

SPEECH BY MR ONG SOO CHUAN, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY
(FOREIGN AFFAIRS) AT THE AHMAD IBRAHIM SECONDARY SCHOOL'S
NINTH ANNUAL SPEECH DAY AND EXHIBITION ON SATURDAY 23RD
AUGUST 1975 AT 9.30 A.M.

It gives me great pleasure to be with you today to celebrate the 9th Annual Speech Day and Exhibition organised by your School. I take this opportunity to congratulate you for having done well in both academic and extra-curricular activities in the year 1974. You have been able to produce champions in sports and games and candidates who obtained up to 5 distinctions. For a young school like yours, the achievements and performance are indeed remarkable.

We have just celebrated the 10th Anniversary of our Independence as a sovereign state. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the students of today are more fortunate than those a decade ago. The prosperity that Singapore is enjoying has spread to the students. Their more prosperous parents have given them better homes and greater opportunities to pursue their studies. Education in Singapore is no longer a privilege of the few.

The acquisition of knowledge is one of the central aims of education. However, the acquisition of knowledge requires a proficient command of a language. No one can acquire more knowledge nor develop one's mental faculties more than one's command of the language. The proliferation of knowledge in the arts and science can always be directed towards generating greater wealth and happiness for mankind. Any nation incapable of mobilizing its people to acquire such vast and expanding knowledge will not be able to make significant progress.

The proficient command of a language is particularly relevant to a multilingual society like Singapore. The Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister have drawn our attention to the fact that large numbers of school children who attended English schools became illiterates some years after leaving school. They came from non English-speaking

families and lived in dialect-speaking neighbourhoods. This is a serious problem peculiar to multilingual Singapore. We need to find a quick and effective solution as we can ill afford to spend so much of our resources to produce this enormous number of illiterates.

Under the present restructured educational system introduced in November 1974, the duration of primary education will be extended from 6 to 7 years. This is to say primary school students will be separated into 6 - and 7-year courses depending on their performance in the first 3 years. The better students could complete their primary education in 6 years, while the rest in seven years. Given the peculiar structure of our society, I would suggest that it would be best to improve the restructured system by transferring the 7-year course students during the last 4 years of their primary education to the language stream which is the language of their race.

For example, a Chinese student opted to study in the English stream by his parents, who are non English-speaking, and due to his poor performance in the first 3 years, he is required to study another 4 years under the 7-year course of the new educational system. If he continued to study in the same stream, he may not make the grade and will become an illiterate after leaving school. But, if he were to switch to the Chinese stream for the next 4 years, he may develop his potentiality and be able to converse Mandarin and read Chinese even he is unable to go on to secondary school. Thus the efforts and hopes of teachers and parents will not be lost. These students will, of course, retain the language which they had studied in the first 3 years, as a second language. In other words, these 7-year course students will have the last 4 years of their primary education in a language they could use and develop in their own ethnic environment even after leaving school. Such a solution would at least minimise the number of illiterates.

The proficient command of a language is relevant to national development. Without any natural resources, Singapore's prosperity depends on the ability of its people to master the skills necessary to promote economic development and for you to acquire such skills, you need to have a proficient command of a language. With this emphasis, I would urge all of you to concentrate on your academic studies as well as healthy extra-curricular activities, so that you will become responsible citizens who can contribute effectively to the national development of Singapore.
