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ADDRESS BY MR CHAI CHONG YII, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE  
FOR EDUCATION, AT THE RELC 10TH ANNIVERSARY OFFICIAL  
CEREMONY ON MONDAY, 25 SEPTEMBER 1978, AT 6.00 PM

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I am most happy to be here this evening on this auspicious occasion to commemorate the 10th Anniversary of the founding of the SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.

This is an appropriate occasion, I feel, for me to share with you some observations on matters important to all of us, particularly those of us in South-East Asia - the issues of language teaching, education and culture.

Education has always been highly valued in all societies through the ages, as the source of wisdom. Today, education is the most potent force for change and in the continuing search for economic development and industrialisation, it assumes a central role in all national planning. Education is important too for cultural transmission and regeneration, for creating and strengthening the cohesiveness of a society. In all of this, language education is of focal importance - it has a crucial role to play because language is the vehicle for the transmission and generation of knowledge and values. Educationists today speak not merely of the language curriculum but of language across the curriculum. And I think we could even say that education begins with language (both spoken and sign), and in a real sense ends with language. It is the only effective means for communication and action within the modern society.

We in South-East Asia are faced with the formidable task of ensuring that language teaching works in our education systems. Our education systems are multilingual; the indigenous languages and one or more foreign languages are taught to the majority, if not all, of our pupils. Language teaching and learning, in any of the languages taught, has therefore a particular need to be effective to enable our education systems to achieve all their goals and targets.

To say this is not of course to say anything new. It was because SEAMEO recognized the importance of language in the SEAMEO region, and the need for improvement in language education, that RELC was established ten years ago. And in these ten years, in spite of the amount of work done by national authorities, the need has increased rather than diminished. Moreover, language education is seen to be considerably more complex than was once thought. Insights provided by sociolinguists into the role of language in society, and by psychologists into the way languages are learnt, have emphasized that many more things must be taken into consideration when planning a language education programme. And this is particularly true in the multilingual societies of South-East Asia.

SEAMEO and RELC have been fully sensitive to changing needs, and RELC's plans for the second quinquennium (1977 - 1981) are geared to these changes. Two years ago I had the pleasure of being the guest of honour at a similar RELC function, at which these plans were launched. On that occasion, RELC could say with satisfaction that the programme for its first quinquennium had been fully implemented, and the targets reached. Today I am happy to see the new programme being translated successfully into action.

I am particularly pleased at the link which has been established between RELC and the University of Singapore, which enables RELC to upgrade its training activities by offering an MA course. This is a one-year programme consisting of advanced course work and a substantial dissertation.

RELC's expanded role includes assistance to member countries in the teaching of other languages as well as English. In implementation of this, a Research Unit for the Teaching of French and other foreign languages has been established with the assistance of the Government of France, reflecting the growing interest in the teaching of foreign languages in the region. RELC's attention is also being directed towards the teaching of other South-East Asian languages, and in the last two years RELC course members have included senior educationists responsible for programmes in Bahasa ~~Mandarin~~, Filipino and Thai - as well as French and Japanese on the foreign language side. The library has already substantially increased its holdings of material dealing with languages other than English, particularly materials on the major South-East Asian languages, covering especially sociocultural and sociolinguistic aspects and contrastive studies.

As I have mentioned, we in South-East Asia have always to take account of our multilingual situation. RELC's current programmes are particularly geared to this. In 1977 an international seminar was held on Language Education in Multilingual Societies, which attracted considerable attention; selected papers from the seminar are published in the RELC Anthology series. And another important seminar is being planned for 1979, the topic being Acquisition of Bilingual Ability and Patterns of Bilingualism with Special Reference to South-East

Asian Contexts. Several of the Specialized Advanced courses touch on this area, and research in this field is planned. In particular, research on bilingual education is receiving increasing attention.

The needs of the practising teacher have not been forgotten. One major RELC project which is well under way is the design and writing of an experimental course in English for Academic purposes. This is intended to help South-East Asian students in their first year of tertiary studies. Other material to help the classroom teacher is also being planned under the publications programme. For example, a handbook on Group Activities published this year is already being used and two further handbooks are in the press. At the same time, a number of more academic publications are in production, including an anthology of papers on Languages in South-East Asia.

The language education situation in the SEAMEO region varies from country to country, and each has its own problems. The aim of RELC is to focus on the most urgent and the most common, in order to make maximum use of its resources. In its first ten years, RELC has achieved considerable success in this, and Singapore is proud to be associated with it. Congratulations are due to the Centre's Governing Board, its Director and Staff and all those who have contributed to the success of the Centre in so many ways.