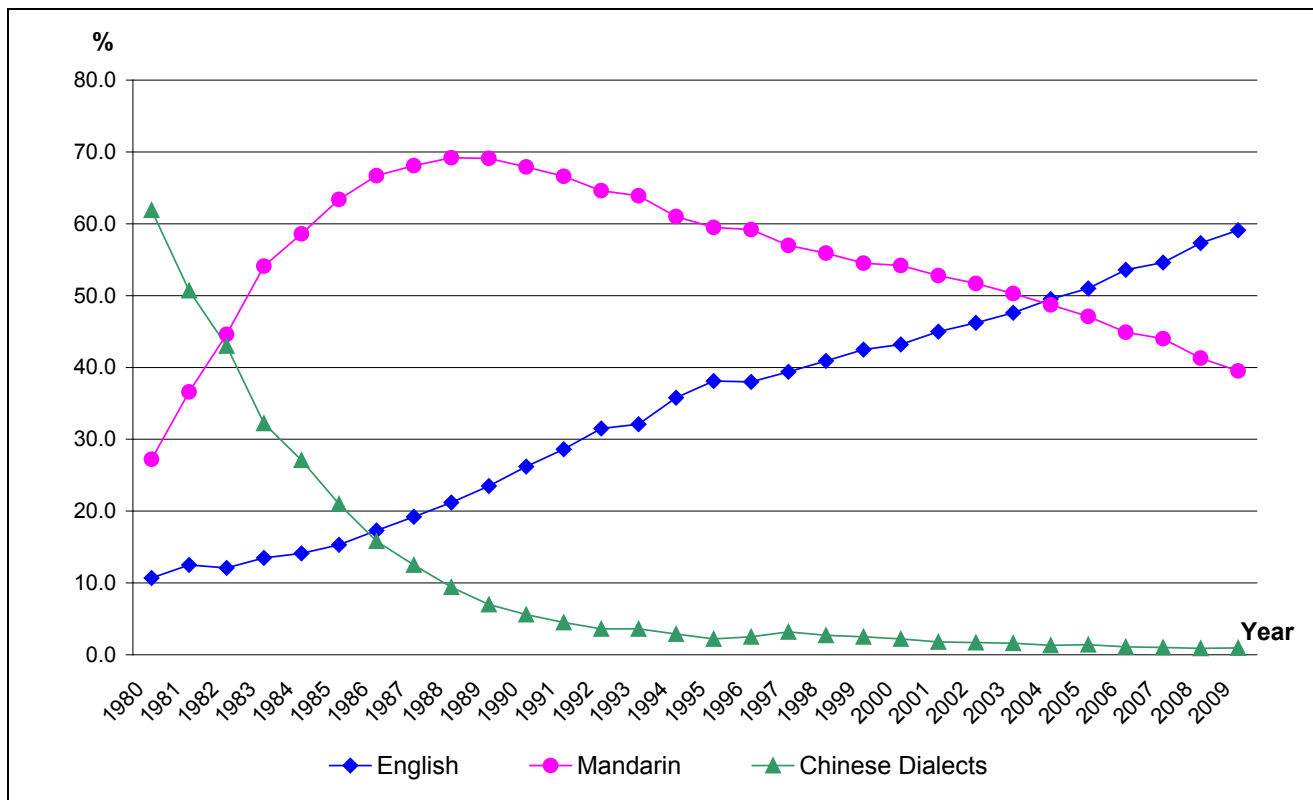


Dominant Home Language of Chinese Pri-1 Students¹ (1980 to 2009)



- The proportion of Chinese families in Singapore who speak dialects at home has dropped significantly in the past 30 years. It fell below 10% in 1988 and continued on a downward trend. Since 2001, less than 2% of Chinese students in each cohort have come from dialect-speaking homes. This reflects the choice of the large majority of parents, who prefer their children to focus on learning English and Mandarin well.

National Archives of Singapore

- As highlighted in the Zaobao Editorial on 9 March 2009, our key challenge for the Speak Mandarin Campaign is no longer about Mandarin versus dialects, but the trend that more Chinese Singaporeans are now speaking mainly English to their children at home. Instead of advocating the learning of dialects, we should focus our efforts on encouraging more Chinese parents to speak Mandarin to their children. This will strengthen their foundation to master Mandarin later in life.

¹ Source: MOE Survey at Primary-1 registration

- Parents have to decide, during their children's early years, what languages will maximise their opportunities in life. They will need English, because it is the language of government and business, and the lingua franca of the world. They will also benefit from learning Mandarin, which is a valuable asset for engaging and doing business with a fast-growing China.
- It is difficult for most children to cope with two languages which are as diverse as English and Mandarin. Cornelius Kubler, an American professor from Williams College who teaches Chinese to US Foreign Service officers wrote that: "***The experience of the U.S. government language training agencies, for example, has shown that it takes about four times as long to train someone to a level where they can function professionally in Chinese as it takes in French, German, or Spanish.***"
- Learning dialects will add to our children's burden, and take away time and energy from English and Mandarin. Dialects also cause negative interferences on the learning of English and Mandarin, due to differences in their vocabulary, phonetics and syntax. With Mandarin, we can connect with the whole of China and its 1.3 billion people. Dialects will confine us to our original village or town or at the most, the province of our ancestors.
- Parents who are fluent in Mandarin will help their children master the language if they speak it at home. In a predominantly English-speaking society like Singapore, this is what we should encourage Chinese families to do, and not to spend time teaching their children how to speak dialects. After a study of American-born Chinese students, Yang Wenzhong wrote in the "Journal of Chinese Overseas" November 2007 that "***Proficiency in Chinese will not develop once English becomes the dominant home language.***" Children of parents who spoke Mandarin at home were able to master Mandarin easily in high school or college. Conversely, those whose parents speak in English at home found Chinese as difficult as any Caucasian-American student.