

**SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG,
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Foreword

Our Speak Mandarin Campaign enters its 14th year this year. The success of the campaign over the years is attributable to the close cooperation between the Chinese community and the government.

Objective of the campaign

The objective of the Campaign has remained unchanged for more than 10 years. Although Mandarin is the common spoken language among Chinese Singaporeans, more than 12 dialects are currently in use by the Chinese community in Singapore, thus posing an obstacle to communications between Chinese Singaporeans and causing a barrier to their social activities. If every Chinese Singaporean knows Mandarin, the problem will automatically be solved. As a result, Chinese Singaporeans will not only understand one another, but also be able to communicate with the Chinese all over the world. Therefore, Chinese Singaporeans should speak a common language, that is Mandarin.

Results of survey

The results of a recent survey show that the original objective of the Speak Mandarin Campaign has been achieved. Just take a look at the language often used by the Primary One Chinese pupils and you will find that usage of Mandarin at home has greatly increased from 26% in 1980 to 64.7% this year. On the other hand, usage of dialects has relatively gone down from 64.4% in 1980 to 3.6% this year. This is an encouraging sign. Children of Chinese Singaporeans now speak mostly Mandarin. Very few of them speak dialects.

Meanwhile, the number of Chinese Singaporean students speaking English at home has jumped more than threefold, from 9% in 1980 to 31% this year. As far as encouraging Chinese Singaporeans to speak less dialects and more Mandarin is concerned, our campaign is very successful. However, we have not done enough as far as encouraging English-speaking Chinese families to use more Mandarin is concerned.

If this trend continues, Mandarin may one day lose its social influence. As a result, Chinese Singaporean children will use only English when they grow up as they will not be conversant with their mother-tongue. Now it may be time to switch the emphasis of the Speak Mandarin Campaign.

Economic value of Mandarin

Chinese Singaporeans are very practical. The Chinese Language Review Committee, in a survey carried out among secondary students in Singapore, found that those from English-speaking families considered passing examination as their main purpose of learning Mandarin, while those from Mandarin-speaking families said they learned Mandarin for self-respect and enrichment of knowledge. As far as learning English is concerned, all of them, whether from English-speaking or Mandarin-speaking families, said they did so for better employment prospects. Apparently, the question of learning Mandarin lies in whether Mandarin can bring about the same economic benefits as English. Many people feel that if Mandarin can bring about economic benefits, more Chinese will learn Mandarin seriously.

As a matter of fact, already there are strong indications that Mandarin has economic values. There is every likelihood that the trend of rapid economic growth in the Asia-Pacific region in recent years will continue into the next century. For this reason Mandarin will become more and more important in the commercial and financial sectors in the Asia-Pacific region.

China, with a population of more than one billion, is actively carrying out reforms and attracting foreign capitals. In developing such a big market, China definitely plays the most important role. In the light of such a big opportunity for economic development, we definitely have to face fierce competitions from other countries in developing trade with China. If we are proficient in both Mandarin and English, we can discuss business with the Chinese in Mandarin on the one hand and with businessmen of other countries on the other. In this way we will have an edge over other countries.

Policy direction

The Ministry of Education has accepted the recommendation of the Chinese Language Review Committee that greater importance be attached to the power of comprehension of students in the Primary Six and O-level Chinese papers. This is a right move to encourage more students to use Mandarin, so that when they enter the job market, they will find greater confidence in the use of Mandarin.

Many problems of today concerning the use of Mandarin are caused by negligence of the power of comprehension of students in the past. Some students still have no confidence in speaking Mandarin even though they have passed their Chinese papers. This is a vicious circle of causality. Their knowledge of Chinese will deteriorate because they are reluctant to speak Mandarin.

Mandarin is the key to our cultural roots

We should encourage Chinese Singaporeans to use Mandarin as far as possible. This will cultivate and enhance the interest of the younger generation in learning Chinese and understanding Chinese culture. We should continue to encourage Chinese Singaporeans to use Mandarin more often. This is the only way to develop our rich cultural heritage.

Proficiency in Chinese will enable us to gain access to the rich treasure of Chinese literature. Some literary works have been translated into other languages, but it is impossible for the original thought and feeling to be fully expressed in the translation because in many cases the significance and nuance cannot be translated at all. Definitely there is a difference between the translation and the original.

Conclusion

We are proud of the success of the Speak Mandarin Campaign. To a great extent Mandarin has already replaced dialects. However, we must continue to promote the use of Mandarin to make Mandarin the key for Chinese Singaporeans to open the treasure of Chinese cultural heritage. That is why we encourage the people of Singapore to learn and use their mother-tongue more often. Being Chinese, we should try to use Mandarin as far as possible. In a multiracial society, however, we must also remain sensitive to the feeling of other communities. For example, we feel very uncomfortable when we are in a group of people who speak a language which we do not understand. Similarly, the non-Chinese will certainly feel uncomfortable when they are in a group of Chinese who speak Mandarin. If Chinese Singaporeans can truly understand and appreciate their own culture and at the same time encourage other communities to understand and appreciate their own cultures, the Singapore culture will become even richer. As a result, the people of Singapore as a whole who live in a multiracial society will truly enjoy the benefit.