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ADDRESS BY DR AHMAD MATTAR, ACTING MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS, AT THE PRIME MINISTER'S BOOK PRIZE PRESENTATION CEREMONY ON TUESDAY, 19 SEPTEMBER 1978, AT 1500 HOURS, AT THE REGIONAL LANGUAGE CENTRE

It is my pleasure, first of all, to congratulate the 24 prize winners of this year's Prime Minister's Book Prize. They have given an excellent account of themselves. They now have this success to look back to, to fall back upon, should they, in future, be faced with pressures and challenges that threaten their self-confidence. Success is a good foundation on which to build one's future, one's other successes. I can imagine how gratifying it is for their teachers and principals to have had the experience of moulding such willing and capable material, for this is what makes education so rewarding. The parents, guardians, brothers and sisters of these prize winners must also be congratulated, not only because they can be proud of the singular achievement of these distinctive 24, but because effective language learning, and particularly bilingual achievement of this kind, must depend a great deal on the home support that is given and the home environment that is maintained.

The Prime Minister's Book Prize was initiated in 1974 when the Prime Minister gave to the Ministry of Education the sum total of lecture fees he had received on an overseas tour, with the request that the interest earned from this can be used to promote effective bilingualism in our schools. The awards are made to pupils and students with the highest combined marks in English and the mother tongue in both the written and oral parts of the Primary School Leaving Examinations and the Singapore Cambridge General Certificate of Education 'Ordinary' and 'Advanced' Levels Examinations. There were 16 awards when the Prime Minister's Book Prize was first introduced. The cumulative total of awards to date is about 100.

It is indeed fitting that these awards should have been initiated and made possible by the Prime Minister and that this ceremony is held here at the Regional Language Centre (RELC). Language is basic to any society and effective language learning is fundamental to any education system. In our society and education system, this is even more so: the multiracial character of our population, and the necessity for our nation to be responsive to the world economy and trading patterns, as well as to scientific and technological developments require many to be bilingual, in English and their mother tongue, to varying degrees. The Prime Minister himself expounded at length on this in a series of forums earlier this year. This is also what RELC was established to study and develop programmes for. But, to what extent have we been successful?

Bilingualism, as a fundamental policy of our education system, was extended universally throughout our schools from 1959. Today, every pupil in school studies two languages. There is national acceptance of the need for bilingualism. This is a long way from the 1950s and early 1960s when monolingualism was the norm. The insistence on second language learning for all achieved the psychological transformation of attitudes; bilingual competence has become a goal to be aspired to; it has become an attribute of the new Singaporean.

In terms of the actual linguistic ability of pupils and students coming out of our education system, however, the achievement has been, to quote the Prime Minister, "patchy" and "uneven". This is not because the fundamental policy is wrong but because the implementation has not been carried out with sufficient sensitivity to the very complex learning situation we are in. As a result, the type of home language environment and support of the child has not been taken into account; many parents feel the need for their children to take heavy doses of private tuition outside the already heavy school curriculum and ECA just to keep up; and those who have left school prematurely without completing their primary education have suffered severe regression in the knowledge of and proficiency in the languages they learnt in school through a prolonged period of disuse.

What must be done now to remedy the language situation for all pupils and students who go through our education system? On

matters of language, I can only speak as a layman since I am no linguist in the technical sense. And yet, as I am made to understand, linguists tend to be more scientific in their approach to language. Perhaps, the approach I am about to suggest will make sense in that light, for in the end, it is basic common sense that I am appealing to and basic common sense tells us that if we are to develop or cultivate anything, we must know what it is we want to develop as closely as possible and we must also know what goes into its development in terms of materials or components and processes.

In addressing ourselves to language attainment, the first question I would like to pose then is what standard or standards of attainment and for whom? I am informed that in advanced countries it is possible to say what standard a pupil in the second month of his sixth grade, for instance, should be able to attain in a particular language. If this be the case, there must be some techniques or technology developed to gauge such attainment. Surely we can learn from such measurement techniques. If we cannot borrow them wholesale because of cultural bias, perhaps we could adapt them to suit our situation. Alternatively we could apply the same techniques to establish standards and standardised instruments for our above-average, average and below-average pupils. Once these are known and the purposes at each level for which language can be put to use clarified, we would at least be certain of the targets we are aiming for. The direction of our efforts in attaining these targets would then have a better chance of being clear.

The second question I wish to pose is: how much do we know about the subject of language and how it is taught and learnt? How is this body of knowledge influencing our syllabuses, methodologies and instructional materials? Again this area presents a wide and rich field for research and development - and I should think, would have an important bearing on how language should be developed in the child at the various stages: from word recognition to stylistic excellence. I suspect that not enough research and development has gone into our language curricula. The syllabus is at best a vague set of guidelines which, however voluminous, cannot be applied to the individual needs of particular groups of pupils. Of course, it is better to have a syllabus than one that is obsolete or none at all.

But how well has the existing one been evaluated? Are the evaluation instruments valid and the findings reliable? Surely the advanced countries have much for which we can learn. Studies should be made on this and techniques borrowed to conduct baseline studies on the present situation in terms of curriculum, methods and materials to reflect development needs which again other countries could throw some light on how to cater for them.

The third question is: do we really know our pupils? Who are these above-average, average and below-average? What make them so? If intelligence is an important factor, and intelligence tests can be applied or adapted, what is the intelligence quotient (IQ) of a particular pupil in a particular class and school? I should think that his or her teacher would benefit from knowing it so as to pitch lessons at appropriate levels. Similarly, we should address ourselves to language aptitude, motivation and attitude scales.

Tied up with intelligence, aptitude, motivation and attitudes are home language support and environment. There is a need to know what languages or dialects a pupil speaks at home, whether good reading habits are encouraged, whether the parents can afford and do provide him with appropriate reading materials and so on. All these biodata should rightly be part and parcel of the teacher's equipment of language teaching and learning is to have any probability of success. At present, I get the impression that teachers do not have a good, not to say complete, picture. If I am not mistaken, teachers tend to rely at best on a combination of isolated insights and guesstimates or at worse, they teach languages and not pupils.

I would suggest that a worthwhile project would be to conduct profile studies of pupils. These could include the prize winners of today and the previous years who have shown they can achieve the highest standards in two languages. Profiles could also be drawn of those who did not make it, including the average and below-average. As a follow-up, comparisons could be made and long-term studies conducted to trace these research subjects up the grade levels, even up to university and/or employment. I have no doubt that the findings will be enlightening and of educational significance in the long run.

The basic objective of all this is that language attainment in a bilingual context may be ensured through effective teaching and learning. This implies that the teacher should be guided by the findings of research into the area and supported by the infrastructure that caters for the requirements in carrying out a highly professional task. The vast areas in which the present staff should be upgraded then become clear. Similarly, pre-service training can and should be more closely directed to the actual situation in schools so that new teachers are more prepared to meet it. Concomitant to it the school environment should be geared to enhancing the effective learning and teaching of languages.

Let me assure you that, in making my proposals and suggestions, I am under no illusion about the complexity and the difficulties of task. As the Prime Minister would say, if it weren't difficult, it would not be a problem at all. Even studying the characteristics of available textbooks in languages alone is, I believe, quite a massive task. That is why, in my opening words my advice to the prize winners was to build on their success today. Faced with the challenge of making our bilingual policy succeed, we can fall back on some of our past successes. We can look to the fact that we have achieved much in our economic growth and in housing, just to quote two examples. In education, we too have enjoyed some measure of success in our school bands and in science and technology. If the right will and effort are put to the bilingual question, I have no doubt that some success can be achieved there as well.

Nor am I under the illusion that we can expect precision or exactness in standards of attainment or knowledge of pupils - because, even in the so-called exact sciences, we still have to work under the principle of uncertainty, just as in mathematics or statistics there is the element of probability. Perhaps one simple truth that has not occurred to non-scientists is that scientific theory having been verified has a built-in possibility of being falsified - two sides of a coin. Hence science has advanced on this by leaps and bounds, from Newton to Einstein. Similarly, there is the possibility of advancing to some extent in the field of language learning and teaching on a level higher than mere guesswork.

My main point is that bilingualism is a cornerstone policy for our nation and thus our education system. Its success must be ensured. The Government recognises the problems and difficulties involved and is prepared to make the necessary investments. I would call for the concentration of professional effort in dealing with the problem. The Ministry of Education should surface the areas of need in a bold attempt to garner all available resources within our reach to provide a comprehensive coverage of the whole area, because a weak or half-hearted attempt will leave too many gaps, too many questions unanswered. Having defined the scope and limits to the tasks, the Ministry can then work out a list of priorities for a more systematic approach to the question of language attainment. A sufficiently deep analysis would even indicate the price we have to pay for successful implementation of the policy so that we may be forewarned and adjust accordingly.

Let me conclude by once again congratulating the 24 winners of the Prime Minister's Book Prize here today. They have set the standards for themselves and others to follow. It is now up to the system to set standards of professionalism in providing the type of language education most relevant to our nation.

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