

My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore's Bilingual Journey

By Lee Kuan Yew, founding Prime Minister of Singapore

Book summary

My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore's Bilingual Journey is the story of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's 50-year struggle to transform Singapore from a polyglot former British colony to a united nation where everyone, while knowing English, knows also at least one other language, his own mother tongue.

The founding prime minister of Singapore tells of why he did away with vernacular schools in spite of violent political resistance, why he closed Nanyang University, why he later started Special Assistance Plan schools, and why he continues to urge all ethnic Chinese Singaporeans today to learn the Chinese language.

Along the way, we learn not only of the many policy adjustments but also the challenges he encountered – from Chinese language chauvinists who wanted Chinese to be the pre-eminent language in Singapore, from Malay and Tamil community groups fearing that Chinese was being given too much emphasis, from parents of all races wanting an easier time for their school-going children, even from his own Cabinet colleagues questioning his assumptions about language.

We learn that there were four changes at the helm of the education ministry in four months in 1975. We learn that there were Chinese-medium schools in Singapore right up to the mid-1980s. We learn of the pain of “teachers who had to switch from teaching in Chinese to teaching in English almost overnight”, and likewise that of students who were “caught mid-stream” in the transition from a Chinese medium of instruction to an English one. We learn why the National Day Rally of 1986 was a milestone and why he “was a proud man that day”: For the first time since Singapore's independence 21 years earlier, the emcee for the event did not have to use three languages – Chinese, Malay and Tamil – to lead the audience, as finally, English had become a language understood by all Singaporeans.

My Lifelong Challenge is also the story of Mr Lee's own personal struggle to learn the Chinese language, which began when he was six years old and his Hakka maternal grandmother enrolled him in a Chinese class with fishermen's children. In evocative detail, the man born to English-speaking parents recounts his own feelings of rebellion and humiliation at different points in his life, when faced with the Chinese language and his own inadequacy in it.

This book describes in matter-of-fact yet vivid fashion his steely determination to improve his Chinese and reclaim his Chinese heritage, right up to the present when he is well into his eighties. In this book, we learn of Mr Lee's belief in a fundamental difference between the Chinese-educated and the English-educated and how it came about. He describes a scene of English-speaking students at the University of Singapore hostel revelling in party games even as Chinese-speaking students in the Chinese High School nearby were locked in a deadly face-off with the police in 1956, and gives the dire warning that "if Singapore students all turned out like those in the university hostel, Singapore would fail." Finally, Mr Lee distils his experiences of 50 years into eight precepts which he spells out at the end of his narrative.

The second half of this book is a compilation of essays by 22 Singaporeans. They include Mr Lee Hsien Loong, the current prime minister and son of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, and Ms Stephanie Sun, the well-known pop star. In these essays, the 22 recount their own language journeys, imbuing flesh and blood meaning to cold policy measures wrought over more than four decades.

This book is essential reading for anyone wanting to find more about Singapore's bilingualism policy and its chief architect. It breaks new ground by putting into the public domain information about education matters that has never been publicised. It is also an invaluable resource for all who are interested in the primeval interplay between language and politics.

Chinese make up 75 per cent of the population in Singapore, but Chinese language cannot be the common language or working language for Singapore.

It is clear to Mr Lee Kuan Yew, who had been prime minister for 31 years, that located in Southeast Asia, Singapore is a Chinese island in a Malay Sea. Singapore must ensure that it gets along well with its neighbours and be the master of its own destiny. This is the guiding principle for all policies, including language policy. In Singapore, language issues are political issues.

Before 1959, Chinese, Malay and Tamil schools were distinctively racial. Different ethnic groups were isolated from and did not interact with each other. Like different types of fish in an aquarium, they were together and yet separate.

When Singapore achieved self-government, the most urgent task for the government was to remove these barriers or at least break them down.

When we became independent in 1965, English was made the main language to overcome the political and social situation of the four linguistic groups keeping to themselves, allowing them to compete openly and fairly.

Apart from the geopolitical reality of "a Chinese island in a Malay Sea", Mr Lee also chose English as our common language for us to survive and grow. Disadvantaged by a lack of natural resources, he knows Singapore must quickly master English to link up with the world to have access to foreign capital and technology necessary for economic development. Put simply, it is a question of survival.

There are many advantages to English being the language of instruction. Nevertheless, this has also weakened a new generation of Singaporeans' command of their mother tongue and unavoidably, their identification with their own culture.

Just learning Chinese as mother tongue would jeopardise our survival. Knowing only English could cost us our cultural identity and national pride. Mr Lee is convinced that the bilingual policy is the best strategy for us to compete as well as a pillar in nation building.

There is no precedent for such a policy and we cannot draw on the experience of other countries. We have to learn along the way.

Political pressure makes it hard for the government to find a balance between English and Chinese - it's like a tug-of-war. Both major and minor adjustments have also been made in response to changing circumstances. The book details the difficult challenges in implementing English-Chinese bilingual education in Singapore in the last 50 years. Some of the thinking and decision-making process which have never been disclosed are now revealed through Mr Lee's eight interviews with journalists from Lianhe Zaobao and The Straits Times.

Quote from **Mr Robin Hu**

Senior Executive Vice-President of Singapore Press Holdings' Chinese Newspapers and Newspaper Services divisions.

"It was sheer pleasure for the team to have worked on this project over a period of two years. We learned many things through a series of nail biting encounters with the author. One of them stands out for me - bilingual journey is not about arriving at a final destination, it is about different points of arrival as we continue to journey amidst changing circumstances. Among other things, this book is about a young nation's destiny shaped by a tenacious mind."

Quote from Mr Patrick Daniel

Editor-in-Chief of Singapore Press Holdings' English and Malay Newspapers Division

“Language is an emotive thing, so language policy is never easy anywhere. But Singapore with its polyglot immigrant society, with each community wanting to preserve its own language and culture, was an extraordinarily difficult proposition. It took courage and steely will to turn this veritable tower of Babel and pan of loose sand into a united nation in which people share a common language yet know enough of their own to keep the links to their cultural roots. This book, which recounts this facet of Singapore’s history, contains insights borne of experience. It comes at an opportune moment, as Singapore seeks to find a new role in a world in which the centre of gravity is shifting from a largely English-speaking West to a rather more multi-linguistic East. I am glad that The Straits Times has had a hand in bringing this seminal book about.”