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**SPEECH BY DR ALINE WONG, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE
FOR HEALTH AND EDUCATION, AT THE OPENING OF
THE ASIAN READING CONGRESS AT PLAZA HOTEL,
BEACH ROAD ON THURSDAY, 22 JUNE 1995 AT 8.30 AM**

I am pleased to officiate the Opening of this Asian Reading Congress on "Literacy and Biliteracy in Asia: Problems and Issues in the Next Decade". The theme of the Congress is relevant to many of us in the Asian region.

Multi-racialism and multi-lingualism are characteristic features of most of the countries in Asia. The need for their populations to be bilingual, indeed, even multilingual, and the benefits derived from this are no longer questioned. The question is how to implement literacy and biliteracy programmes and to what levels of attainment. In the Singapore context, the issues of literacy and biliteracy may seem to be no longer pressing. Singapore already has a 90 per cent literacy rate and an established bilingual programme in our schools. While this is true, we still need to re-examine from time to time what we mean by literacy and biliteracy, because each definition of literacy and biliteracy makes clearer the scope of the problem. Along with this issue of definition are the questions of the attainable levels of literacy and biliteracy, and the strategies for achieving these goals. What are the implications of these choices for the educational system and the school curriculum, for the individual, and for the society at large? These are just some of the issues that have to be dealt with.

Our own understanding of literacy in Singapore has largely been defined by the census definition, and this itself has moved from an earlier interpretation of literacy as "the ability to read and write a simple letter" to the current

definition of literacy as "the ability to read with understanding a newspaper in a specified language". In spite of a more demanding definition, our literacy rates have been moving up from 72 per cent in 1970 to 84 per cent in 1980 to 90 per cent in 1990, an achievement that we can all be proud of. Nevertheless, these definitions are deceptively simple. The earlier definition suggests a low level of reading and writing ability. The current definition suggests greater vocabulary demands, but it omits any reference to writing ability.

Is it sufficient for literacy to be defined merely as the ability to read a newspaper in one language? The census definition actually reflects a level which is only a little higher than functional literacy. Functional literacy in turn is defined as the almost mechanical ability to read and write at a level that is adequate for following instructions and for doing simple tasks. This is minimal competence essential for survival purposes, but in the contexts of our educational aims, and the demands of the working world, this is far from adequate. We have therefore gone very much beyond the goal of raising basic literacy among the population to educating the young up to a relatively high level of language competency through 10 years of general education.

The second theme of the Congress, biliteracy, equally requires constant redefinition by each country that aims to achieve this goal for their educational systems. We all understand bilingual ability as the ability to use two or more languages orally, but biliteracy goes beyond that. Biliteracy includes the skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and even thinking in two languages. Our 1990 census revealed that the percentage of bilinguals in two of our official languages has increased from 39 per cent of the population in 1980 to 47 per cent. The percentage is much higher at 76 per cent among those aged 10 - 19 years old, as compared to around 17 per cent among those over 50 years. These figures are a testimony to the success of our bilingual programme in schools, considering that

Singapore faces the special challenge of educating our children to learn English and their mother tongue simultaneously, beginning from primary and even pre-primary school.

However, biliteracy programmes do present some problems. For instance, attention to high levels of literacy in two languages can result in dividing the learner's attention, leading to low levels of literacy achievement in both languages. Another problem that is commonly observed is that many of the bilinguals are not using their literacy skills in the two languages they have learned but prefer to use one language only. If it is only a matter of preference, then it is an individual's choice. But if it is the matter of language competency, then we must ensure that the bilingual should be competent in both languages so as to exercise this choice.

Should we only focus on bilingualism, the ability to speak two languages, or is our real goal biliteracy, the ability to read and write in two languages? Ideally, all students should be adequately equipped with the literate skills of both English and their mother tongues. This is because the ability to read and write in mother tongues also brings one nearer to the goal of culture learning and preservation of cultural values. The learning of one's culture through one's mother tongue is an objective which complements our bilingual policy. However, can this be attained among those students who clearly lack the ability to master two languages? And if they cannot cope with both, which one should be emphasized?

Also, not enough is known about the threshold levels that students need to have before they can become fully biliterate. We need to know what it takes to become a biliterate. The general consensus is that this is as much a question of attitude and interest as it is of linguistic and cognitive ability. We have provided a bilingual education programme for the population, but how do we ensure that they will want to read and write in the two languages after they finish schooling, when most of what they

need is available in one language, English, as is the case in Singapore? This is becoming an important concern too in the region where countries are educating their populations in English and in the native languages. The dominance of English in the world and the amount of material available in English to read, to listen to, to write about, is overwhelming compared to that available in native languages. For instance, in Singapore, we need more quality reading materials in the mother tongues. For language learning, starting young is very important. And yet, we lack suitable children's books in the mother tongues as supplementary reading. This causes the child's interest to tilt towards English from an early age - eg. through reading and listening to stories like Snow White, Cinderella from kindergarten age onwards!

The goals for bilingual education and the levels of proficiency to be achieved vary according to the needs of each nation. Nevertheless, the same questions of what levels, and how to achieve these levels are relevant for all. As a region, we also share the same concern over maintaining our native languages and cultures, while embracing a pragmatic policy of learning English. The implications of such an educational policy for biliteracy should be discussed, as well as the strategies that can be employed to promote biliteracy. These are some of the useful topics for the Congress to address.

To conclude, literacy is not a static concept. Over the years, our understanding and beliefs about literacy have moved from a concern with the mechanical skills of reading and writing to a critical appreciation of texts, meaning and culture. And in today's information age, computer literacy has added another dimension to this question of literacy.

Many questions thus follow from a review of the definition of literacy and biliteracy. Policy makers and educators need a clear idea of the levels of literacy and biliteracy required for vocational and social purposes; as well

as adopt realistic expectations of the levels that can be achieved. At the same time, we must be aware of social and cultural implications that advancing literacy and biliteracy levels bring.

I am confident that the regional emphasis of the papers presented at this Congress will provide for rich and diverse perspectives on the issues at hand. It leaves me to wish you a stimulating conference, and to our foreign visitors, a pleasant stay in Singapore.

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