

English use policy and additional support for bilingual learners in Singapore

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Abstract: *The aim of this essay is to describe and critically review the English Use policy in Singapore towards bilingual learners, followed by a case study a Vietnam girl in an English-medium school. The further intention of Singaporean official achieving “English-knowing bilingualism” will be discussed. Additionally, this essay makes recommendations to the teaching and learning methods adopted by the bilingual school in Singapore to the diagnosis and support of SEN students. In this essay, SEN students in Singapore will be focused on bilingual learners causing concern. The aim of this essay is to give a critical review of the English Use policy in Singapore and give some suggestions towards the practice in Singapore and other Asian countries for those bilingual learners causing concern.*

Keywords: *Medium of instruction, English language, Bilingualism*

1. Introduction

Globalisation has brought more frequent communication among countries and the languages used to make connection are various. However, English has become a lingua franca for 21st century in many fields, such as economy, education, and technology^[9]. Many non-English speaking countries have implemented education policies to prepare their students capable enough to face the global challenge^[1]. Situation is different when it comes to Singapore, a multi-ethnic country where four languages are spoken^[4]. In this essay, three main parts will be illustrated and discussed.

Firstly, the social context of Singapore will be introduced, which includes its geographic location, historical and economic background. Secondly, this essay will analysis one of the policy: English Use Policy in Singapore. This policy is designed and implemented by the official and has achieved distinguishable achievements^[9]. In this part, the historical problems of four languages using together in Singapore will be discussed from three different aspects, following the content and goals of the English Use policy. Thirdly, a case study of a Vietnam girl who studies in an English-medium secondary school in Singapore will be introduced here to indicate the application and effect of the English Use policy. The bilingual or multilingual schools in Singapore also set up some offices for those students who learning bilingualism but causing concern. For those who require Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Singapore, Singaporean schools provide service and help those SEN students professionally.

2. The social context of Singapore

Singapore, gained its independence in 1964, locates in Southeastern Asia. Singapore has four official languages, which are English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. Because of its multi-ethnic background, the populations of speaking these four languages are of different proportion. This multi-lingual context can be prominent issue for Singaporean official to solve. Furthermore, some political, educational and social issues would be aroused by multi-lingual chaotic^[6].

Furthermore, the geographic location makes Singapore a global commerce and transport hub and is evaluated as “Easiest place to do business” by World Bank. After independence of Singapore, this country implemented the Medium-of-Instruction policy (1979). After decades, it achieved an English-knowing bilingualism^[8] and this city-state republic also gained social stability and widely-acknowledged national identity by its well-planned language policy and effective management in multilingual social context.

3. English Use Policy in Singapore

3.1 Problems caused by Multilingualism in Singapore

Before the implementation of the English Use policy, this small multilingual city-state country had a complex environment^[9]. In families, the languages used by different generations are different, for instance, a three-generation Chinese family. The grandparents may only speak Mandarin or Chinese dialects (Cantonese, Hainanese and Hokkien etc.), whereas the parents can be bilingual in English and Mandarin. However, their children may be English-speaking Singaporeans with limited school-taught Mandarin^[4]. Although the communication among family members can be reached by translanguaging methods, situations are rather diverse among different ethnic families, which made the communication among different ethnic family groups inconvenient. Moreover, this kind of inconvenience may influence the building of social integrate and national identity^[7].

Situations are even severe in schools that students speaking different languages merely get connected and do not know each other^[6], for instance, students from Chinese-medium school hardly associate with students from English-medium schools. The multilingual inconvenience from families, working places and school education requires the official to make careful decision about language and education policies in order to help with social stability and development of this country^[9].

3.2 The content of English use policy

Based on the complex social context, Singapore implemented the Medium-of-Instruction (English Use) policy in 1966 and represented itself as a successful case for language management^[3]. Since 1987, the English Use policy has resolved English as the medium-of-instruction in its national education and the outcome of this policy is that Singapore has reached an English-knowing bilingualism^[8]. According to this policy, students should learn English as a medium-of-instruction and meanwhile they are required to learn their own “ethnic mother tongue”, according to the father’s ethnic classification^[4]. English (EL1) has become first school language, and meanwhile Chinese (CL2), Malay (ML2) and Tamil (TL2) are second school languages. Moreover, if students have gained high proficiency in EL1, they can choose to achieve higher achievement in their ethnic mother tongue, such as Malay (ML2) or Chinese (CL2). This English Use policy solved the problems of communicating in families, workplace and schools. Furthermore, Pakir considers Singapore as an impressive case of multilingual management^[9]. In the postmodern globalising world, the English-knowing bilingualism makes trades and connection with the whole world more efficient and frequent^[10]. With the building of English-knowing bilingualism, national identity is gradually built up and cohesiveness of Singapore is strengthened^[6].

3.3 Critique of the English use policy

Singapore has a “highly centralised education system”^[11], which improves the efficiency of implementation. Huang and De Costa conclude the major achievements of the English Use policy in three aspects^[2,6]. Firstly, the national identity and social stability have been built and secured. Secondly, Singaporean students are bilingual talents and are prepared to face the challenge of globalisation and contribute to the development of this country. Thirdly, Singaporean students achieved cosmopolitanism due to the development of English-knowing bilingualism. They are more willing to accept and embrace the changes and challenges^[2].

However, Pakir shows her concern about the linguistic security of Singapore^[9]. Since the implementation of English Use policy, the proportion of English-speaking and Mandarin-speaking Singaporeans increased rapidly^[8]. She states that English is not the mother tongue of any of the major ethnic and the rules of language is derived from foreign countries. She also expresses the worry of losing the values of Asian culture, because more Singaporeans become English-educated Singaporeans. There is a trend of decline in use of their mother tongue, such as Tamil and Malay, but only speak English both in school and at home. The dilemma that the official of Singapore are faced with is that how to keep the balance of English language and their cultural tradition.

4. Case study

As the English Use policy show efficient outcome, the dominant language in Singapore has become

English. According to Graddol, the prevalence of English is worldwide^[5]. Moreover, De Costa says that the official support of English in Singapore has demonstrated the construct of cosmopolitanism^[2]. The reason of choosing the case study investigated by De Costa is that the case study can show the successful outcome of English Use policy and can also be inferred as a deeper meaning of the English Use policy in Singapore, which is the trend of cosmopolitanism.

According to De Costa, the stance of cosmopolitanism is to stay open-minded and embrace others in the age of globalisation. This case study focuses on a Vietnam girl named Daniella who studies in Orchid Girls' Secondary School, which is an English-medium secondary school in Singapore. At the beginning, De Costa lists three research questions about the relationship between cosmopolitanism and English Language classes in Singapore. He uses qualitative research methods, such as out-of school observations, interviews, and classroom transcripts.

There are two reasons of choosing Daniella as a sample in this case study. On the one hand, the program that Daniella has joined in is an official program for those 'cosmopolitan intellectuals' overseas to study in Singapore and sponsored by Singapore government. Before the Vietnam girl comes to Singapore, she has been taught and is good at English. For the implementation of English Use policy in Singapore, it becomes easier for Singapore to embrace and gather more international talents. On the other hand, she comes from Vietnam where the vernacular language is none of the four official languages of Singapore. As a result of that, she can only communicate with her Singapore peers in English, which is also the first school language in Singapore. In this case, the social fairness about the four official languages is excluded. De Costa uses a different perspective to demonstrate the outcome of this English Use policy and the further meaning after the policy^[2].

To sum up, the case study demonstrates the effective outcome of the English Use policy and the further influence of this policy is about cosmopolitanism. In this case, an immigrant girl can get accustomed to the local context with some efforts and the policy makes local students more internationalised^[2]. Singaporean students can follow the global trend and their identities of global citizenship have been promoted. From another perspective, Singapore national identity and local culture have influence on skillful bilingual learners, regardless of what the two languages are.

After all, the case of Daniella is only one of the bilingual learners in Singapore. This intelligent Vietnam girl doesn't have difficulty in English learning and cognition, at least before her coming to Singapore. However, during the implementation of the English Use policy, there are some bilingual learners found having difficulties in learning two languages^[2]. For the learners causing concerns, situations are various and different. A large amount of factors should be taken into account, such as the family reasons or immigrant learners. The situation and suggestions will be discussed and made in the following part.

5. Suggestions

The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore provides supports for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). "The goal of MOE for the education of SEN students is to enable each student to optimise his potential and prepare him to participate in and pursue a productive and meaningful life in our society." For instance, the English Use policy in Singapore has made suggestions that those bilingual learners causing concerns are suggested to study only English as a monolingual learner^[3]. As Pakir introduces, those students who find it difficult of learning both languages and content instruction will be offered special help by schools.

Moreover, those students need SEN are placed to the most suitable education setting. On the one hand, students have the ability of cognition and can be involved in group-discussion are placed in mainstream schools and get additional support, such as students with dyslexia. According to Dyslexia Association of Singapore, "Dyslexia describes a different kind of mind, sometimes gifted and productive, that learns differently." Special education service is also offered in Singapore for those bilingual learners causing concern. On the other hand, for those who demand specialised assistance, the Dyslexia Association of Singapore cooperate with 20 local Special Education (SPED) schools to provide service for severe SEN people, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Multiple Disability and Sensory Impairment.

6. Conclusion

In this essay, four main parts are discussed, which are the social context of Singapore and its English Use policy; achievements and critiques of the policy; a brief case study about a Vietnam girl study in an English-medium school; suggestions to the bilingual students causing concern. In conclusion, the English Use policy has a positive role in preparing Singapore to globalisation and maintains the hub of international transportation and commerce. Meanwhile, the national identity and social stability have been established by the implementation of this policy. Though, some of the concerns state about the losing of Asian cultural values. However, Singapore should not restrain itself in Asia and it can also be considered as a chance to use cosmopolitanism and build the own value of Singaporean. It is vital to keep an open mind and embrace the diversity and new things.

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