



SPEECH BY MR ONG SOO CHUAN, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY,
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Educationists, social critics and politicians have of late commented on the decline in the standards of both the first and second languages in our schools. However, they are more concerned with the decline in standards of the first language. For example, there have been many press reports where our tertiary institutions have complained that many undergraduates are unable to express themselves well on paper. As a result, under-graduates have to undergo language tests to determine whether they need extra tuition in language.

Some of these commentators have attributed this drop in standards to the emphasis placed in recent years by the Government on the bilingual education system. They complained that with more time and attention being devoted to making the Singaporeans bilingual, less and less time will have to be devoted to the teaching of the first language. Some others have also attributed this to poor facilities, deficient teaching methods and insufficient exposure to the language. We should not have any dispute with the bilingual education system. We are fortunate to have adopted this system without which there would be much more serious problems in our multi-racial and multi-cultural society. Perhaps it may be more reasonable to put the blame on the methods of implementation which have not achieved the objective of a bilingual policy.

It would be unrealistic to put the blame on poor facilities or poor teaching in schools. We must admit that the facilities are more than adequate and teaching staff are better trained and qualified than that before the sixties.

I am of the opinion that the appalling decline in the standards of languages in our schools in the last decade may be attributed to the emphasis on encouraging students to study and excel in technical subjects in order to qualify for blue collar jobs.

This move has prompted the parents to influence their children to concentrate more efforts on Science subjects, with a view to seeking better job opportunities after graduation. As a result, Arts subjects which develop language skills are neglected.

Another factor is that more scholarship awards are given to the Science stream students than Arts students, and this has motivated students to excel in Science subjects. Furthermore, the setting of PSLE examination papers by the Ministry of Education in recent years may have indirectly contributed to the decline of the standard of language in schools. The students were required only to write 'Yes' or 'No' as answers. Consequently, students do not make the mental effort to learn how to express their thoughts in fluent language. It appears that passing examinations is a matter of luck, having no relationship to knowledge.

If we look back with nostalgia to the old days, we will note that the curriculum of all the language streams in Singapore consisted of predominantly non-technical subjects such as history, geography, and literature. Then, Chinese stream students were studying the classics whilst those in the English stream devoted much of their time to studying Wordsworth, Shelley, and Shakespeare. Whereas, students today have less time for language as a result of the emphasis on technical subjects, the standards in language has fallen as a consequence. However, we must realise that the education system of the past was geared towards a colonial society where the people were educated to become clerks and petty officials to serve in a colonial bureaucracy. There were no industries then worthy of mention and therefore no need for emphasis on technical subjects.

Even industrial society like ours needs not only those skilled in technical knowledge, but also those who have a good command of language. Since the dawn of civilisation, man has depended on two important skills for progress and development. One of this is technical knowledge and the other language. Both are equally important. They could be described as having a symbiotic relationship as they are inter-related and dependent upon each other for its development. There would be little technical progress in a society where the language skills of the population is low.

We should, therefore, examine the problem in its proper perspective and find the correct solutions to it. The ideal for our society would be to have a population both skilled in language as well as technical knowledge. Once we have reached that stage, we would have achieved what even some present-day industrial countries have found to be a difficult objective.

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