ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE PRESENTATION OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S BOOK PRIZE FOR 1974, RELC BUILDING, WEDNESDAY, 29TH MAY 1974

For economic reasons, the English language is vital. It has helped our economic development. But for our multi-racial, multi-cultural people to learn only English would be folly. For this will detach them from their cultural roots. After 15 years of grappling with this basic problem, we have settled for bilingualism -- the mother tongue and English.

However, for those who do not speak one of the four languages taught, e.g. Chinese students who speak a dialect at home, bilingualism really means more speaking a dialect at home and learning two other languages in school. A Chinese dialect and Mandarin are not different languages. They are more different pronunciations of the same basic language. But it nevertheless increases the difficulties of bilingualism. If the family speaks English, or Malay, or Mandarin, or Tamil at home, the child has only one other language to learn in school. And the home helps the learning of the other language. But it may take us one generation to achieve this position.

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Languages are best and easiest learnt early in life. If they cannot start in a home, they should be started early in kindergartens. If learning is kept up until the late teens, they are mastered for life. A language learnt late in life is never fully mastered. Effort is always required to be fluent. It may be that for average or below average students, the studying of two languages results in lowered standards than if only one language is studied. But it is better to know your mother tongue and English, both imperfectly, than to know well only one. However, the learning of a language does not stop at school. Speaking, reading, watching TV and the cinema and writing reports of letters are a life-long experience. What is crucial is to achieve a minimum proficiency in the language before that part of the mind which facilitates speech and the learning of languages loses this capability. Neuro-surgeons believe that this capacity is considerably diminished after maturity, usually after twenty.

If I were a student again, I would first go to a Chinese school. That would be the easiest and surest way to master Chinese. I would also want to learn English in school, especially to write it correctly. I would have no difficulty in speaking English, since that I can do at home. If I had the teachers in school, I would also learn Malay. It is very close to Bahasa Indonesia, and would help me understand our neighbours, and their culture.

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Because I did not learn enough Chinese and Malay in school, it has taken much effort for me to use Chinese and Malay, and with less facility than if I had acquired at least fluency in conversation.

However, it is our English-speaking parents who send their children to English schools who are worried about the increase in the teaching of the second language. There have been no complaints by Chinese-speaking parents in the Chinese press. Those of them with children in the English schools are happy that their children will learn more Chinese. Those of them with children in Chinese schools have always been happy to have them learn more English. The same is true of Malay and Tamil parents, whatever schools their children are in.

The crux of the problem is that many English-educated Chinese parents, with children in English schools, believe there are no economic benefits in learning Chinese, especially if it is at the expense of English. They are wrong.

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They have only given this matter superficial thought. If they want to give their children the best guarantee of survival, whatever the future holds, they should send their children first to Chinese schools. There, the atmosphere and environment are such that given 6 years of primary education, their children will be effective in Chinese for life, provided they continue learning it in an English secondary school. The Education Ministry allows this switch from a Chinese

primary school to an English secondary school. Not many parents take this course, probably because not many know of it. Whilst in a Chinese primary school, there is no fear that their children will not master English, for they will be taught it in school, and use it at home.

Chinese is a difficult language. It is mono-syllabic, tonal, written in characters and not phonetic script. But it can be learned easiest when young, preferably at 4 years old, whilst playing at kindergarten. But the grudging attitude of some parents and the scepticism of some principals and teachers in English schools have made the learning of Chinese more difficult in English schools.

I am convinced that if the price for knowing enough Chinese is a lower standard of English, at Primary 6 or Secondary 4, it is still worth it. The children's English will improve with further reading and writing after schooling.

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What will help bilingualism is a positive attitude from parents, principals and teachers. This is more important than methodology or exposure time. We want to give our children the best combination of languages for their future -- Chinese, or mother tongue, for the ethics, values on work and discipline in an orderly society, and English for access to new knowledge, and for jobs. Our children, especially those now in primary schools, will live to see a different world, and a

very different Asia. One day they will be thankful that they were not trapped by the short-sightedness of their parents, or their government, which left them monolingual and unable to cope with the needs of their time. Bilingualism is the minimum. And, for those above average, a third language is valuable.

I congratulate the prize winners for having done well in their examinations in their mother tongue and English. A language lives in the lives of those who speak it and use it. Keep it alive in your lives by using it every day at home, in school, with your family or friends, reading or writing. Never stop reading and learning long after your last examination.

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