

# ***Critical Analysis of the Application about Multilingualism in Education Contexts with the Case of Singapore***

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**Abstract:** Discussions on multilingual education arising from multilingualism have been a very popular topic in recent years. In multilingual education, languages other than the dominant language are usually recognized as the language of instruction. This model of education arises from different sociolinguistic contexts and needs to take into account the use of the language it involves and the relative status of that language. This paper critically analyzes the policy of multilingualism in education promoted in the Singapore region as a case study, and goes on to point out that multilingualism in education as an important resource cannot be guided by state policy while providing better developmental resources and economic value to individuals. Multilingualism in education should place indigenous, national, and official languages on an equal footing and promote the development and prosperity of multiple languages.

**Keywords:** Multilingualism, Education, Singapore

## **1. Introduction**

Language, as a very important form of mediation in human society, is a symbolic system designed for communication purposes, performing functions such as giving information, expressing emotions and feelings, building relationships and establishing identity [1]. There are more than 200 countries in the world, but the total number of languages exceeds 5,000. It is roughly estimated that more than one billion people in the world are fluent in more than one language, and with the globalization of the economy and the consequent movement of people around the world, the number of bilinguals and even multilinguals is increasing [2]. Thus, speaking different languages in a country is a very common phenomenon, and the causes that constitute this multilingualism are complex, including historical, religious, cultural, educational, economic, natural disasters, language policies and other intrinsic and extrinsic factors [3]. As Canagarajah [4] argues, the ability to communicate in different languages is an asset for postmodern citizens who must learn to navigate through different communities and environments.

The study of multilingualism is not a recent phenomenon, as early as 3000 BC, in southern Mesopotamia, a mixed Sumerian-Akkadian language is documented; After the Norman conquest of England, the whole society appeared the coexistence of multiple languages, English was the daily language of the vast majority of the people, while the Norman French was the language of the notification class, and the language of the church at that time was Latin; In the Middle Ages, linguists from different European countries and regions gradually began to translate Arabic and Greek texts

into Latin for the spread of knowledge and culture [3]. From the perspective of a global view of modern society, multilingualism seems to be a norm rather than an exception[2]. What is multilingualism? A very well-known definition of multilingualism was proposed by the European Commission in 2007, where multilingualism refers to the frequent use of more than one language in the daily life of a society, institution, group or individual. According to Bussmann [5], multilingualism emphasises an individual's ability to express himself or herself in multiple languages with a level of proficiency equivalent to that of native language. Cenoz[2] also notes that multilingualism is not only about the individual's own competence, but also about the use of different languages in society. Multilingualism is also seen as a social phenomenon in which several languages exist together in a society, which can be official or unofficial, local or foreign [6].

## **2. Multilingualism in education**

The debate on Multilingual Education, prompted by multilingualism, has been a very hot topic in recent years. Multilingualism in education is a natural consequence of two trends: the teaching of multilingualism in schools and the promotion of multilingualism in society[7]. As Genesee[8] already noted, multilingual education is becoming more and more common today and in many countries it has become important to teach different languages as school subjects or as a medium, often encouraging students to learn a foreign language from an early age or requiring them to study one or two foreign languages in secondary school. According to Cenoz & Gorter[7], multilingual education refers to educational programs in which communicative competence is achieved in two or more languages, and in which the language other than the dominant language is usually recognized as the language of instruction. This model of education arises from different sociolinguistic contexts and takes into account the use of the language or its relative status. If one or more Languages have a high level of recognition in society, or if they have a very important symbolic value in society, then it is highly likely that the Language will be an important part of the school curriculum. This suggests that the choice of language is crucial in multilingual education. It has also been suggested by scholars such as García[9] that the choice of language is equally important in non-multilingual education and that there is a need to raise the status and value of languages other than English, to actively foster minority or heritage languages, and to integrate them into the process of multilingual learning in society as a whole. Therefore, in this essay, I will use Singapore as a case study to assess multilingual education policy, after which I will critically evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of multilingualism in the local educational setting.

## **3. Reasons for adopting multilingualism education policy in Singapore**

### **3.1. Historical Background**

Singapore's linguistic diversity can be traced back to migration trends that were shaped by commercial and economic exchanges during the colonial period[10]. According to Wikipedia, Singapore was originally part of the Kingdom of Johor in the Malay Peninsula, where the indigenous people were mainly Malays. In 1819, 'Sir Stamford Raffles', an employee of the British East India Company, landed in Singapore and began to govern the area. In 1824, the Kingdom of Johor ceded Singapore, which officially became a British colony, and English became the main working language of the colonial authorities. In November 1958, the British colonial authorities enacted the Singapore Self-Government Act, which allowed Singapore to become self-governing by democratic elections, at the same time when the independence movement of In 1965, Singapore gained independence from Malaysia and formally established the official languages of the Republic, namely Malay, Chinese, English and Tamil, which is spoken by the local Indian population. While Malay was still used as the official national language, English was the common language in practice, the working language and

the primary language of education in Singapore. In 1966, the Singapore government implemented a bilingual education policy whereby students were required to receive at least 10 years of education, six years at primary level and four years at secondary level, in both their first language and their mother tongue. Students of all races are required to learn English as their first language, in addition to their own Chinese, Malay and Tamil, as their respective second languages. For this reason, the introduction of a second language curriculum was made compulsory in Singapore's traditional English schools, while the traditional mother-tongue schools were converted to English-medium schools where the mother tongue was taught as a second language. There is little difference between the two types of schools to date, with both teaching the main curriculum in English and the mother tongue course requiring only a passing exam [11].

### **3.2. Economic Factors**

The Singaporean model of bilingual education is also known as 'English-speaking bilingualism' or 'English-based bilingualism'[12]. This bilingualism is the result of the labour of Singapore's forefathers in recognizing the importance of English as the 'first language' of Singaporeans for pragmatic reasons [13]. As a country whose mainstay is re-export trade, with few natural resources and a small land area, the English language is a globally used language that is synthesized with progress, technology and higher education, and is an essential tool for Singapore's economic development to make a living, establishing a good English language environment also facilitates the direct importation of high quality talent from outside Singapore[14][15]. In addition, the fact that English is a neutral language in Singapore and is not the language of any of the dominant ethnic groups has enabled it to be accepted by all ethnic groups, and hence to maintain peaceful relations between the different ethnic groups in Singapore, facilitating the process of national identification with Singapore[11].

### **3.3. Respect Multiculturalism**

In addition, Singapore consists of 74.3% Chinese, 13.3% Malay and 9.1% of Indian descent, with the remaining 3.3% being Eurasian and other ethnic minorities (Singapore Department of Statistics 2014), choosing their own language as a second language to be taught based on ethnic group is conducive to passing on and preserving the traditional culture and values[16]. As Lee[17] argues, children must learn English so that they have the opportunity to learn about new changes and knowledge in the contemporary world, and they have to learn their own mother tongue so that they can understand what makes them become the people who they are today. For example, in a study directed by Xie & Cavallaro[18], who surveyed 20 secondary school students, 20 polytechnic students and 22 tertiary students in Singapore on their attitudes towards Mandarin and Chinese-English bilingual education, the results of the study showed that the majority of participants had a favourable attitude towards learning Mandarin as a connection between them and Chinese culture, and at the same time, the Participants felt that Chinese-English bilingual education had a very positive effect in terms of both communication and practical application, and they are not convinced that learning one language would impair or even affect their proficiency in the other language. In addition, being bilingual facilitates communication and dialogue between individuals and other groups of people, and when a person has knowledge of both the official language and the indigenous language, it is easier for that person to access more valuable information and to express themselves more clearly[19]. Moreover, as the world moves towards multilingualism, multilingualism offers insights into the understanding of different cultures and experiences, which are multicultural in nature. For Singapore, as a multilingual and multiracial nation-state, to treat all language groups equally, it is even more

important to start with education and deepen multilingual education to encourage students' active understanding, appreciation and tolerance of different cultural values[17].

#### **4. Disadvantages of Singapore's multilingual education model**

However, there are some drawbacks to the multilingual education model in Singapore. Essentially, when two or more official languages are present in a society, there is always one language that tends to dominate the other, the latter being referred to as a subordinate language[1]. As Kaplan[12] reveals, most language planning policies are designed from the top down and rarely reflect the language needs or aspirations of a given society or community. Similarly, May[20] suggests that in a multilingual society, the majority language is usually inextricably linked to greater political power, privilege and social prestige, eventually even displacing the scope and function of the minority language. Bilingual education policies have been implemented in Singapore for over 40 years since Singapore gained independence in 1965, and although Singapore's previous macro-linguistic planning was considered effective and successful, there is growing evidence that Chinese language proficiency among Chinese students in Singapore is declining, while the number of Chinese families adopting English as their home language is increasing every year[21]. The initiator of Singapore's bilingual education policy, Mentor Lee, has stated his belief that after more than 30 years of bilingual education, the centre of language use has swung excessively towards English, which will result in more and more Singaporeans being unable to speak their own mother tongue. As Tan[11] points out, it is highly ironic that for many Singaporeans, English has become their mother tongue. Over the years, English has been given a high social status as a widespread language of communication and as an official language, with young English-educated parents becoming virtually invisible planners in their children's language planning[22], and they are increasingly aware that the modernization of Singaporean society needs to promote the use of English and that without proficiency in English, their children are likely to be marginalised and denied access to a wide range of social resources. In schools, English has been the dominant medium of instruction since 1987 and is a subject of study for all primary and secondary school students, which requires all students in Singapore to master basic grammar, spelling and pronunciation of English and to use English to communicate and express their views and ideas. The emphasis on English in the school curriculum has further contributed to the trend of monolingualisation in Singapore[21].

On the other hand, the government's 'mother tongue' policy, which is essentially a re-conceptualisation and oversimplification of differences between heterogeneous communities, allowing each community to be defined by a single language, which means that whatever language a child actually speaks at an early age, it is ultimately the child's father's ethnic group that determines which language is officially designated as their language[21], which suggests that traditional patriarchal notions of race and descent are still at play in education. At the same time, for the vast majority of students, they simply use the mother tongue subject as an examination subject, revealing yet another drawback of Singapore's multilingual education model and posing an important challenge to language planners in ensuring that the mother tongue is learned not just as an examination subject, but as a living language with social meaning and value[21].

#### **5. Conclusion**

The purpose of this essay is to critically analyse multilingualism in an educational context with the case of Singapore. We can affirm that multilingual education can improve individuals' cognitive skills, develop their understanding of multiculturalism and intercultural communication skills, and even serve as an important resource to provide individuals with better developmental resources and economic value. However, multilingual education in society cannot be achieved without the support

and guidance of national policies. As Hornberger[23] argues, multilingual policies are meant to promote the development and prosperity of multiple languages, not to bring about the loss of a language.

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