SPEECH BY MINISTER MENTOR LEE KUAN YEW AT THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN AT THE NTUC CENTRE, MONDAY, 13 DECEMBER 2004

Twenty five years ago, the vast majority of our Chinese school children spoke dialects at home and learned two languages in school, English and Mandarin, none of which they spoke at home. As a result they had problems studying Mandarin.

I started the Speak Mandarin campaign in 1979 to ease the burden on students by not using dialects. At the same time, I stopped all dialect programmes on television and radio, and retained dialect news only on radio for the old. It was difficult for grandparents as their grandchildren lost fluency in dialects. But without phasing out dialects, the learning of Mandarin would have failed.

Dialect-speaking homes have switched to Mandarin. Now we must encourage people to continue speaking Mandarin at home and in public places. The Speak Mandarin campaign now is to encourage parents and students not to switch to speaking English to the children at home. We need many to be fluent in Mandarin to keep the language alive in society. It should not be confined only to bilingualists/biculturalists and those HDB heartlanders whose parents are not tertiary-educated in English.

The trend is for English to be the home language. In 1980, it was 10.2% of Chinese families. By 1990, it has risen to 20.6%, and by 2000, 23.8%. This year, the number of Primary 1 Chinese students from English-speaking homes has risen to 49.8%, more than those speaking Mandarin.

As more parents are tertiary-educated in English, at universities and polys, they will tend to speak English at home. Their children will find it difficult to learn Mandarin. We must stem this drift from Mandarin to English at home. My advice to parents is: You should aim to get your children to achieve the highest levels of fluency in both English and Chinese. You judge the language ability of your child, then decide how much Mandarin to use at home and how much Mandarin to have him learn in school. Our schools will now offer varying ratios of time between English and Mandarin. We need to keep our mother tongue alive for our sense of self to understand and appreciate where we come from, the sense of history of Chinese culture, its traditions and its values. These belong to all Chinese, those in China and also those Chinese who have migrated and left their descendants overseas, as in Singapore.

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At present, the majority of Chinese Singaporeans speak Mandarin at a conversational level. They often switch to English when they discuss serious subjects with intellectual or professional content. This is unavoidable because English is our working language and we constantly use it. We are instituting bilingual/bicultural Chinese programmes in schools to maintain a core of people who will be comfortable when doing business with people in China. At a popular level, Chinese Singaporeans will continue to enjoy the arts and entertainment in Mandarin, be it movies, pop songs or TV

programmes. This year's campaign will use the mass media and pop culture to arouse interest in Mandarin and culture.

As China develops into an economic and cultural world player, it will export its culture products. We will see more Chinese television series, films and drama, text messaging, traditional print media, kung-fu movies, story and comic books. They will spread world-wide, including in translations.

When we began the Speak Mandarin campaign, our minorities, Malays and Indians, were concerned that we would drift back towards a Chinese-speaking society. They now know that there is nothing to fear. Indeed Malay and Indian children are facing the same problems in learning their own mother tongues because their tertiary-educated parents are speaking to them in English at home. My advice to all is, try to keep your mother tongue alive at home. We should also use our mother tongues at markets, shopping malls, hawker centres, food-courts, restaurants, whenever we can.

I was confident my children would learn English because they speak it at home. So I sent my three children to Chinese kindergarten and Chinese primary and secondary schools. I spoke to them in Mandarin during their early years until their late teens when my Mandarin was not adequate for the matters I wanted to discuss with them. My wife always spoke to them in English and they always replied in English. Today they are comfortably bilingual. Originally we thought their English would be less fluent as a result but it turned out that their English is stronger because they use it intensively at university and at work. Their experience showed me how valuable it is to have a good foundation in Mandarin early in life.

My advice is: those parents who use Mandarin at home should continue to do so. Your children will pick up English without difficulty. You can send them to English language PAP Foundation kindergartens. In primary school we will help those who come from Mandarin speaking homes to pick up English, perhaps by using Mandarin to help them master English in Primary 1 and 2. To parents who are tertiary-educated, my advice is if you speak English at home to your children, consider sending them to Chinese-speaking kindergartens in the HDB heartlands where their fellow students speak Mandarin at home. They will master English easily later because so much teaching is in English (70% of classroom time) and also there is better reading materials in English and more viewing of English television programmes. So have no fear, your children will pick up English. Keep their Mandarin alive for your children as I did with mine. The important years are from 4 to 12 – the time they are in kindergarten and primary school. Once they have achieved fluency in Mandarin before secondary school, they should be able to retain it for life.

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This year's campaign slogan is "Hua Yu Cool". Let me add this simple truth: if you don't use a language, it will get rusty. My advice is use it, or lose it. I paid a heavy price for not having learned Mandarin when young. To this day I meet my teacher/friend once a week to keep my Mandarin alive. Every day I spend 20 minutes listening to Mandarin lessons on tape and 15

minutes reading ZaoBao, or Chinese newspapers on-line. These keep up my passive vocabulary. Because I do not meet as many Chinese-speaking friends as I used to in the past in the PAP party HQ or community clubs, I converse with my teacher-friend for about one and a half hours a week to keep my active vocabulary alive. Then listening and reading becomes easier. Speaking Mandarin is difficult for me because I have to dig the words out from my memory and string them out in proper sentences according to the correct idiom and grammar to express my ideas. If I miss my lessons for several months, and do not speak it, my Mandarin will get rusty. This is true for all those who learned Mandarin late in life. Those who mastered Mandarin early in life can revive it much more easily. My advice is get your children to learn and master Mandarin when they are young. They will have a foundation for life. When they need it, they can easily build on that foundation.

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Annex 1

1. Predominant household language for Chinese families (Population of Census Survey)

	1980	1990	2000
English	10.2%	20.6%	23.8%
Mandarin	13.1%	32.8%	45.1%
Chinese dialects	76.2%	46.2%	30.6%

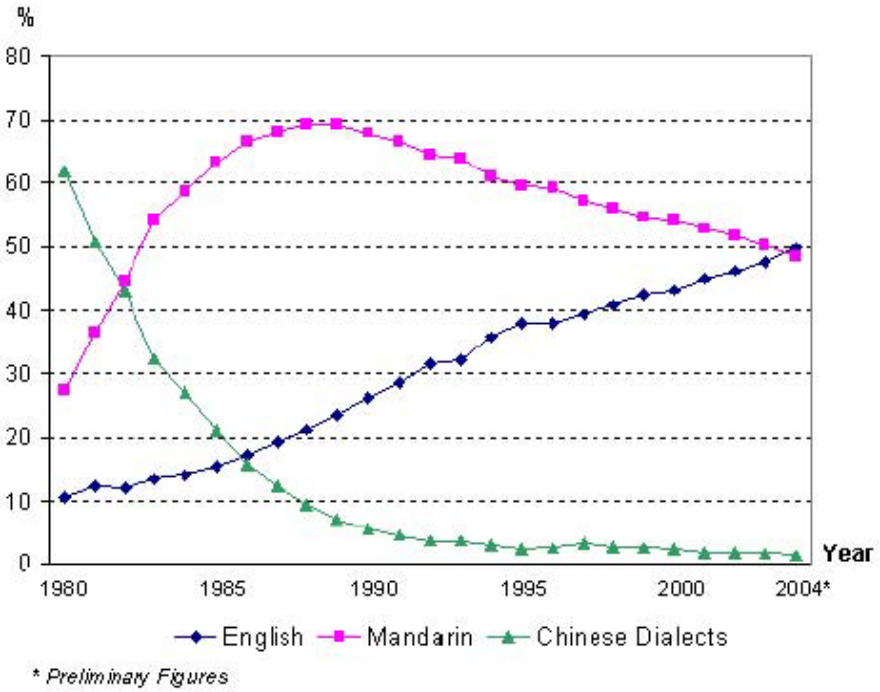
2. MOE Survey, administered by Forbes Research in May 2004 MOE's findings point to a generational shift in the language use among students. Chinese is still a major spoken language, but declining in prominence. Meanwhile, English is gaining in prominence among younger students.

% of parents who reported speaking to their children in	Pr 2	Pr 4	Pr 6	Sec 2	Sec 4
English	25.7%	23.5%	21.5%	24.4%	17.6%
English & Chinese	33.0%	27.4%	29.6%	21.8%	19.6%
Chinese	37.3%	44.8%	44.1%	50.2%	59.1%

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Since the CL Review in 1999, the number of Chinese students from English-speaking homes has risen to 49.8% in 2004[1] (see Chart 1). English has now overtaken Mandarin as the primary language used in homes of Primary 1 Chinese pupils. We need to recognise and adapt to these changing home language trends.

Chart 1: Dominant Home Language of Chinese P1 Students: 1980 to 2004



Source: MOE Survey at Primary 1 registration

[1]Statistics are obtained from information provided by parents at Primary 1 registration. Figure for 2004 is based on preliminary returns.

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