

**ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. LEE KUAN YEW, TO**  
**THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, NANYANG UNIVERSITY, ON FRIDAY,**  
**10 FEBRUARY 1978**

**Bilingualism and Higher Education in Singapore**

QUALITY OF CHINESE LANGUAGE STUDENTS INTO NANTAH

From 1956 to 1967, two years after separation of Singapore from Malaysia, Nantah had good students from all the best Chinese middle schools, not only in Singapore, but also from Malaysia and Indonesia. The early batches were probably the best.

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From 1960, PSC started giving scholarships to Chinese middle school graduates to universities abroad. They were the top 20 students each year from the Chinese stream. From 1960 also, the University of Singapore started to admit Chinese middle school graduates. They were invariably the better students. The result was that Nanyang University lost the best Singapore students from the Chinese stream. By 1963, 100 good Chinese middle school

HSC graduates went abroad and to the University of Singapore. By 1977, 343 had gone abroad or to University of Singapore.

Meanwhile, the number of good students who came from Malaysia and Indonesia diminished. These countries had changed their educational policies, and their students did not have sufficient command of the Chinese language to enter Nanyang University. Perhaps even those who had enough Chinese language command had decided to seek university education in English abroad.

Nanyang University's fatal error in adjusting to this drop in students was to lower standards in order to keep up the size of the student population. It became so bad that for Malay Studies, students who had been rejected by University of Singapore, with as low as 20 points for HSC, were admitted into Nanyang University in 1969-72 when the minimum for other Arts subjects were 32 points. And they all graduated with Nanyang University degrees! When the government drew the attention of the University Council to this deplorable practice, the Malay Studies Department was allowed to phase out in the academic year 1972/73.

Had Nanyang University responded differently, and kept at least the same minimum entry requirements as University of Singapore, Nanyang University would have become smaller by one-quarter to one-third. But its standing and reputation in Singapore and abroad would have remained high. By admitting and passing sub-standard students, Nanyang University lowered the standing and the employment prospects of its good students and so accelerated the flow of good students into University of Singapore.

In 1974, a Joint University Admissions Selection Committee was established for University of Singapore and Nanyang University to maintain minimum standards for admission. Even so, in order that Nanyang University will not have too few students too suddenly, minimum points for admission were slightly lower in Nanyang University than in University of Singapore:

Nanyang University      University of Singapore

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1975

Commerce	35points	Business Ad	38 points
Accountancy	35 “	Accountancy	40 “

1976

Commerce	36	“	Business Ad	38	“
Accountancy	38	“	Accountancy	43	“

It was only in 1977 that standard were the same:

1977

Commerce	38 points	Business Ad	38 points
Accountancy	43 “	Accountancy	43 “

For 1978, there is still argument whether minimum points for admission to Nanyang University should be slightly lower than University of Singapore for certain subjects.

## NANYANG UNIVERSITY GRADUATES IN GOVERNMENT SERVICE

In April 1977, according to the Government Central Pay Office, there were 1,306 Nanyang University graduates with first degrees, and 7 with second degrees, as against 2,187 University of Singapore graduates with first degrees and 96 second degrees (Master's and PhD's). All these Nanyang University graduates are working in an administration using English. There have been few difficulties. After the first 3 years in government service, with continuous and constant usage, Nanyang University graduates have had no difficulties in using

English. However, let us not forget only the better Nanyang University graduates were recruited.

### THREE CONCLUSIONS

From my working experience, I draw three conclusions. First, that the more able an officer, the more bilingual he is. A good Chinese-educated officer will master the English language even though his sentence structure and grammar may not be elegant. A good University of Singapore graduate has little difficulty in mastering spoken Mandarin and passing his Government Standard II Chinese written examinations. But because he does not write Chinese often, his written Chinese is poor. In other words, where other factors of the learning landscape are equal, the ability to learn a subject or discipline is the same as the ability to master a language.

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This is confirmed by the Chinese stream scholars we have sent to Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Their results have been outstanding, and certainly not inferior to those of English stream scholars sent to these countries.

We did not send them to Britain, because the British universities did not accept the Government Chinese 'A' level certificates. In 1972, we sent the 5

SAF scholars to Britain. We managed to get them admitted to Aston University, a new university, not yet under the jurisdiction of the Joint Matriculation Board in UK, and prepared to accept our 'A' level Chinese stream results not jointly conducted with Cambridge. Three years later, all five came out with First Class Honours in Engineering and Computer Sciences. They also were able to speak fluent English. Their written English had improved enormously, although not grammatically perfect and the sentence structure reads awkwardly because they never got out of the Chinese sentence mould. Complete immersion in a total native English-speaking environment exposed their total working life to English, not only in the university, but also in the college halls of residence, the shops, buses, cinema, TV, etc. Their ability was high. The results were what we had expected.

My second conclusion is that the greater and more frequent the usage of English, after a Chinese stream education, the more effective the English. The converse is also valid, after an English stream education, the more usage of Mandarin (not dialect), the more the effectiveness of Chinese.

This is confirmed by the ability of the Chinese middle school students in University of Singapore. Their immersion into an English-speaking environment is not as total as those students sent to Britain. But it is considerable. After

difficulties in the first year, they all make the grade. The percentage of failures of University of Singapore students in science subjects is not higher than that amongst English stream students. The English-speaking environment in University of Singapore was a decisive factor.

In University of Singapore, the usage between students, between students and staff, is English. The immersion into English language would not be as total and complete as that of a student in Britain or Australia for he still speaks Mandarin or dialect outside the university. Nevertheless, after painful difficulties in the first few months, all Chinese stream students break through the language barrier by the end of the first year, and become part of the English usage community by the second.

But remember that these are the students with the better results in 'A' levels. Chinese stream students, although less than 40% of the engineering faculty of University of Singapore, got the following proportions of the Class 1

Honours of total University of Singapore graduates:

<u>ENROLMENT</u>			<u>NO. SITTING FINAL EXAM</u>		<u>CLASS 1 HONOURS</u>	
<u>Chinese/Total</u>			<u>Chinese/Total</u>		<u>Chinese/Total</u>	
1977	383/975	39.3%	90/250	36.0%	11/29	37.9%

1976	352/980	35.9%	55/245	22.4%	2/19	10.5%
1975	323/1002	32.2%	71/237	29.9%	12/26	46.1%
1974	327/1104	29.6%	87/283	30.7%	11/26	42.3%

That the environment is a critical factor in the learning of English is corroborated by the performance of those who become SAF officers in their 2½ years of national service. In the SAF, the immersion into English-speaking environment is not as high as in University of Singapore, for the SAF uses Mandarin, Hokkien and Malay. Nevertheless, put into an environment where the usage of English is high, where they are compelled as officers to use English, they have overcome the psychological problems of breaking into a second language, and learned quickly. Again their grammar and sentence structure may not be as elegant as English stream students. But they are effective, articulate and even fluent.

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We have found that primary and lower secondary Chinese stream national servicemen, and even 'A' level students who only become NCOs or section leaders, do not improve as much as the Chinese 'A' level graduates who become commissioned officers. This is because they use more Hokkien working and talking with the "privates". Because the majority of national servicemen have only primary and lower secondary school education, from both the English and Chinese streams, Hokkien has emerged as the common language of the Chinese in the SAF.

My third conclusion is that the earlier one starts learning a language, whether it is Mandarin or English, the more grammatically correct and fluently one can speak and master a language. It is a mistake to believe that the second language should be learned only in secondary school. Neurologists have confirmed that there is a special part of the mind which is specially used in mastering language, listening and speaking, which is different for reading and writing. A child who is not taught to listen and to speak any language before 7 may never learn to speak at all. And up to the age of 15, it is easier for a person to learn to hear, comprehend and speak a language. For reading and writing, learning later in adult life does not seem to be so much a disadvantage.

REFORMING NANYANG UNIVERSITY FROM WITHIN

From 1959 to 1977, the percentage of Singapore students registering for Chinese language schools dropped from 45.9% to 10.8%. By 1975, it was clear that if Nanyang University continues to teach Chinese, most faculties will close down in 10 years. So in 1975, the government, with the agreement of the Nanyang University Council, tried to get Nanyang University to gradually use more English as the medium of instruction. It was an effort to reform Nanyang University from within.

But the problems were many and difficult. The main obstacle to reforming Nanyang University from within into an English-medium university was that the Nanyang University campus was an established Chinese-speaking environment. The usage of English could not be easily established in this environment. Whilst many teachers could speak and teach in English, they were much more comfortable and fluent in Chinese. But more important and decisive, students in Nanyang University, in an environment where the usage was Chinese, inevitably spoke to each other in Chinese.

## TOTAL IMMERSION TO ACHIEVE COMMAND OF ENGLISH

The way our economy has developed has made it necessary for those who want to reach executive or professional grades to master English, spoken and written. The earlier in life this is done, the easier and better the mastery.

From our experience with Nanyang University graduates in the government and from my personal observation of Nanyang University MPs, the mastery of written English is achieved by the abler graduates even where they start learning it years after graduation from Nanyang University. The mastery of spoken English is more difficult the older a person is.

Hence, it is easier to do it during your university days than after you graduate. And it is easier for our students in Pre-U classes and junior colleges than at university. Of course it is easier to learn English in Chinese Sec 1 than at Pre-U 1.

This is the secret of the difference between the success in mastering English of Chinese stream students in universities in Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and in University of Singapore, and the difficulties faced by Chinese stream students in Nanyang University.

With increasing preference of Chinese stream students for University of Singapore, it was obvious that Nanyang University would be left with few students unless changes were made in Nanyang University. These facts were known to the Nanyang University Executive Council and Senate. Hence, last year, the Nanyang University Executive Council decided to have joint courses with University of Singapore. Unless this exercise succeeds, more and more Chinese stream students will opt for University of Singapore. Then University of Singapore would have had to keep its Bukit Timah campus to absorb all the Chinese school students who qualify for admission. The Kent Ridge campus cannot accommodate them all.

#### ONE OR TWO UNIVERSITIES

A critical decision the government had to make in 1972 was whether Singapore should have one or two universities. If it were in the national interests to have all students in one big university, then we would have planned Kent Ridge for 15,000-18,000 students. We decided to build Kent Ridge for 8,000-9,000 students. Singapore will be better off with two universities, one at Kent Ridge, the other at Jurong, competing with and complementing each other. It makes for more manageable size of university students, intimacy between staff

and students. And we know from the examples of other countries that healthy competition for both staff and students improves overall performance in each. Whether it is Oxford and Cambridge, or Harvard and Yale, or Peking and Nanking, it is better to have two than one. But it is also clear that both our universities will teach in English other than for the Chinese language and literature department. This conclusion was the result of our economic development and because parents choose English stream for their children in increasing numbers.

#### WHY ONLY ACCOUNTANCY AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION FOR JOINT COURSES – 1978

Nanyang University Executive Council has proposed to start with Accountancy and Business Administration. In 1975, the first year of joint admissions, minimum entrance points were:

SU	Accountancy	40;	Business Administration	38
NU	“	35;	“	“
				35

Those male students admitted to Nanyang University in 1975 are in national service. They will join University of Singapore students, and compete and cope with girls admitted this year, with Accountancy 43 and Commerce 38, if last year's minimum points for Nanyang University and University of Singapore prevail.

So we can expect some unequal results for the first few years. For the Chinese stream women students, they face a difficult change into total English language learning. My view is they will learn and adjust faster if the lectures, tutorials and seminars are held outside Nanyang University, because we have found it difficult to establish this English-speaking environment in Nanyang University. Between 200 to 300 students from Nanyang University will join 400 to 500 students in University of Singapore for Accountancy and Business Administration\*, but in fact they will join an English-speaking environment of 12,000 students in University of Singapore. Some of the less able students may not cope with learning both the language and the subject. If Chinese stream students fail, they should be allowed to repeat the first year. If any student finds difficulty in following the course, he should be encouraged to postpone his course for a year, to concentrate on mastering the English language before rejoining the course.

Every year, less purely Chinese stream students will be coming to Nanyang University and University of Singapore.

Once Nanyang University decided on joint courses with University of Singapore, and English as the medium of instruction, then we have to increase the teaching of English for those already in Chinese stream secondary schools. Those in 'A' levels, and in Sec 4 likely to make 'A' levels, should be gathered in special classes for intensive English language usage and instruction. By insisting on minimum pass levels for all in second language, before they can get from Sec 4 to Pre-U 1, we are ensuring that all those who go into Pre-U 1 have a good command of the second language, English in the Chinese stream, because they want to go to university, and Chinese, if in the English stream, because we want them to maintain their traditional cultural values and the work ethic.

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	<u>Year</u>	<u>Accountancy</u>	<u>Business Admin</u>
SU	1976	254	228
	1977	193	172
	<u>Year</u>	<u>Accountancy</u>	<u>Commerce</u>
NU	1976	116	261
	1977	60	151

As I explained, male students would have done national service before university. So the problem is greatly diminished. For 2½ years, they have adjusted to English language. For women students, straight from schools into

universities, the psychological obstacles to English usage are greater. At present, five junior colleges are conducting a 15-hour per week special English course for a period of 18 weeks to increase general language proficiency in English. And there is a total of only 180 students, mostly girls – woefully inadequate. But it is the best the Education Ministry can do with the English language teachers available. More can be done as more English language teachers become available. Also, because numbers in the Chinese schools have diminished, teachers can concentrate their energies on smaller classes.

#### REASON FOR OPTIMISM

Despite all the difficulties of converting from Chinese to English as the language of instruction and examinations, the results in University of Singapore, Polytechnic and Ngee Ann show that there are few or no failures because they have come from the Chinese stream. I believe this is because the students admitted to University of Singapore, Polytechnic and Ngee Ann are those with ability, and higher scores in 'A' and 'O' level examinations. In other words, they are the abler students, who are also able to master the second language, English, despite initial difficulties.



Those of you who have missed the joint course which will start this year will have to make a special effort to improve your English. Many will have to do it the painful way, learning on the job. This problem will be solved with less wastage if we tackle it openly and realistically in the universities and in the pre-university classes in schools. Our society has been through a period of great and rapid changes. This is one more change we can and must make in the next 3-5 years.

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