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# English Language Competence and Occupational Mobility in Singapore

John A. MacDougall and Chew Sock Foon

THROUGHOUT SOUTHEAST ASIA national languages have regularly been replacing former colonial languages as the main media of instruction in the schools and as official languages for government business.<sup>1</sup> In some countries such as Indonesia this transition unquestionably reflects sound language planning policy. Neither Dutch nor English nor regional vernaculars like Javanese had the unifying potential displayed historically by Bahasa Indonesia. In other countries such as Malaysia the transition has provoked more controversy. Here a thriving English-medium school system which lasted well into the independence period has been systematically dismantled in favor of a gradual directed growth in Malay medium. In regional context the language policies of the Republic of Singapore are thus genuinely exceptional. There the paramountcy of English over local vernaculars is not only factually clear but no longer meets any significant political opposition.

This article examines contemporary patterns of linguistic competence in Singapore, showing the roots of these patterns in successive government language policies, and illustrating how competence in English has come to be a vehicle of mass cross-communal social mobility.<sup>2</sup> Technically, the focus is on occupational mobility resulting from the mechanism of achievement in a society in which systems of both sponsored and contest mobility are in operation.<sup>3</sup> The time-frame is that of a lifespan or generation, particularly from the starting

<sup>1</sup> See Richard Noss, *Higher Education and Development in Southeast Asia: Language Policy* (Paris: UNESCO, 1967), p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent similar analysis relevant particularly to Singapore youth as opposed to the focus here on Singapore adults, see Douglas Murray, *Multilanguage Education and Bilingualism: The Formation of Social Brakers in Singapore* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Turner, "Sponsored and Contest Mobility and the School System," in *The Logic of Social Hierarchies*, edited by Edward O. Laumann, Paul M. Siegel, and Robert W. Hodge (Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 407-419.

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point of first job to the destination point of best job ever attained. The argument relies heavily on findings from a national probability sample survey of Singapore citizens twenty-one years of age and over designed and supervised by the first author in 1970 and observations of the second author while she was an Administrative Officer in the Singapore government specializing in personnel recruitment, retention, and release.

### *On Linguistic Competence*

Linguistic competence, often referred to as "fluency," involves four distinct skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Speaking and listening jointly define oral-aural competence, or competence in the "spoken language." Reading and writing jointly define "literacy," or competence in the "written language." Oral-aural and literacy competence need not occur together. In Singapore they do so mainly among the more educated sectors of the Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities—the three principal ethnic groups. Nor should it be assumed that full oral-aural and literacy competence for a given member of a community includes the presumptive native language of that community. English, in particular, is not the mother tongue of any of the three major communities in Singapore, but significant numbers of Chinese and Indians are fully competent only in it and not in any Chinese or Indian languages.<sup>4</sup>

Malay is written in Singapore in both *jawi* (Arabic) and *rumi* (Roman) scripts, but *rumi* is now nearly universally understood by Malays of all ages and *jawi* disproportionately by the older Malays. Virtually all Malay-medium school texts are in *rumi* and when Malay is taught as a second language, *rumi* is the script used.

In Chinese and Tamil Roman scripts are rarely seen. Rather, mastery of Chinese characters and the Indic script of Tamil are necessary to have attained literacy competence in these languages in Singapore. These scripts are seldom mastered by Singaporeans except among Chinese-educated Chinese and Tamil-educated Indians, respectively. English-educated Chinese and English-educated Indians are particularly deficient in mastery of written Chinese and written Tamil, though they generally retain some oral-aural competence in their mother tongues if they are the first generation educated in

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<sup>4</sup> Among the Malays English-language mono-lingualism is rare, although among second- and third-generation English-educated Malays, competence in Malay is markedly lower than among Malays who are only first generation English-educated or have not been educated in English at all.

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English in their families or if they are educated in the Chinese or Tamil medium, or are not educated at all.

The strong overlap in oral-aural and literacy competencies in English and the more limited overlap in such competencies in Chinese, in Malay, and in Tamil are critical aspects of the contemporary distribution of linguistic competence in Singapore. Singapore is now in transition from a society in which English constituted a "high" language for the colonial sponsors and their proteges in the Civil Service to a more open society where English is the lingua franca for nearly all Singaporeans. In socio-linguistic terms Singapore is moving from a situation of bilingualism with diglossia to one of bi- (and mono-) lingualism without diglossia. The effects of this massive shift to English mastery on occupational mobility are already immense.

The effects are magnified since the promotion of Malay as the national language was virtually abandoned after the expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia in August 1965. In fact, the ruling party in Singapore from 1959 to date has never seriously promoted Malay, except in the 1959-1965 period as a lingua franca for the little educated. Both the former British colonial rulers and their successors, the People's Action Party (P.A.P.), intended that English would retain pre-eminence as the main official language of government, and the P.A.P. has since made plain its intention that English shall acquire preeminence in the private sector as well. (Parallel effects of differential levels of English mastery on occupational mobility are evident today in other countries, as in the cases of Spanish-English bilinguals among the Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban communities in the United States.)

#### *Patterns of Linguistic Competence and Usage in Singapore*

Singapore is multicommunal, 76% of its population being Chinese, 15% Malays, 7% Indians, and 2% others (mainly Europeans and Eurasians). Contrary to popular non-Asian thinking, the Chinese do not comprise an undifferentiated linguistic unit, but are divided into several speech-groups, the three most numerous being the Hokkiens (32%), the Teochews (17%), and the Cantonese (13%). The term "speech-group" is technically preferable to the more frequently used "dialect group," since the notion of a dialect of a language implies substantial mutual intelligibility at the oral-aural level among dialects. In fact, mutual unintelligibility is the rule among Singapore's prevalent Chinese "dialects" with some important exceptions (such as the non-reciprocal intelligibility of Hokkien to Teochew speakers).

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A basic pattern of oral-aural linguistic competence among adult Singapore citizens is that almost all members of each community (or sub-community) speak, and listen with understanding to, their own mother tongue (the latter term referring to the predominant language used by parents to the child during infancy). In the case of the Chinese speech-groups, this would entail separate mastery by each of spoken Hokkien, Teochew, and Cantonese in particular. Especially among the little educated but not confined to them, there is also a tendency for the various Chinese speech-groups to learn each other's mother tongue. Thus 72% of all adult Chinese exhibit oral-aural competence in Hokkien (though Hokkiens are but 42% of all Chinese); 51% of all Chinese know Teochew (who comprise 22% of all Chinese); and 46% of all Chinese know Cantonese (while Cantonese are only 16% of all Chinese).<sup>5</sup> Such extensive use of a third Chinese speech other than Mandarin and the mother tongue by Chinese may be unique to Singapore and Malaysia. This pattern apparently does not occur to such an extent in either the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, or other Southeast Asian Chinese communities. Such mastery of more than two Chinese speeches facilitates greater coping with problems of everyday life in Singapore and probably increases chances of being hired by some small Chinese firms, but probably has very little other impact on occupational mobility out of the working class.

Mandarin is, in addition to English, Malay, and Tamil, an official language in Singapore, its use being permitted when necessary in conducting the business of government. It is also the only Chinese language sanctioned as a medium of instruction in primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions of learning in Singapore. Ironically however, Mandarin is *not* the mother tongue of even one percent of the

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<sup>5</sup> These and all other linguistic competence and usage data were gleaned from the Singapore National Identity Survey, a national probability sample survey conducted by the first author in 1970. A technical analysis of the validity of the measures of linguistic competence used is beyond the scope of the present article. Basically, however, scaled self-reports of competence in each of four linguistic skills were obtained for each language. This technique is similar to that used by Joshua Fishman in *Bilingualism and the Barrio Final Report*, Vols. I and II (Washington, D.C.: Office of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1968). The 1970 Singapore census schedule reflected a very low priority in the gathering of socio-linguistic data, including only one item on linguistic competence—ability to read a newspaper in any language. The results have been rather misleadingly analyzed as indicative of literacy, a joint reading and writing skill, in the formal census report by P. Arumainathan, then Chief Statistician, in *Report on the Census of Population 1970 Singapore* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 1973). Comparative use of 1970 census "literacy" data in this paper is also foreclosed since the population covered in census tables in persons ten years of age and over, a more literate group than the adults (21 years of age and over) examined in the Singapore National Identity Survey.

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Singapore Chinese, whose immigrant origins are in Southern China where Mandarin is not a numerically significant mother tongue. Almost entirely through the instrument of the Chinese-medium schools, 36% of all Singapore Chinese have acquired oral-aural competence in Mandarin. Because of its link to education, Mandarin unlike the other Chinese speeches, does possess some economic currency in Singapore and so can aid occupational mobility out of the working class. But this effect is decidedly limited: almost no one among the other communities possesses oral-aural competence in it (nor for that matter, in any of the Chinese speeches).

All adult Singapore Malays universally speak their mother tongue. Just as minority proportions of the various Chinese speech groups have learned each other's speeches, so some non-Malays have learned Malay. About 22% of the Chinese and 70% of the Indians indicate oral-aural competence in Malay. But the uses of Malay mastery by the non-Malays parallel the uses of mastery in the Chinese vernaculars among the Chinese themselves. Malay acts as a lingua franca for many members of the little educated of all communities, just as mastery of say, Hokkien, by non-Hokkiens acts as an intra-communal lingua franca mainly among the little educated members of the Chinese community (Mandarin would be the lingua franca of one of the more educated segments of the Chinese community, the graduates of Chinese-medium schools). As an inter-communal lingua franca among the uneducated, Malay should not be expected to have any significant impact on occupational mobility.

So is it also with oral-aural competence in Tamil, the main Indian language. Negligible numbers of Chinese and Malays display such competence. Tamil is almost wholly the language of the Tamils only, and among Tamils who are English-educated oral-aural competence in Tamil has begun to erode since Tamil is not always chosen or even made available to Tamils as a second language in the non-Tamil-medium schools. While 79% of the Indians have oral-aural competence in Tamil, this figure means only 3% of the total population. Tamil thus has almost no economic value in Singapore, the major exceptions being the few Tamil importers who use the language in business transactions with Madras exporters in India and those who produce the local small-circulation Tamil-language newspapers.

The low utility of the Chinese vernaculars, Malay, and Tamil for upward occupational mobility is worsened by the pattern of literacy competence which is uniformly below oral-aural competence for all three language families. Only 36% of Chinese can read and write

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Chinese characters, while almost all Chinese show oral-aural competence in some Chinese speech. Similarly, while all Malays show oral-aural competence in Malay, only 64% exhibit literacy competence. Though 79% of all Indians indicate oral-aural competence in Tamil, only 50% are literate in it. These discrepancies suggest that even if mastery of these languages at the oral-aural level improves chances of upward occupational mobility, the lower literacy-competence rate would restrict such mobility for many to jobs which require no knowledge of reading and writing. Such jobs nearly all entail manual work.

Who then are the bulk of Singaporeans who have risen out of the working class? The only remaining set of persons not considered are those who are competent in English. Of all adult Singaporeans 24% have oral-aural competence in English, and 22% literacy competence. The close congruence of these figures is suggestive. A vast majority of those who are competent in English can use it in jobs requiring ability to read and write the language. Such jobs are overwhelmingly white-collar, paying moderate to very substantial remuneration.

Relatively speaking, the Indian community is in the best position to use the opportunity which English mastery creates for upward mobility. Some 70% of the Indians show oral-aural competence in English, and 41% literacy competence. The other two major communities do not come close to these levels of attainment. The Chinese appear in the next best position, 23% indicating oral-aural and 22% literacy competence. About 19% of the Malays have oral-aural competence in English, and 22% literacy competence. Because the Chinese far outnumber Malays and Indians, however, it is clear this community will grasp the absolute greatest number of employment opportunities open to those with competencies in English, though the Indians will share in these benefits far out of proportion to their numbers in the population. The Malays will gain least of the three, but that there will be progress in the form of a new Malay white-collar class cannot be gainsaid.

The strategic importance of English mastery for upward occupational mobility is further manifested in the patterns of language usage in various domains. In the family (whether of orientation or procreation), in the neighborhood, among friends, and during worship, the various mother tongues of the three major communities are pre-eminent. While English is useful in each of these domains, for all three communities use of the mother tongue substantially surpasses that of English, no matter what the domain. Aside from the English-medium schools, the only area where English comes into extensive use is that of

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work. The other languages are obviously not shunted aside, but none is used to such an extent with one's superiors at the job. While 21% of all adult Singaporeans use English with their bosses, just 12% use Hokkien, 9% Cantonese, 8% Malay, 4% Teochew, and 4% Mandarin (these are the only speeches used by greater than 1% by all adult Singaporeans to bosses). While use of the vernaculars and Mandarin rises when interaction with co-workers is considered, still only Hokkien (23%) seems to surpass the use of English (18%). This displacement of English from first to second place when co-workers (as opposed to bosses) are considered only points up the position of English as the language symbolically and actually indicative of high economic status.

One important fact emerges when these data are compared with those on linguistic competence. The 18% who use English with co-workers and the 21% who used it with bosses are numerically remarkably close to the 22% who have mastered the language at both the oral-aural and literacy levels. Once English is learned, it seems nearly always to be put to use in an occupation. This is probably not so to the same extent with the vernaculars and Mandarin. Their rates of use on the job, whether with co-workers or bosses, are uniformly well below the levels at which persons show competence in them. These speeches are thus, relatively, all devalued in the work domain.

The various figures for language use at work are based on the entire adult population. If only the working population is considered, one finds that jobs in which English is used with one's bosses comprise approximately 36% of all jobs in Singapore. English is the economic language *par excellence* so far as employment is concerned. Hokkien is used with bosses on a much lower 20% of the jobs, Cantonese on 15%, Malay on 14%, Teochew on 7%, Mandarin on 7%, and Tamil on 1%.

The earlier suggestion that Chinese obtain the greatest absolute economic gains from their competencies in English is also indicated by these data. Chinese occupy 77% of all the jobs in which English is used to one's superiors. Moreover, the disproportionate benefit gained by the Indians because of their pre-eminent rate of English competence also seems borne out. While 63% of all Indians are in jobs where English is spoken to one's superiors, only 39% of all Malays and 38% of all Chinese are so situated.

### *Theory and Fact in Government Language Policy*

How did competence in the English language come to be such an impressive vehicle of upward occupational mobility in Singapore? It is



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convenient to begin by viewing this result as the end-product of a sequence of deliberate decisions on language policy by the governments of Singapore from the colonial period to the present. While Singapore was a colony, the sole language accorded legitimacy in transacting government business was English. This was no accident. The small civil service was staffed by a mixture of British expatriates and English-educated locals, mainly Chinese and Indians from the better-off families who could afford to send their children to the small number of English-medium schools set up by the British government or by various English-speaking missionary orders. English was the exclusive language permitted in a powerless and unrepresentative colonial-sponsored parliament. If one wished to compose a letter to or visit an office in the colonial administration, English was the language of address. Vernacular-only speakers could gain no audience except indirectly through petition-writers who translated their requests into English. Because the proportion of Singaporeans competent in English was very small at this time, the colonial government ultimately came to be seen as having an official language policy embodying "English-language chauvinism."

In the anti-colonial movements after World War II in Southeast Asia, Singapore lagged behind as the colonial government successfully coopted potential rebels by absorbing them into the civil service. But such a tactic could be successful only among those English-educated leaders whose perspectives did not extend beyond Singapore. The year 1954 saw the founding of the People's Action Party as an anti-colonial alliance between the Chinese-educated leadership of the communist left and a small number of canny English-educated social democrats who had received their university education in Great Britain. The mass-base of the movement comprised the non-English speaking Chinese who had grown steadily alienated from a government which had refused to listen to them except in the colonial language which few could speak or write. The alliance between the factions of the P.A.P. was an uneasy one. The English-educated intellectuals did not care for communism, but politically required the mass-base which could only be delivered at that point by the Chinese-educated communist leaders. For their part the communist wing needed the English-educated intellectuals in order to undertake agitation and propaganda in a language the colonialists could comprehend.

In 1957 the British secretly gave an undertaking to the communist wing of the P.A.P. that it would allow them to take over the reins of

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government if they could win a new parliamentary election in 1959 in which for the first time the electorate would encompass nearly all adult Singaporeans.<sup>6</sup> No longer feeling that they needed the English-educated intellectuals, the communists attempted to take sole control of the P.A.P. at its 1957 convention. They succeeded, only to find their ranks forthwith decimated by a wave of government arrests against the "surfacing communist menace." Control of the P.A.P. thus fell into the hands of the English-educated intellectuals for the first time. Campaigning for an end to colonial rule and the release of their "comrades" from detention, the P.A.P. came into power by a landslide vote in 1959. The British granted internal self-government (retaining control of defense, foreign affairs, and internal security), and the English-educated leaders of the P.A.P. freed their communist comrades but did not allow any a position of significant power in their new government. These same British-educated intellectuals control Singapore today.

On assuming power, one of their first major actions was to change the government language policy. Malay was given an honorary status as "national language," partly to win friends among neighboring Malay-speaking countries and partly because the English-speaking leadership believed the language would be a useful inter-communal lingua franca in Singapore's then educationally disadvantaged status. However, little was done to promote public competence in Malay. This was not the key aspect of the change in government language policy. Rather, the major change was from a policy where English was the only language permitted in government to a policy of official multi-lingualism. For the parliament and in government offices, use of Chinese (Mandarin in spoken form), Malay, and Tamil in addition to English was now proclaimed as not only permissible but also a major positive force toward solidarity in Singapore's linguistically heterogeneous society. After this policy shift, the popularity of the P.A.P. and its English-educated leadership reached a new peak.

The consequent use of English in government business did not decline. The new policy simply enabled the people to interact with the new administration without the use of mediators. The civil service continued to keep its internal record in English. The two tactics which camouflaged the gap between the "official" and the "unofficial" policy were government tolerance and encouragement of private and mass media (particularly newspaper and radio) in all four official

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<sup>6</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *The Battle for Merger* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 48-50.

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languages and a timely new commitment to universal education in all four official languages, minimally through the primary level.

It was the implementation of the decision on the language of instruction coupled with the retention of English as the internal language of an expanded civil service that determined in the long run the greater economic value of English over the other three official languages. The P.A.P. built schools for all language streams, but designated most as English-medium. So while the ranks of the Tamil-, Malay-, and Mandarin-educated expanded as never before, the numbers of the English-educated grew even faster. In 1946, 31% of all students were enrolled in the English stream; in 1970 the figure was 62%, in 1974 it was 68%. The P.A.P. had apparently successfully set in motion a momentous exercise in social engineering which would gradually and voluntarily change Singapore into an English-speaking society. Because of this linguistic revolution from above, competence in English became at once the gateway and the barrier to the upper echelons of the world of work in Singapore.

#### *Language, Education, and Occupational Mobility*

Since in the colonial period English was perceived by many Singaporeans as the language necessary for upward mobility in occupations,<sup>7</sup> even those aggrieved by the British language policy could attempt to place their children in the English-medium schools. But several constraints operated so that "an honest choice" of medium of instruction was not always possible. First, there was a low overall ceiling on enrollments in the English stream relative to all others. Second, many poor parents could not afford to send their children to an English-medium school (and some, not to any school), particularly if it were private rather than government-run. Third, when enrollment in the English stream was possible for only one of several offspring, male children would usually receive priority. Fourth, fears of deculturation and suspicion of Westernization (often dubbed "yellow culture" during the anti-colonial struggle) were widespread, deterring more communally-centered parents as well as some of those committed to cultural pluralism from even wishing to have their children sent to an English-medium school. Fifth, many felt that mother-tongue competence would be lost in the English-medium, since courses on second languages were limited to European, not Asian languages. Finally, English for many was the "language of the oppres-

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<sup>7</sup> Although not seen by all as the most desirable language facilitating such mobility.

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sor" and on these grounds sufficiently devalued to ensure that vernacular- or Mandarin-medium education was preferable.

The effect of the new language policies of the P.A.P. was to make more apparent the fact that English mastery had greater long-term occupational payoffs than mastery of local vernaculars or Mandarin. In addition, many of the constraints on enrolling children in English-medium schools were systematically removed. Consider one early effect of P.A.P. language policy. Though certain civil service jobs were opened to the non-English-educated by the party, this policy was conceived and correctly perceived, especially by the Chinese-educated, as one of tokenism. Among the Singapore public, consequently, a gradual realization grew that mastery in English, now the language of choice of Singaporeans' freely elected government, was still required for entry into even a moderately-paying civil service position as contrasted with positions entailing general public-lower civil servant interaction in languages other than English when the government met the people in offices.

The bias of the P.A.P. in favor of English also appeared in early party attitudes toward preferred foreign investors. Extensive and ultimately successful economic inducements to establish branch firms in Singapore were initially given to foreign investors mainly from English-speaking Western countries. While this policy has since been abandoned in favor of attracting investments from most developed industrial societies, even investors from non-English speaking nations often use English as a business language in their Singapore operations. The public learned that to rise beyond the status of unskilled laborers in such firms and particularly to gain a white collar position in them English mastery was essential. So whether parents were interested in having their children rise in the occupational hierarchy in the public or private sector, after the P.A.P. gained power it became clear that the "smart money" was and remained on the English-medium schools.

A second aspect of the P.A.P.'s language policy concerned the removal of constraints on enrollment in the English-medium schools. The ceiling on such enrollments was first raised by a massive school-building program in which a majority of new structures at primary and especially secondary level were reserved for English-medium classes. With government encouragement private English-medium schools created additions or new buildings to accommodate increased enrollments. Family incomes gradually rose somewhat, opening school doors previously closed. Monthly school fees were remitted for

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needy students, in a blanket fashion in the case of the Malays, Singapore's most economically disadvantaged community. Socialist dogmas of sexual equality together with growing economic prosperity brought the proportion of females in the school-going population into line with their proportion in the population at large. Concerns about "yellow culture" diminished as the Chinese-educated communist wing of the party fell increasingly into disgrace and eventually split from the P.A.P. in 1961 to form an overt communist-front organization, the Barisan Sosialis (Socialist Front). English could now freely be proclaimed as a Singaporean language as well as an international one, raising its legitimacy far above its prior status as a colonial language.

Fears over the loss of mother-tongue competence were somewhat allayed by the expansion of new and different second-language classes. Significantly, in the Mandarin-, Malay-, and Tamil-streams, the party pushed English as a second language to almost the total exclusion of other Singapore languages, but in the English-medium schools Chinese, Malay, and Tamil students were strongly urged to adopt as a second language Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, respectively. The effect of these new policies on second-language learning meant that the P.A.P. was hoping unrealistically that all students, whatever their medium of instruction, would become competent in English, while mastery of a tongue of one's own community by students in the English-stream was intended as a "brace" against deculturation resulting from extensive exposure on the part of English-medium students to the vast amount of English-language media from the West freely available in Singapore.

These decisions on official language and medium of instruction policies have transformed English into the first language of choice for young Singaporeans. In 1970, 62% of all primary and secondary school students were enrolled in the English-medium, 32% in the Mandarin-medium, 6% in the Malay-medium and less than one-half of one percent in the Tamil-medium (the 1946 figures were 31%, 61%, 7%, and 1%, respectively).<sup>4</sup> Comparing the absolute figures in 1946 and 1970, the English-medium schools had thirteen times as many students in 1970, the Mandarin-medium four times, the Malay-medium five times, and Tamil-medium three times as many. The percentage enrolled in English-medium classes and the rate of growth of such

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<sup>4</sup> The figures in this paragraph were computed from raw data in *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Education in Singapore* (Singapore: Teachers Training College Publications Board, 1967), and *List of Schools, Singapore, 1970* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1970).

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classes would be even greater if only Primary One enrollments were considered.<sup>9</sup> At the tertiary level of education, 79% of Singapore's university-going population in 1970 attended English-medium classes at the University of Singapore or the Singapore Polytechnic, while but 21% attended the predominantly Chinese-medium Nanyang University. These figures refer to Singaporeans undergoing tertiary education in Singapore. If Singaporeans studying abroad were to be included, the English-educated percentage would probably rise into the nineties.

The latest figures available to the authors which give communal breakdowns for the school-going population date from 1967.<sup>10</sup> They indicate that English-medium classes enrolled 56% of all Chinese students at primary and secondary levels, 53% of all Malay students, and 92% of all Indian students. These percentages have undoubtedly since risen for each of the three main communities in the school-going population. Again it appears that the Chinese will gain most (in mobility) in absolute terms, while the Indians will gain out of proportion to their percentage in the school-going population. The dominance of the English language in Singapore thus seems assured, and in terms of the existing and projected occupational opportunity structure in Singapore, the graduates from the English stream seem most equipped to exploit the best occupational opportunities.

Universal primary education in Singapore ensures admission to school but does not guarantee progression through school. An extraordinary number of students drop out at various stages. The Singapore government has not regularly released drop-out figures mainly because it has not historically collected them in a valid and systematic manner. However, these rates may be estimated from other published Ministry of Education data, for 1968.<sup>11</sup> Overall it appears that relatively few students dropped out during primary school (Primary One through Primary Six). In Primary Six, students have been required to take the Primary School Leaving Examination if they wished to

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<sup>9</sup> The Primary One enrollment figures have sometimes assumed the status of state secrets, since they point to a situation where the Malay stream will vanish in the very near future. Only 3% of all primary and secondary students were in the Malay stream in 1973, down from an already low 6% in 1970. The Tamil stream has already been so depleted that by 1970 there were no separate Tamil-medium secondary schools remaining in Singapore and the total primary school enrollment in Tamil was but 1,499 pupils. These trends vividly illustrate the direction in which the P.A.P. leadership has wished to proceed, but they also pose political and ideological problems for it since the party continues to sound the public theme that all four language streams are treated equally. Reportedly, 81% of all Primary One enrollments in 1975 were in the English medium.

<sup>10</sup> *Annual Report of the Ministry of Education, 1967*. (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1970).

<sup>11</sup> The following estimates of drop-out rates have been computed from raw data in *Education in Singapore*.

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continue on to secondary school. Until 1975, when it became a grading exercise, this was a "bar exam" almost identical in function to the British "eleven plus" examination, a procedure which introduced an early element of sponsored educational mobility into the educational system. In Singapore only 54% of the Primary Six students who took the Primary School Leaving Examination in 1968 "passed" it, the highest percentage of passes occurring in the English and Chinese streams. Of those permitted to continue their education, approximately 5% chose voluntarily to drop out. Thus the compulsory drop-out rate between primary and secondary school was a remarkable 46%, while the voluntary drop-out rate between the two levels was 5%.

At the secondary level (Secondary One through Secondary Four), 28% dropped out during their secondary education (i.e. before reaching Secondary Four). In Secondary Four, students took another exam to determine whether they would be permitted to go on to Pre-University (a two-year university-preparatory program). While the name of this second exam varied by stream, in the English stream it was formerly referred to as the "Senior Cambridge" exam, and now as the "School Certificate" exam. Approximately 58% of Secondary Four students "passed" it in 1968 and were thereby sponsored to continue their education. Virtually all did so, but 42% of the students in Secondary Four necessarily become compulsory drop-outs. The percentage of "passes" was highest in the English and Chinese streams.

In the second and final year of Pre-University, yet another exam was imposed, commonly called the "Cambridge Higher School Certificate" exam formerly and now the "Higher School Certificate" exam in all streams. Approximately 59% "passed" this in 1968 and were permitted to *apply* to a university in Singapore. The pass-rates were much higher in the English-stream (71%) than in the Chinese (50%) or Malay media (40%). Those students who could afford university fees generally continued on to their tertiary education.

What this sponsored system of educational mobility means is that enormous numbers of young Singaporeans are channeled into the competitive labor market at an early age with deficient occupational skills and economically inappropriate language competencies. The two most strategically significant drop-out points are after Primary Six and after Secondary Four. Dropouts are almost wholly compulsory at these points, a result of deliberate selection policies by the government. The social cost of this policy may be quickly assessed by noting that in 1973 secondary school and pre-university enrollments

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were but a half and a twentieth, respectively, of primary school enrollments. Thus the extent to which the educational system defeats upward occupational mobility for a majority of young Singaporeans is readily apparent. Those drop-outs who must endure the most hardship in job opportunities are the primary-educated of whatever stream, next the non-English-educated who either do not or just manage to complete secondary school, and finally the English-educated secondary school dropouts.

#### *University Education and Its Impact on Mobility*

Singapore's two major institutions of higher education are the University of Singapore and Nanyang University. The former is older and is the one from which most of the present P.A.P. leaders matriculated before proceeding to Great Britain for further study or higher degrees. All its classes are conducted in English except for a few in the small Departments of Chinese and Malay Studies. About three-quarters of the student body currently comes from the English-stream schools. Nanyang University, on the other hand, draws virtually all its student body from the Mandarin stream. It is the only mainly Chinese-medium university in the world outside China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, and its continued existence is attributable both to a strong desire among the Singapore Chinese community for a tertiary institution of higher education to absorb graduates of the Mandarin-medium secondary schools and the P.A.P.'s regionally unique permissive policy toward Mandarin-medium instruction.

Nanyang remains a privately financed institution with increasing aid from the government, but the University of Singapore's budget is almost wholly drawn from public funds. This, together with the latter's position as the first university in Singapore (it was earlier known as Raffles College), has given it the status of "the national university." In 1968, the Chairman of the P.A.P. took direct control by assuming its Vice-Chancellorship. In 1975 he was replaced by a trusted senior civil servant, formerly Permanent Secretary to the Education Ministry. P.A.P. influence has so permeated even Nanyang that it has made a previously unthinkable commitment to become bilingual (Mandarin and English) in its media of instruction. Early in 1975 the English-educated Minister of Education himself became Vice-Chancellor of Nanyang in part to speed up implementation of this commitment. Thus the P.A.P. leadership through a series of qualifying exams and strategic personnel shifts has determined who enters both universities and exerts extraordinary leverage on the curricula of both and the destiny of their graduates.



### *Occupational Mobility in Singapore*

The bachelor's degree structure in both universities has been substantially similar. At the risk of some oversimplification, it can be said that degrees are classified as Honours or General, the most prestigious being that of Honours, First Class (roughly equivalent to the American *magna cum laude*). Following in prestige are the Second Class, Upper Division (Honours) degree; Second Class, Lower Division (Honours) degree; and the General or "Pass" degree without honours. At Nanyang, there is a Third Class (Honours) category preceding that of the General degree. The majority of degrees awarded come with Honours of one sort or another, and the sort of Honours is a central determinant of immediate and future occupational mobility. In both universities an exceedingly small number of First Class degrees are awarded in any given academic year. Persons gaining this status are considered the intellectual cream of the graduate crop. University of Singapore First Class degree-holders, in particular, seldom if ever have problems in securing prestigious and well paid first jobs. They are keenly sought after by both the government and private sector.

First Class degree-holders usually do not have to compete for jobs upon graduation. Their occupational mobility is *de facto* sponsored by either government or firms in the private sector. If their political loyalties are not considered suspect and their aspirations clearly lie in the academic world, they are aided by government and their universities in various informal ways to gain fellowships for graduate study, after completion of which they are expected to return to lecture at their former universities, in many cases replacing expatriate professors who have taught them as undergraduates. No matter which field they enter, almost all will have formal careers and proceed far in them. First Class degree-holders from Nanyang who are functionally bi-lingual in Mandarin and English will share in these perquisites of sponsorship, but those without functional English competence often experience unique difficulties before and after gaining employment.

Second Class, Upper Division degree-holders must contest for employment, since they are much more numerous than holders of First Class degrees. If they enter the Singapore Civil Service, they typically receive Executive Officer positions, one division below the Administrative Service. Those who enter government Teaching Service receive stable but humdrum jobs since the teaching profession in Singapore is not highly differentiated and there is an oversupply of teachers. At best, those with better degrees may have a higher starting salary. Second Class, Upper Division degree-holders also may enter the private sector at an entry level managerial position. It is in these

positions that English is still almost exclusively used for communication within managerial ranks, to clerical workers, sometimes to laborers and always with the government and nearly always with executives in other firms. Only in the smaller private locally owned family concerns can the Second Class, Upper Division Nanyang graduates have an advantage over a comparable degree-holder from the University of Singapore. University of Singapore Second Class, Upper Division degree-holders usually are more competitive in the private sector, particularly if they are bilingual in English and their mother tongue (which is usually the case). They may even enjoy advantages over non-English-speaking First Class degree-holders from Nanyang.

The University of Singapore Second Class, Lower Division degree-holder (still an Honours graduate) experiences a sense of being in an occupational limbo. There is no employer to sponsor his occupational mobility and no employers who readily include him in a pool of graduates contesting for a high-level entry position. Rather, he must first diligently locate and only then contest for the opportunities open in the occupational structure. While white-collar work is usually secured, the actual job is rarely seen as one commensurate with the status of a university graduate.<sup>12</sup> Holders of a comparable Nanyang degree who are not competent in English have many more problems; many are forced to assume the roles of private tutors of Mandarin and Chinese literature for school children in return for a mere pittance. Not surprisingly, some of them are hostile to the P.A.P., whose language policies are seen as having engendered their plight. Prospects for significant upward occupational mobility are possible for this group, but the prestige of the occupations they gain will remain substantially below those of their English-educated counterparts.

Holders of General or "Pass" degrees enjoy few substantial advantages in the job market over those students who have completed secondary school, except that in the case of University of Singapore graduates, English language competence will be somewhat higher, allowing a slight competitive edge.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A surprising number of such persons become cadet journalists for English-language newspapers. Their recruitment to these positions explains much about the mediocre intellectual quality of such publications.

<sup>13</sup> One avenue for occupational mobility objectively open to many English-educated Singaporeans would be emigration to an English-speaking western country and obtaining desirable employment there. This avenue is subjectively closed, however, to all but a small minority. Data from the Singapore National Identity Survey indicate that only 14% of the all-English-educated Chinese choose the United States (9%), or Great Britain (5%), as their first choice for the country in which they would want to live their lives. No all-English-educated Malays or Indians expressed such a preference.

## *Occupational Mobility in Singapore*

### *Conclusion*

At present, mastery of the English language facilitates upward occupational mobility for individuals and communities beyond that which may be gained from competence in other Singapore languages. Moreover, this positive effect on future mobility increases with education. Originally a colonial imposition, the English language has been purposefully propagated by the political leaders as a means to raise the economic status of any citizens who choose to use this vehicle. What has happened in Singapore is that an elite of English-educated democratic socialists have tried to alter the social stratification system in a relatively nondisruptive and gradual manner so that there will result a more equal distribution of power, property, and prestige. Social costs there have been, especially discrimination in employment practices against the non-English-educated, but the evidence suggests that these costs will diminish further as time passes.

But the advantages of English mastery as a kind of "up escalator" in the occupational hierarchy in Singapore are far from unqualified. It seems likely that once English-medium education or at least English mastery becomes nearly universal in Singapore, its differential effects on the mobility of individuals and communities will become very much less pronounced. While today there seems little likelihood that mastery of English will ever become a "down escalator," it could in time become a mere horizontal "conveyor belt" moving individuals and communities along a level plane. If this should happen, more of the customary predictors of upward occupational mobility may again become pre-eminent. Residual ascriptive advantages gained through two or three generations of English-education in a lineage will remain, but in time these too would substantially decline or vanish.

Two confounding variables may even change the role of English mastery into a "down escalator." Singapore in becoming increasingly an English-speaking nation finds itself surrounded by large neighbors with language policies diametrically opposed in principle to those it now fosters. Indonesia has long had a policy in which the Indonesian (Malay) language is the main medium of instruction in its schools, and Malaysia is moving rapidly in this same direction. Consequently, Singapore by promoting English often seems to its two neighbors somewhat un-Asian. Singapore is further isolated from its neighbors by its enviable greater economic prosperity and majority Chinese population. Suspicion and hostility toward the Chinese minorities in Indonesia and Malaysia remain strong and such feelings are easily projected on to predominantly Chinese Singapore. Partly for such reasons, Singapore has fortified itself militarily in much the same

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manner Israel has in the Middle East. A successful military invasion of Singapore would almost surely mean the end of the system of English-medium education there and the end of English mastery as a vehicle for upward occupational mobility.

The other contingency in which the role of English mastery would become reversed relates to Singapore's internal political affairs. Despite one of the most efficient secret police, surveillance, and preventive detention systems in the non-totalitarian world, neither the forces of communism nor the linguistic chauvinism of the Chinese community have been completely extinguished. One input into the government's delay in diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China has been anxiety over domestic repercussions of such a move among these segments of the Chinese population. In 1971 three senior executives of the leading Chinese newspaper *Nanyang Siang Pau* were detained and accused of having launched a deliberate campaign to stir up Chinese "racial emotions." An estimated 5,000 persons visited the Singapore Bank of China branch in January 1976 to pay last respects to Chou En-lai. Wreaths received from 250 organizations lined the entrance and hallways. In the unlikely event of a change in government or a split in the present government, opportunities could arise in which underground communist cadres could join with disaffected members of the Chinese community not reconciled to the predominance of English in contemporary Singapore in a common effort to overthrow the existing government by violent means. Should this ever occur, it is probable that neither Malaysia nor Indonesia, which have outlawed communist parties in their own countries, would stand idly by. Despite the formation and deployment of indigenous Singapore armed forces, armed intervention might well be ultimately successful if Singapore were in internal political disarray. While the elevation to power of communists and Chinese linguistic chauvinists in Singapore would probably mean a shift from English to Mandarin, successful invasion by Malaysia and/or Indonesia would mean a shift from English to Malay.

These remain only very remote nightmare scenarios. Today Singapore's neighbors are not making any serious threats against its sovereignty, and within Singapore no significant political challenges come from the underground communist movement or from Chinese linguistic chauvinists. Internal or international war contingencies are not likely to be among the social costs of Singapore's linguistic transformation.

*University of Alabama in Huntsville, January 1976*