or Chinese in the case of ethnic Chinese, must be sustained to a fairly high level – at least, up to secondary four. I agree with you on that. And also this language must be made into a living language – the language we use in the homes and in the society at large. Another advantage to that would be that we will not then create a sort of a linguistic division among the people, the English-speaking elites and the non-English speaking masses.

Prime

Minister: I am afraid we are in quite a dilemma there. I do not see our succeeding in making Singapore totally monolingual or totally able to meet in English. I have explained the problem of the 28% in the Chinese stream and the 32% in the English stream who could not make it in the PSLE last year. Perhaps we can cut this wastage down to 20% by better teaching, by concentration on language and literacy and numeracy. But you will have this 20% who can only speak one language. So that one language is going to be Mandarin,

Malay and maybe Tamil. I think most Tamils would make it into English. I don't know why. Maybe longer years of the British Raj in India before the Tamils came here. For this 20%, there is no way of moving across into English. So, the slight stigma of being inadequate will remain because the other 80% will make Mandarin and English. So eventually – 'eventually' meaning in about say, 12, 15 years from now – if we are able to arrange our teaching methods and time and slowly alter the speaking environment, you will have a population which is 80% bilingual and 20% monolingual. And because the monolingualism is connected with the mother tongue, and the command of English is with the 80% and the better your command of English, the chances are the higher you will be in the academic ladder, so the unavoidable social connotations of being a monolingualist. Today, you can have an ethnic Chinese who comes from a dialect-speaking home, who has failed in his Mandarin and passed in his English and has gone on to university. That would not happen by another three to five years because as from next year, they have got to get a P7 for their Chinese as a second language at 'O' levels. So they are going to make it. Later on, we may bring it down to P6 and they will make it. I have no doubt that they can. The ones who can make it to university can be bilingual without any

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doubt. It is the people who cannot make it into secondary school who will face this problem.

Dr Gwee: Surely we can make the elite few, the top 3% to 5%, those who are high up on the academic ladder, to have a fairly good command of the indigenous language ...

Prime

Minister: Yes, of course.

Dr Gwee: ... so that you make them at least belong to the people.

Prime

Minister: Yes. I don't disagree with that at all. I have no doubts whatsoever that not only will the bilingual student in university be good in English, his Mandarin and his written Chinese will be better than those who could not make it into Secondary 1. It must be so and therefore, we must insist that it will be so.

Brother

Patrick: Prime Minister, I think we can be more optimistic than that. I feel that a much bigger percentage, at least 50%, of those who passed

PSLE and get to secondary school, I think if the teaching beginning from kindergarten is done in the right way, in other words, with more emphasis on speaking and listening rather than reading and writing, right up through secondary school, up to secondary four, I think there will be enough literacy in Chinese to make it more than just an examination subject and also a vehicle for our ancestral tradition and culture. So I would be more optimistic than Dr Gwee on that.

Prime

Minister: You are stating a pious hope or a reality?

Brother

Patrick: Judging by things as they are, everybody admits that our students study Chinese just as an examination subject. But I blame it on the method of teaching and the emphasis on the written rather than the spoken language. It is up to the teachers concerned to make it something they would be proud of, tied with the culture, tied with the tradition, not just merely learning 2,000 characters. In other words, make it a living thing in the classroom itself. Unfortunately, it is not being done.

Dr Wong: Suppose the parents say, well, the dialect is the proper vehicle for the transmission of culture. How are you going to make Mandarin compete with that kind of motivation?

Brother

Patrick: Accepted that their dialect will take first place at home if the parents continue as they are, but I still feel if the teachers do the right way, they can be so proud of their language that they will read the papers for one thing, they will watch more TV programmes in Mandarin and they will mix more with the Mandarin-speaking group rather than with just the dialect-speaking group.

Prime

Minister: I don't think that is the problem that we face -- that they are not meeting each other. They are. Students from the English stream meet students from the Chinese stream in the army and they are conversing in English or in Hokkien. And this is a tendency which has grown and not slackened with the years. Further, it is a tendency that was first discovered to our horror amongst the privates and, because officers begin to speak to their men, to

Hokkien-speaking platoons in Hokkien, it is now finding its way into the officers' masses. And so instructors who have been instructing their men in Hokkien meet each other in the mass and begin to converse, not in Mandarin, but in Hokkien. So language and usage of a language is not something which we can change overnight or we can change by dictate. I think it is something we have to slowly encourage, cajole, coax and that small modicum of coercion. But eventually, if we are going to teach them in Mandarin in the schools, our problem is: do we accept, sincerely, that this is something we must encourage them to use. And if parents who can speak Mandarin ... And I have canvassed Mandarin-speaking parents who speak to their young children in dialect, and I have often enquired why. He says, "Ah, well, he is not of school age yet. He will learn Mandarin in school." Well, it is wrong because the child will continue to speak to the parents in dialect even after school and worse, it will be an English school where 70% is in English, 30% is in Mandarin. And the child grows up finding the 30% really not relevant to his life because he can cope with non-English speakers through dialect. So there must be first, this conscious appreciations of the realities and then a conscious switching of speech habits. As a government we can change the

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ground rules. We cannot coerce the individual. You need the cooperation of parents. By changing the ground rules, I mean simple things like getting the children from the time they are in school to drop dialect. So whilst they are in school, they will use either English or Mandarin, or English and Malay, or English and Tamil. And in the army, we will make sure that it is either English or Mandarin. And in the government departments, slowly over the years, where a counter officer has to meet the public, for those below 40, he will address in Mandarin and not in dialect; those below 40, who speak dialect will be last in the queue, will be attended to at the end of the queue. Or those below 30, if we want to be kind to those who have missed it. And so in this way you can change their language habits by altering the ground rules. But I think I would be dishonest if I did not admit that we are really up against a very big problem because the more the facility in one language, the greater the tendency to use that language. And the facilities within our population are dialect and Malay – I don't know about Tamil, I think it is not so prevalent amongst the Indians as it used to with the second generation or third generation Indians – and English. We have to keep Mandarin, to make literate the 20%. We have to keep the 80% together with the 20% to communicate freely

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in Mandarin. How do we bring that about? By an edict? By a dictate? The conversational is a relatively simple thing to achieve, conversation over social matters, say, 500 to a thousand words, a vocabulary of 500 to a 1,000. A facility to speak that when you are young. If you have started it in kindergarten, in school and you keep on using it, you can play about with it like building blocks, but it is a limited number of building blocks. But anybody who is bilingual will tell you that one is his master language and that is the one he has got most facility in, where nuances of meaning, finesse in presenting an idea comes with least effort. And the more you use it, the less effort. So what we are witnessing today is a desire on the part of both the parents and of the students to acquire a total facility in English even at the expense of the second language.

And the dilemma we face is that 20%, if we are unlucky it might be 25%, cannot make it.

Ideally, you want a society that speaks one language and it is also the language of the home. Then you have got the perfect situation. Well, we haven't got the perfect situation because we started with an imperfect set of building blocks for this particular nation. And I

do not think there are facile answers. We can get conversation going. But my real problem is, will that conversation ever be 100% understood by the population? And I think no. Because the Malays and the Indians are not learning Mandarin. So they can't communicate with this 20% who will be able to make themselves, I hope, orally understandable in maybe 400, 500 words of English. I am not sure whether this is achievable. But we are going to try so that interaction between people in the markets, in the bazaars and the 'pasar malam' will be possible without using signs, grimaces and gestures.

Mr Drysdale: Brother Patrick is being optimistic, Prime Minister. Can I inject a little pessimism? Supposing your policy does not succeed, what do you think would happen in ten years' time?

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Prime

Minister: It will not fail more than it has failed. That is not possible. We cannot do worse. We will do better, we won't do worse. We may not achieve our best. Our best, as I sketched out at the opening, is really to get 80% of them bilingual, with a varying competence of bilingualism. I may be wrong. It could be that over two

generations, we can get them 100% bilingual. In other words, we may get into a situation where all parents speak Mandarin and English, or Malay and English, or Tamil and English and we may get a generation born after that, except for 20% again, going to school already with a competence in two languages. You never know. Because the learning environment is also changing.

Whereas 15 years ago I could go into Paya Lebar – and, in fact, you still can ... If you go into parts of Paya Lebar and Lorong Tai Seng, you can meet a whole village or kampong that speaks Hainanese.

And for a child in that environment to go to a Chinese school and learn Mandarin and English, and come back and speak Hainanese, and to make it through in English – I think it is a near miracle. But that village will go in about five to seven years, on present planning, and the population will be spread over either Tampines New Town

or Bedok New Town. They are going to be spread over a much more diverse environment and finding a common language in

Mandarin and English. And so when the child goes to school – and the child will go to the nearest school in either Bedok New Town or Tampines New Town or he will go into an English stream school, he will come back, I hope, to speak Mandarin to the parents if they are Mandarin-speaking or, if they are not, then still Hainanese, but

Mandarin to his friends when they meet in the playing fields or the play deck, and English.

Drysdale: You are not frightened of a creole type of language?

Prime

Minister: I am but that is a different matter. It is a different subject because the English that we are beginning to see or hear our people speak is a very strange Singapore pidgin, a Singapore dialect English which is not ideal but which is the best for the time being and which we can improve upon if we concentrate some effort and considerable resources. I think we must – by the time we are spending 600, 700 million dollars a year on education. And since parents want their children to speak English, let us speak an English which will be understood anywhere and everywhere in the English-speaking world. And I do not think it is impossible of achievement in a very special situation, a special location like Singapore. It is highly urbanised, the mass media is 100% effective, travellers from all over the world converge and meet and interact with our population and more and more of our people are travelling, both for pleasure and for business. And perhaps I am a perfectionist, but since we have decided to make English a working language, let us make it a

language which will be understood anywhere in the world and nobody will have difficulty in hearing us and understanding us and we will have no difficulty in understanding any English-speaking person anywhere in the world. And I say this for Mandarin, too.

Dr Wong: I think parents will all say that their children somehow, are adverse to learning Mandarin. So I think we will have to look into the measures of how to support the learning of this language. We can aim at certain standards, but we have got to get them started. In some way the children have gained an aversion to the language – in the English schools at least.

Prime

Minister: No, in some schools. In some schools where the attitudes of parents and the principal and the senior teachers have made children consider the time being spent on Mandarin as detracting from what they could otherwise achieve in their other subjects in the English language, both in English and in their other non-language subjects because to them it is so time consuming. And it is fundamentally a question of approach. And I am afraid the approach of the child is not something which the school can decide. It is how the home

decides. I had no problem motivating or encouraging my children to learn languages because they were seeing me sweating my guts out learning how to make myself understood in Mandarin, in Hokkien and in Malay. So to them it was fun – it was beating their father at how to do it better than he can, and which they can do now because they started at an age when it is easy for them. And so there was no need to motivate them. But if they came from a home where the father says, “Look, don’t spend too much time on this. You might jeopardise your chances of scoring distinction in mathematics and physics and chemistry or general science, biology – just concentrate on them. Because, after all, it doesn’t matter whether you pass or fail (Mandarin)” – well then, we are in for trouble.

Dr Wong: But I am not sure that is the picture now since the Ministry has set a minimum standard of pass.

Prime

Minister: I am quite sure now they will make the effort and pass.

Dr Wong: You think they will pass?

Prime

Minister: Yes. I have no doubts whatsoever that the Singapore student is a very rational human being. If you set him certain norms and say, "This is the obstacle course and to get this prize you will clear the obstacles and if you stumble over more than three obstacles you will fail, and if this one obstacle you do not clear, you are disqualified" – he will clear that obstacle. But he will set about it in a thoroughly rational way. He will say, "What is it they require of me? A love for the language? No. Because they can't test that. They require of me the ability to translate maybe five sentences in one paragraph, a set piece. To answer certain questions, to pick certain answers in a multiple choice question". Well, he will set out to get A-7 in that test and to be interviewed by an examiner to make sure he is competent in the language. He will master that.

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Dr Gwee: Mr Prime Minister, I think if the people of Singapore can appreciate the importance you attach to Mandarin, well, you know, that language would be used. Because right now, people feel that it is not important and they feel that English is all important. Therefore we learn English and do Chinese just to pass examinations. So as you said just now if, for example, the counter clerk in government

departments, in dealing with the public, the non-English speaking public, instead of speaking to them in dialects, they could speak to them in Mandarin, I think that would be at least half the battle won. And I think this would also help written Chinese because there is a one-to-one correspondence between the spoken Mandarin and the written form, not in dialects. In fact, the written form is “bai hua” (白话): as you know, it is colloquial Chinese. So if Mandarin, in fact, is spoken instead of dialects, we would have a better bilingual situation, at least in regard to Mandarin.

Brother

Patrick: Mr Prime Minister, coming back to the “aversion” that Dr Ruth Wong referred to, and the need to emphasise the importance of Mandarin in schools: I think the view of the Chinese Teachers’

Union – about giving 50% time to English and Chinese – I think that would help to make the two languages important enough to parents and students right from the start, beginning, I repeat, from kindergarten.

Prime

Minister: Yes, we should put that to the test by offering that kind of mix in the Chinese stream school. But I do not believe that the majority of parents who have opted for the English stream for their children will agree with you, and definitely the Malays and Indians will oppose that because it means that for 50% of the time, they will be forced to do subjects in Malay or Tamil, and that is not what they send their children to English schools to do. Let us make this offer. Fifty percent in English, 50% in Chinese/Mandarin; or 50% in English, 50% in Malay – Chinese stream schools, Malay stream schools. English stream schools: 70% English, 30% in the second language. And the choice will be known within a matter of days of registration.

Brother

Patrick: But there will still be a problem. The parents have to be convinced that the teachers you send to the Chinese schools to teach English, and those to teach English in the Malay schools, would be competent. That has been the trouble all the time.

Prime

Minister: No – that’s part of the trouble. I think it is not the whole trouble. If you study some of the curious results we get in the English stream, you will understand how much the thought processes are influenced by early sentence structures, early meaning early in life. It is very common to get ‘O’ level certificate with a P7 or a P8 for English in the English stream – P7, P8 ‘O’ levels – and a P3 for Chinese as second language and with very high marks in mathematics. So with 70%, sometimes 80%, in English, the child has scored a P3 with 30% of the time in CL2, Chinese as a second language, and a 7 or 8 for EL1, English as a first language.

So I would not be dogmatic, I would not start off and say, “Well, if we spend 50% and 50% for five hours a day, for 200 days out of 365, we will get this result.” No. Let us take each individual case.

What is he or she speaking at home? What backing from brothers, sisters, neighbours, friends, relatives and often, private tuition for those who can afford it, massive voluminous hours in private tuition – what is the backing? And if, before they start school at 6 plus, the wiring in the brain is the Chinese sentence structure, the dialect sentence structure – and it is only very slightly different between dialect and Mandarin as Professor Gwee has pointed out but vastly

different between dialect and English – they will find it a great problem. So who am I to dictate to the parents? I can offer the parents, “Here are a group of teachers, both in unions and not in unions who recommend this.” My advice is: the home background must be a very important factor in choosing. I have not the slightest doubt that if you are English speaking at home, then the maximum advantage is obtained for your child in a Chinese language school. You will have no problem getting the child to speak idiomatic English. You can correct it each time the child is lazy and does a word-for-word transposition and translation. But if you are not Mandarin speaking, you are dialect speaking, you cannot do that for his Mandarin. So let him go to a Mandarin-teaching school.

But I would object very seriously if I had been forced to choose for my children a school which taught 50% of the time in Mandarin and 50% of the time in English because I would say, “No, that’s not what I want.” In fact, I wanted them 100% or nearly 90% of the time in Mandarin because they would have no problems with their English – as I proved it right in the end. And despite speaking Mandarin from the age of three, and speaking in dialect before that, at the end of the period, in a nearly complete Chinese/Mandarin-

speaking environment, two of my children, I know, use English as their master language. After, in the case of one of them, 12 years, from primary one to 'A' levels, the other two from primary one to secondary four. And yet, because of the influence of the home, their master language is English. Only one is able to speak and write idiomatic Chinese, not influenced by the English sentence structure. So I would be very loathe to lay down laws. I would say, put down various options; and no school, unless it is a boarding school and has more than 200 days a year, can compete against the impact of language at home.

Chairman: Well, at this stage, Mr Prime Minister, I would suggest that we adjourn after which the floor will be opened to the audience to address their questions to you.

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Prime

Minister: Very well. Thank you.

Question-and-answer session following the panel discussion with the

Prime Minister on “Bilingualism”

Chairman: Ladies and gentlemen, the Prime Minister has agreed to deal with questions from the floor as well as from the panel. Any questions please?

Miss Chan

Mo-Yu: Mr Prime Minister, I'm Chan Mo-yu, 2nd year Commerce student of Nanyang University. The emphasis of the forum today has been on bilingualism, on both written and spoken Mandarin and English. But (if) about 20% of the students fail in their primary school leaving examination, would it be better to set different levels of competence in language skill for the students involved?

Prime

Minister: Yes, of course. We cannot expect the students who cannot make secondary one to have anywhere near the level of competence in either the first or the second language – if he can make a second language – compared to a student who gets through his university.

Even a first language command of a primary six or a PSLE student who did not make it, will not be equal to a second language competence of a university student who has done it. It is the luck of the endowment of a person, of a child. But by the time a person can make it to university and has shown the intellectual and linguistic competence to have made it to university, then I say if we have had our education system set it out right, that person should have been competent in both languages without any difficulty.

That is the point I regret very much.

We failed to understand the complexities of our own society, the inadequacy of the schools in matching what was lacking in the home and therefore missed giving to the student who had the capacity to make it and who had got into university and shown that he or she has the capacity. We did not use those critical years, those critical learning years when oral expression could have been taught so painlessly. That is what I meant. I think we failed there. We could not have made somebody who did not pass his PSLE three times, however much we tried to and concentrated on him as an individual, we could not have got him into junior college. It's just not possible.

But the person who had already got into university, to have missed teaching him or her oral fluency – written fluency you can acquire however late in life – but oral fluency and the capacity to catch sounds and to reproduce sounds, we missed that. That was a pity. I hope I have made myself clear?

Miss Chan: What I meant was that can we stress more on the spoken ability of the students in the primary school so that if they pass their primary school leaving examination, then when they reach the secondary level, the emphasis will be more on the written side?

Prime

Minister: I am not an educationist, I don't want to venture into this field. By and large, I would agree with you, I would subscribe to the view that the younger the child, the more we concentrate on the listening and speaking rather than reading and writing. That is the part that seems to atrophy: the capacity to learn, seems to atrophy faster. The reading and writing does not seem to atrophy: the capacity in the brain. And, therefore, by and large, I would agree with you but I am no educationist and therefore, I should really leave this to people

who have studied growth and development rates of the physical, mental and oral aptitudes of children.

Miss Chan: Thank you.

Chairman: Next question.

Miss Liu

Min Kune: Mr Prime Minister, you have said that if the Ministry of Education sets a certain level of competence, you have no doubt that students will make the effort to pass the second language. Don't you think the problem is, how do we take these students from the point of merely learning the language for the sake of passing exams to the point of functioning in the language as part of their total life?

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Prime

Minister: You are now talking about English or about Mandarin?

Miss Liu: For English stream students it will be Mandarin, for Chinese stream students it will be English.

Prime

Minister: I don't quite agree with that. I think it will take too long to describe how we got where we are, the situation that exists today. But there is no difficulty today of getting the students to speak English: there is no problem. They want to speak English. They are shy perhaps, to start with but the desire to master it is there. The problem is to provide them with the facility to express themselves adequately so that people can understand them. As I can see it, the problem is Mandarin because they can get by through life, and if we go in this way, they will continue to get by through life, without using Mandarin but just by using dialect. And that condition – of language use in society – we must monitor and consciously decide to encourage more use of Mandarin, even if it means less dialect outside the homes of those who cannot speak anything but dialect. I have not made my point? Please.

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Miss Liu

Min Kune: What I mean is, say Mandarin, how do we tell students that they do not just learn for the sake of passing exams but to the point of functioning in the language?

Prime

Minister: Let's take English. We don't have to tell any student, either from the English or the Chinese stream, that they are not learning English just for the sake of passing their examination. They have got to use English. We have got to a point now where everybody understands that. The difficulty does not arise with Malay because the Malays speak Malay and so it does not arise. I assume that is the case with Tamil too. The problem is the Chinese can get by with dialect, without Mandarin. Therefore, perhaps, we should, if that's the wish of parents, teach them dialect, and then they will speak better dialect than their fathers or mothers or their grandfathers and everybody may be happy. But will they? I don't think so. I think they want both Mandarin and dialect and English. And I am saying that for the average student, that is not possible. Therefore, a conscious choice must be made.

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Prof Teh

Hoon Heng: Mr Prime Minister, I am Teh Hoon Heng from Nanyang University.

It seems that there's still fear among some Chinese-educated parents that bilingualism in Singapore is just a disguise of monolingualism; namely, English plus a few sentences in Mandarin such as "Ngee how ma?" (你好吗?) "Shia shia ngee" (谢谢你) "Dui bu

chee” (对不起). I am sure that won't happen ... What do you think of this?

Prime

Minister: No, I don't think that will happen. Mandarin is already a part of Singapore. There are people who speak it, there are people who write it; they are in the newspapers, they are in the publishing houses, they are in the universities, they are in the schools. Lives and lives in being could go on, with our life expectancy maybe 70 plus years but you can't lose it. What you can lose is a high standard of it in both the written and the spoken form. That is something we can lose. And if you see the standard of written Chinese today in the newspapers, perhaps it is good because it is more simple, it is more “Chen Pai” (简白). But, at the same time, occasionally, I have gone through phrases with my teacher – and I do this regularly just to keep up my own competence – and he says, “No, this has been used wrongly”. In other words, the standard of Chinese of the journalist has gone down and I think that is because of bilingualism. It is the price we have to pay. I have discussed this matter with the Chinese press and they say a Chinese journalist who does not know English is of no commercial value; he's useless in

the Chinese press because you are dealing with visitors, with ministers, with agency reports, Reuters, AP, UPI in English. And if somebody has got to translate it for you, then it is not possible. So you have to read it in English, decide what is important and pick it up. Or listen to what is being said in English. A visitor comes, speaks to you, you pick up the important points, not get the whole thing translated.

The result is a slightly lower standard of Chinese because in order to make his English, he has to programme his mind for every item, two words. It is not easy and there is some loss of refinement, polish elegance. That is the price we pay. So I do not think it will be lost. What may happen if this goes on, and I see it going on in the nature of our economic development over the next 15 more years, not only has Nanyang University got to go into English to survive, to have good students, I see the junior colleges using more English and teaching Chinese only as a subject – language, and perhaps for those who are interested, literature – two subjects. And some will go on and do it at university as one of their subjects. I do not believe, five years from now, any student is going to go into Nanyang or the University of Singapore and do Chinese and

Chinese literature as the sum total of their BA degree. Because he will have no job other than to teach and that will constrict his horizon. He is no use to the newspapers. Therefore, the price will be this loss of the high gloss, not regrettable but perhaps, not a total loss because it can always be revived and re-polished if needs be. And I think part of our duty is to see that it is not lost.

S.

Gopinathan: Mr Prime Minister, I am Gopinathan from the Institute of Education.

You have placed considerable importance on the home environment for the language achievement of the pupils. The reality is that the home environment is very largely dialect speaking. It is the dialect that many homes consider as their mother tongue. And yet we want to try and persuade them to take on Mandarin, to speak Mandarin

and to motivate their children to learn Mandarin. How do you think

this can be done? I also have a related question and that is: Why

Mandarin? I've never quite had the background to why Mandarin

instead of the dialects. And I ask this because I'm told that in Hong

Kong, the Chinese medium schools use the Cantonese dialect.

Presumably, the same economic and cultural imperatives that we

have would also apply to the Chinese speakers in Hong Kong.

Prime

Minister: It is a very complex answer and I will try and reduce it into simple terms even at the risk of missing the nuances.

First, if we stick to dialect, which we can, then we will be sticking to something like 15 different dialects. Some can understand each other like various kinds of Hokkien, Foochew, Chuan Chew Hokkien, Teochew, perhaps. Then you have other groups which may become unintelligible to each other. In which case, you reinforce English as the common language.

So what is the point of learning the dialect at all other than to satisfy sentimental desires of the older generation. Further, if we are going to learn this written script, let us learn it to the fullest advantage.

This is a script which is being taught to some 800 million people, another few tens of millions scattered around the world. Why not learn it to the fullest advantage? And we will also be able to converse across dialect groups. It makes communication within the Chinese community easier. And most critical of all, I come back to this 20%, I hope only 20%, who may never make it into secondary

school, who are left with one effective language and perhaps a spoken smattering of English – if they are going to stick to dialect, they won't be able to talk to each other. Perhaps they can, as they do in Hong Kong: they all learn Cantonese. And if we allow Singapore to go on, if the Government does not intervene and pose the question to parents, then I think we will develop in Singapore a Singapore Hokkien as there is a Penang Hokkien, a special patois. And it will emerge. Is it desirable? If I thought it were, I wouldn't have raised this matter.

Mr Tan

Tai Wei: Mr Prime Minister, I am Tan Tai Wei of the Institute of Education. On this point again, of discouraging dialects, surely this is not just a matter of maintaining sentimental links with the older generations.

Because, after all, on the other hand, we want to talk about promoting the transmission of traditional values through a second language and it seems to me that this link between the child and his grandparents, grandaunts and uncles and so on will be very important for this kind of cultural continuity.

Prime

Minister: Yes. Therefore, I conceded where parents or grandparents cannot speak Mandarin, they should continue – and they will continue whatever the Government decides – to speak in the only language they know; namely, the dialect. But if you do that and you don't consciously encourage and you are not consciously aware, that you will then make the learning of Mandarin and exercise in learning an artificial language not a real-life language, you are just wasting the child's time and the teacher's effort.

This is again part of Singapore: "I want English, I want dialect, I want Mandarin. And you say with French perhaps I'll get a good job? Well, I'll do French too." But there is a limit. If I can use this metaphor very loosely, there is a limit to what you can grasp with one hand – the number of grains of sand or pebbles, if you will, with one hand. In a very vague way, there is a limit to any individual's grasp of instant recall of words – for vocalisation or for writing.

The educationists tell me that you require 2,500 to 3,000 characters to read a simple Chinese newspaper. I don't know if all our secondary four students can achieve that standard but I think all 'A' level students who pass even in Chinese as second language should

achieve that standard and particularly those going on to university can achieve that standard. That I am convinced of.

Because if you can command 5,000 to 7,000 words in your first language – an average university student, a lower second, would have 5,000 to 6,000 words either in Chinese if he is in Nanyang, or in English if he is in Sintah – you can have at least half that in your second language. This is not asking too much. It is not possible to have say 6,000 words or phrases in your first language and the same number in your second. It's not possible, or you will spend all your time learning languages and the other name for calling something or expressing an idea. But whilst you are young and you can pick up the sounds, you can work up a vocabulary. I believe by secondary four, a vocabulary of 1,500 to 2,500 for the average student in the second language is achievable. 1,500 definitely. Not adequate to read either the English or the Chinese newspaper but an adequate basis on which to build on if you choose to build on it. Life is a constant daily business of learning, of forgetting what you have learnt and are not using, of learning new things which you have to use.

Have I satisfied you?

Mr Tan

Tai Wei: Yes, thank you.

Mr Ng

Ser Kwei: Mr Prime Minister, I'm Ng Ser Kwei from Commerce, 2nd year student Nanyang University. My question is this: For ethnic Chinese who are from dialect-speaking families and who have gone to English schools and are taking Mandarin as a second language, what form of incentives or disincentives should we adopt to convince and encourage these students to take up Mandarin or brush up Mandarin, do well in Mandarin early in life? Convincing them that Mandarin is a language of utility as well as part of their heritage?

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Prime

Minister: Let's be brutally frank to ourselves. It is not part of our heritage, the spoken part isn't, that is the problem. If it were, the problem would not have arisen. Dialect is part of the heritage, the spoken heritage. The written heritage was "wen yen" (文言), literary Chinese. The problem was raised by our Indian friend from the

Institute of Education: Why Mandarin? Well, because if we stick to dialect, is it worth the effort? Do we want to cut ourselves off, after spending all this time, from a whole mass of humanity speaking this language? Is it wise? So how do we get this across to a child? I do not think you can argue with a child. You just create the language environment so that the child begins to speak it before he begins to question why he is speaking it. And if we can create it – it is like the chicken and the egg, once we have created it, we have achieved it. How to achieve it? By the time we start arguing ... We argue as adults. If you are convinced that we are doing right, then do you want to speak dialect to your children or your brothers and sister? You ought to change: you should not. And I have myself made a conscious attempt with all those who work with me, that I will not speak dialect. If I know they are English-speaking or Mandarin-speaking, they will speak in either one of the two. And a conscious effort must be made by those who can think, to create this environment for those who are in no position to think but who will absorb it and make it part of their heritage because we have created it for them.

Miss Grace

Toh: Mr Prime Minister, I'm Grace Toh, Social Work student from the University of Singapore. Given the importance of the whole environment in the acquiring of a living language, I feel that the parent is a very important factor in the teaching and learning of language. I would like to know if measures to motivate parents' interest in the relevant languages and possibly teaching them to use the language to provide that environment for the child, could be explored?

Prime

Minister: Could I get the last part of the question?

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Miss Grace

Toh: Measures to motivate parents' interests in the relevant languages. By relevant languages, I mean English and Mandarin, especially Mandarin, because that's the language which I feel not many parents are very interested in, and possibly teaching them to use the languages so that they could provide the environment for the child.

Could we explore such measures?

Prime

Minister: It's a very vast and complex problem and I don't know where to begin.

Miss Grace

Toh: Yes, it is.

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Prime

Minister: It's the chicken and the egg problem. I will give you an account of this so you will understand why I say it is complex. If we did not have to take into account people's wishes and convenience and emotions, then I think it is possible to do it faster by just making it

inconvenient, awkward and even embarrassing for people to use dialect. We could cut down on dialect programmes; we can recreate slowly, the atmosphere which was created in the Chinese schools in the years before the war, when the speaking of dialect was an admission that you were uneducated. We can recreate that. It's very awkward but you could put the dialect speaker on the defensive. After a while, the bus driver, the bus conductor, the taxi driver, feels that he has got to speak Mandarin or his customer will say "Well, you are uneducated". And that can be a tremendous social pressure. Unfortunately, in order to get myself understood, to win votes, I set a bad example. I went and learnt Hokkien and started speaking publicly in Hokkien and legitimised the speaking of dialect, not realising at that time that I was putting the seal of legitimacy, of good language speaking habit. So, the other MPs, the other ministers, did likewise. And so it seeped down – the clan associations, the community centre leaders who used to speak Mandarin switched into dialect and set a bad example for the children who were hanging around watching the proceedings. So the difficulty of one man, one vote, and ideal language solutions. If I switch off immediately and don't use Hokkien anymore, it is a rebuke to all those who speak Hokkien, a rebuke that I myself am

National Archives of Singapore

not prepared to administer, because it is a rebuke that I should administer first to myself for having encouraged it. But I think slowly I will have to take the Hokkien dialect-speaking population with me in this argument – that we can't have our cake and eat it. It is not possible. A few people can; I can, I have to: I have no choice. For me to speak in Mandarin when I know that half the audience is not following me, especially the older half, is a loss that I cannot incur. And for me to ask an interpreter to transmit my ideas when I can hear the interpreter losing my meaning is not something I can accept. But should I impose on every student the need to learn English, Mandarin and dialect? There are times, at the end of an election campaign, when I am speaking to somebody and wanting a glass of water, I find myself speaking to someone I've spoken Mandarin all the time to, "Hor wah chi puay" (给我一杯). I have got into the habit and it is bad and the habit must be broken. It is not possible to have every item around me, to remember it in its Mandarin and in its Hokkien. It is an imposition completely unnecessary. Worse, it is not just transmuting sounds. A different phraseology is used for the same concept. I have to learn it. Must every Singaporean? If it is of advantage, yes. Is it of

advantage? I say not for the price that I have seen being paid. It is as simple as that.

Have I met your point?

I cannot motivate the parent to motivate his or her child to speak Mandarin. I can create that environment by encouraging it, by making sure that at peak hours, viewing time over the radio and over TV, in the schools, in the camps, at government counters, they are speaking Mandarin. And I hope by social pressure, slowly to get it spoken amongst the young in the shops, in the buses, in the cinemas and the hawker centres.

Miss Grace

Toh: I agree with you. But I was thinking that, at present, before we have a generation where people on the whole, the majority, are able to speak in either English or Mandarin, we could help the children at present trying to learn the languages by helping the parents; maybe, you know, in some form of training so that they could encourage the children to speak ...

Prime

Minister: You mean we teach the parents to teach their children? Adult Education will be inundated. No, no.

Dr Ruth

Wong: I think Mr Prime Minister, a better method might be for you to use your Hokkien that you used in a way without realising that it had influenced others, now to use this Hokkien to recapitulate, by using it psychologically, to explain the new situation.

Prime

Minister: It is easier said than done. Each time I use it, I am reinforcing the habit.

Mr Saidi

bin Shariff: Mr Prime Minister, I'm Saidi bin Shariff, member of Parent-Teachers' Association of Pasir Panjang English Primary School.

Before I put this question to you, let me just say this. As a father, and I'm quite sure many parents share the same view as mine, we would like to have our children to be equally competent not only in English language but in our own mother tongue. And, of course, for the Malays, it will be English language and Malay. Although you

mentioned that the Malays do not have much problem about this, I think we do have because some of our Malay parents, our grandparents, still talk in their dialect. For example, my late father still spoke in Javanese because he came from Central Java and, as you know, the Boyanese community, they do speak Boyanese amongst themselves.

Prime

Minister: My goodness!

Mr Saidi

bin Shariff: Anyway, I think because most of the Malays went to Malay schools, Malay has, in fact become the means of communication amongst the Malay community. So there's not much problem. I think the choice would be English language and Malay. But of course from the discussion, I gather there are problems of the Chinese community to make it English language and Mandarin and to perhaps forget the dialects. Now, I also gathered from the discussion that the impact of this home background plays an important or influential part in a person's achievement of competence in any particular language, and that's why you have

problems about poor English and also a poor second language. We know that parents choose English schools. This is because of their consideration for the children's future since English is very important. Now, from my observation, my two children who went to primary school and were taught in two languages, the second language Malay and the main language English, I notice now they are in the secondary school, they have difficulties particularly in the second language. For example, if they are asked to write a composition, they have to ask me how to proceed because there is a lack of Malay words for them and they are able to write in English better than they can write in Malay. So my question is: What do you think of my own suggestion, perhaps, to solve this vast problem that we have – that children should go to a primary school in their mother tongue and then proceed to a secondary school in English?

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Prime

Minister: We offered you that choice and you could have taken your children to a Malay school and learn English as a subsidiary language, and you could have switched from primary six to secondary one from a Malay to an English language stream school.

Mr Saidi

bin Shariff: But there were changes in our education where the stress is more on English, where you find the Malay secondary schools were turning more with English school students ...

Prime

Minister: No ... We offered that choice to Malay parents like yourself and you opted for the English school. As I have said, take any individual. Let's say you take a university graduate: if the command in the first language is about 6,000 to 7,000 words, I would consider 3,000 words in the second language as adequate. If you want the same competence, 7,000 words in the second language, then he has got to be a professional interpreter. And to keep up that level of competence, you must be interpreting every day.

I have spoken to someone who was a court interpreter. He has given up, he is not an interpreter anymore, he is a judge now, a magistrate. He was qualified to interpret for four dialects into English and, in fact, he knew five. I asked him now that he had ceased interpreting for a good 17 years, could he interpret? He said “No, I understand. But I think I can, given a bit of practice.” Even though he had listened to all that variety of dialects every day.

If you want complete and equal facility, you want to be totally ambidextrous, then unless God made you that way, it is going to take a lot of effort. It is not possible. I say this from my own experience – that at the start of an election campaign, my Malay and my Hokkien would not be as fluent as at the end of the campaign, because normally, I would not use Malay or Hokkien. If I have to do any speaking, I would use Mandarin. So, it is usage. But what I am saying is, what we can achieve with bilingualism is not immediate instant facility, equal with both, but a hard core of the basic understanding of the language on which to build if you want to. And, at the end of secondary four, your son and your daughter should – if the schools are right in telling me this – achieve in the second language, the standard of two classes below the first

language. In other words, in secondary four, when your son and daughter do their 'O' levels, if they pass in their Malay, they would have passed secondary two Malay – which means less vocabulary and probably less complex sentence structures but enough to build on. And if you haven't learnt it young enough, to learn it in your adult life is real torture. But if your definition of bilingualism or your expectation of your child is equal facility, so she can take a pencil and write an essay in Malay or in English, then I say, "Well, you should have sent her to an English school" – which you have done, or send her back and repeat it in a Malay school. Which was what we have offered the Chinese pre-university one students – an extra year to catch up. Do their Chinese pre-university two in two years and repeat an extra year, just picking up the English. But they won't. But if that is the level you want your children to reach, there is no way that we can achieve it without more time. And even if you spend that more time, unless they are using it every day to that same degree of competence, the memory process, recall, instant recall, the retrieval, will not be there for that whole range of vocabulary.

My Hokkien is lacking in the social graces, what they call conversational; you know, "Have a cup of tea", "How nice", "Isn't

it a beautiful day?” and “Would you not like to go to the pictures?”

But I have got a very wide vocabulary in political terms – which is what I require. But what is the use of my trying to learn all the courtesies? Every time I sit on a platform, I hear the chairman of the meeting coming out with long-winded, very elegant literary phrases which has no great relevance to me. I have not bothered to learn them. Perhaps I should, but I don’t think I can cope – filling up my mind with flourishes which I don’t really require. I have to pare it to the bone and the bone includes hard political concepts which I must reduce into simple terms to get it across. So if you want complete facility, then no other way than, perhaps, after primary six, stay on, repeat in Malay, primary six, one year; then go to secondary four in English, and repeat Malay secondary four.

Mr Saidi National Archives of Singapore

bin Shariff: What I mean by ‘equal competence’ is that you know you are a member of the Malay community, you know your language, you know your culture, to have this feeling of being a Malay, you stick to your cultural values and so on. That’s what I mean. I do not mean ‘equally competent’ in the sense that you can translate any

time Malay/English, English/Malay, which I think is really difficult.

Because I think that is what we want ...

Prime

Minister: But surely your children have got this?

Mr Saidi

bin Shariff: Yes, to a certain extent but not really satisfactory ...

Prime

Minister: Not satisfying to you?

Then you should protest that the Malay Teachers' Union should have suggested that we cut down the teaching of Malay. Did you support that proposal? You read that proposal?

Mr Saidi

bin Shariff: I'm aware of that proposal.

Prime

Minister: You read it. Did you agree?

Mr Saidi

bin Shariff: I haven't thought of it.

Prime

Minister: You haven't thought about it? Now that you have thought about it, do you support it?

Mr Saidi

bin Shariff: But at that point, I think, at first we all believed that there should be more English, you know ...

Prime

Minister: At that time you also believed that there should be more English?

Now do you believe there should be more English?

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Mr Saidi

bin Shariff: I think there should be equally more ...

Prime

Minister: You want more of both you mean. Well, perhaps, we should have two lifetimes.

Dr Gwee: He is a Singaporean.

Prime

Minister: (to Dr Gwee) Maybe, you have a point.

Fong Hoe

Fang: Mr Prime Minister, I'm Fong Hoe Fang, from the Department of Social Work, University of Singapore. I have a suspicion that there are families which are able only to converse in dialects and not Mandarin or in English and there are quite a number of these families around. So it would seem then, that students from these families would face a great disadvantage in the struggle for upward social mobility. There are two parts to my question. Firstly, what are some of the measures which you may have in mind to

compensate for this disadvantages? Secondly, do you foresee that such parents, in their desire to see their children get the most out of life, would force their children into more tuition in Mandarin, so much so that a heavier workload would be placed upon them, leading to a greater demand on their school work?

Prime

Minister: I disagree with your second half – that because parents can only speak dialect, therefore, the social mobility of the children is affected. No. Because the parents speak only dialect, the oral capacity of the children has been slightly disadvantaged. But the intellectual capacity has nothing to do with the gift of the gab, and they can make up. No problem. They may never be able to speak fluently, either in Mandarin or in English. But do not mistake poor spoken English or Mandarin for lack of intellectual ability. That is something which anyone who has worked in Singapore, or in situations like Singapore, quickly learns to discern. In a monolingual, monocultural, homogenous society, you can correlate command of language usually with intelligence and intellectual discipline, but not in Singapore. If we were all, let's say, all Hokkien speaking, if Singapore is 100% Hokkien speaking, then

starting from Hokkien speaking homes, all those who make it into English or into Mandarin will usually be the brighter ones and the ones, who although not as bright, have a special aptitude for picking up languages. There is a slight margin there – the aural and oral, the hearing and the speaking is different from the reading and the writing. But in a place like Singapore, the PSC for instance and most employers, understand when they are interviewing a candidate, whether in English or in Mandarin, that it is not the mother tongue of the candidate and, therefore, they go for the substance and not the form.

In society such as ours, of course it is of advantage if you start off with a home that gave you all these languages. Then you don't have to make the effort. If I had listened to my grandmother and continued in a Chinese school, I would have saved myself thousands of hours pouring over my Mandarin and my Hokkien. But I went along with my mother, I was sent to an English school. I spent one year in a Chinese school. And my mother said, "Well, no, that is very silly because in Chinese school you are just repeating all this by memory, reciting in class. You must learn how to think independently." I have paid a heavy price for that.

I do not believe that any group of people listening to me in Singapore in Hokkien or in Mandarin is judging me by the elegance of my Hokkien or my Mandarin. If they did, I would not be here. When I went down and campaigned in 1961 in Hong Lim – you are too young to know that there was a by-election in 1961 in Hong Lim, but it was a life-and-death struggle for Singapore – I had to speak Hokkien because the majority of them were adult Hokkiens. And the children laughed at me. They thought it was very funny, and it was, probably. If I were to listen to some old RTS tapes I would probably laugh.

But I believe, however inadequate, there was enough mastery of the basic language structure to get my thoughts through. And what they were listening to, convinced them that first, I understood them and secondly, I was charting for them a course of action which they found reasonable and probable as a solution to their difficulties.

But how do we convert these dialect-speaking homes? I say by no longer continuing dialect in the next generation. You may have to speak to your parents in dialect because they do not speak anything else. But do not continue that dialect because you are trapped in dialect. Do you want your children to continue in dialect? I say no. If you are going to speak to them in English, then I say send them to a Chinese school and speak to them in English. Or if you are going to speak to them in Mandarin ... Do you speak Mandarin?

Fong Hoe

Fang: Yes, a little.

Prime

Minster: Did you pass your CL2 for your 'O' level?

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Fong Hoe

Fang: 'O' level, yes.

Prime

Minister: Did you continue for your 'A' levels?

Fong Hoe

Fang: No.

Prime

Minister: But you know enough? Well, you decide. But if you are going to speak to your child in English and you send him to an English school, then you are creating a problem for yourself or for your child because he is going to spend 30% to 40% of his time, and unless his friends engage in that language, in Mandarin, and he is using it in the playing fields, he will come back and say, "Look, I am wasting my time. Why should we be doing this?" But if you are convinced by what I have told you that he ought to be doing this, then you should create that atmosphere for him.

Mr Wong

Lian Aik: Mr Prime Minister, I am Wong Lian Aik from Nanyang University. From my personal observation, a lot of students from the English school would refrain from speaking (Mandarin) in public, although

some of them do speak very good Mandarin. You know, English being the prestigious language and if the students can well manage with English alone, well, they are not going to speak Mandarin since there is no necessity for it. If they don't speak English during the years of their education ...

Prime

Minister: If they don't speak Mandarin, you mean?

Mr Wong

Lian Aik: Yes, Mandarin – then they are not going to speak it the rest of their life. Then I think the bilingual policy would fail. I don't know what kind of steps can be taken to encourage the English students to speak Mandarin, to use Mandarin in public?

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Prime

Minister: May I break up your proposition into two halves. If we could all become English speakers, we could all speak English, then I think what you fear may well come about because everybody can move into English. So, other than speaking to the older generation who can't, why speak in Mandarin or in dialect. But I have explained at

the very beginning why I think that is not likely to be achieved. Because if you watch our primary school leaving examinations, watch the figures over the years, you will see that the failure was as high as 50% at one time, and it has gone down last year – 28% for the Chinese stream, 32% for the English stream. I do not see them becoming monolingual in English. If they cannot pass in the Chinese stream their PSLE, how can they speak English as a second language? And if you have got to communicate with these people, you must speak Mandarin. We are having a census in 1980, two years from now. We are going to settle the questions we are going to ask. And we are going to find out the speaking habits of our population. We hope people will take the trouble and answer this in detail. Then we will know the language usage.

I do not see Singapore becoming monolingual in English. The top range, as I have said, 3% to 5%, you can give them three languages, they will master it and they do. I have seen it done. We have sent our students, who have come out bilingual, to universities in France, in Germany, Japan, not speaking a word of the language, spending the first two years preparing themselves in the language for the university. And they have come back and done, in some cases,

exceptionally well in a language they had never learnt until they had got to the country, after they had finished their 'A' levels. So at the top, there is no problem. The problem is the middle range. And the tendency of parents is to say, "Look, why jeopardise my children's future by spending too much time on the second language." I think that is a real problem and one which I cannot solve because I cannot coerce parents into accepting standards of competence in the second language which they do not want their children to have. But I can make sure that they must pass a certain level before they get into pre-university; and later on, a certain level at 'A' levels before they get into university. But, as I have said, that is different from usage. And they will be bright enough to say, "Right, if that is what you want to test me for, I will pass your test." But that is not the same as creating a language environment.

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So I really must ask you to address this question to yourself: What can I do to ensure that this becomes a living language?

Mr Tay

Seow Huah

(Chairman): Mr Prime Minister, I think that covers the questions from the audience this evening. You have covered a whole range of problems concerning bilingual education in Singapore. And you have reminded us most vividly of the need for the home and the social environment to support what is being done in the schools. At the same time, you have pointed out to all of us who are parents, that there is a limit to the language learning competence of children and that, in fact, in Singapore what is being practised is a trilingual learning situation in the schools and at home, and that under the stresses of the trilingual learning situation, there is a very close limit of what can really be achieved.

It remains for me, on behalf of the panel and on behalf of the audience, to thank you for the trouble you have taken and to express our gratitude to you.

Prime

Minister: Thank you, because I think I am more indebted to you than you are to me.