

**SPEECH BY MR ONG YE KUNG, MINISTER FOR
EDUCATION,
AT THE LAUNCH OF BULAN BAHASA 2018
ON SATURDAY, 1 SEPTEMBER,
AT WISMA GEYLANG SERAI**

Setiausaha Parlimen Kanan

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Puan Rahayu Mahzam

Pengerusi Jawatankuasa Bulan Bahasa Dua Ribu Lapan Belas(2018)

Para tamu yang dihormati

Tuan-tuan dan Puan-puan

INTRODUCTION

*Dari duduk pagi ke siang,
Mari cabut ubi di desa;
Dari duduk-duduk di Geylang,
Mari sambut Bulan Bahasa.*

1. Saya rasa besar hati dapat bersama hadirin sekalian untuk melancarkan Bulan Bahasa Dua Ribu Lapan Belas (2018). Majlis hari ini istimewa sekali. Sudah tiga puluh tahun lamanya sejak Majlis Bahasa

Melayu menganjurkan Bulan Bahasa yang pertama, iaitu pada tahun sembilan belas lapan puluh lapan (1988).

2. Bulan Bahasa sudah menjadi acara ikonik / yang dinanti-nantikan masyarakat. Tahun ini, seratus lima puluh dua (152) sekolah / mengambil bahagian berbanding dengan tahun lalu, iaitu lapan puluh satu (81). Kejayaan Bulan Bahasa mungkin tidak akan tercapai tanpa / para pemimpin Majlis Bahasa Melayu dan Jawatankuasa Bulan Bahasa / seperti Encik Sidek Sanif, Encik Mohamad Maidin Packer Mohd, arwah Encik Harun Ghani, Encik Yatiman Yusof, Encik Hawazi Daipi, Encik Masagos Zulkifli dan Encik Zaqy Mohamad.

3. Faishal dan Rahayu, sekarang anda berdua menjadi waris misi penting ini. Saya yakin mereka akan terus mendapat sokongan semua pihak.

4. Izinkan saya untuk meneruskan ucapan saya dalam bahasa Inggeris.

5. Bilingualism is a cornerstone of Singapore's education policy, and core to our identity as Singaporeans. Our forefathers came from across Asia – China, India, South-east Asia – speaking different languages,

carrying with them different history and cultures. And while we adopt English as a common working language as it is also the language of international commerce, it is equally important to keep alive our Mother Tongues so that we stayed connected to our culture, values and ancestry. Without our Mother Tongues and community identities we will be like floating leaves, blowing with the wind. With them we are firmly anchored to the ground like big trees. With our culture and Mother Tongues, we are firmly anchored to the ground like big trees, and that makes the Singapore identity multi-layered, rich and colourful.

6. Upholding bilingualism has been full of challenges, because it is not easy for everyone to master two or more languages. But I will say that the outlook for bilingualism is optimistic in Singapore. A recent MOE survey of parents of incoming Primary 1 students showed that the percentage of families that speak English plus a Mother Tongue at home has increased from 83% in 1997 to 90% in 2017. There has been an increase over 20 years. It is not huge, but significant. A separate survey also revealed that the percentage of people who are literate in two or more languages had also risen, from 70% in 2010 to 73% in 2015. Not huge, but I think, significant.

7. The language landscape is therefore gradually shifting and evolving. Indeed, families that speak only their Mother Tongues are giving way to families who use English as their dominant language. But at the same time, the dominant language is not the only language used in the families. More families are becoming bilingual, even bi-literate. The dominant use of English and Bilingualism are rising in tandem.

8. One likely explanation is that more Singaporeans now realise the benefits of knowing two languages, including Mother Tongue. It enables us to stay connected to our roots, encourages cultural empathy and inclusiveness, and helps us understand different perspectives. Further, in this globalised world, where Asia is growing and becoming prosperous, knowing our Mother Tongues is also an important economic skill. To illustrate, Singapore's location in the heart of South-east Asia places us in the midst of more than 290 million people who speak Malay or Bahasa Indonesia. Knowing the language opens up opportunities.

9. Today, among students, I believe there is a strong awareness and interest in being bilingual. Not to know your Mother Tongue is not cool anymore. It is cool to know your Mother Tongue. So even amongst students who are not strong in their Mother Tongues, they know it is

important to learn it. But for these students, it can be daunting and difficult to improve their Mother Tongue language skills. But that is what schools are for, to teach, help and support the students.

10. MOE is therefore doing more to support bilingualism. Students learn the fastest, and are the most fearless when they are young. So language learning should preferably start early. Students at MOE Kindergartens have an hour of Mother Tongue lessons every day. At that age, children pick up language skills very quickly. The teachers at MOE Kindergartens told me that they can see the clear difference between the beginning and end of the year. One hour of Mother Tongue teaching everyday makes a big difference.

11. Our pre-schoolers are also learning Mother Tongue in fun, interactive ways. One programme, called WOW Wild Learn programme, brings them to River Safari where they can practise their Mother Tongues in a fun setting. This was launched in May for all MTLs in collaboration with Wildlife Reserves Singapore.

12. We have been using the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism to support the development of materials for learning of Mother Tongues at the pre-school level. We will continue to do so, and work closely with

MOE Kindergartens to guide all these ground up initiatives to develop better materials for the teaching of Mother Tongues.

13. Beyond pre-school, we will continue to encourage the learning of Mother Tongues, and support students with the interest in Mother Tongues to attain the highest level that they are able to.

14. Every year, Malay language teachers nominate students who excel in Malay as Rakan Bahasa (Friends of the Language), to spread the love of the language to their friends and families. This year, 151 schools nominated 299 students – an 85% increase from last year. The biggest increase came from primary schools, many of them nominating their students for the first time.

15. Students can also take Higher Malay and Literature in Malay, or enrol in special programmes such as the Elective Programme in Malay Language for Secondary Schools (EMAS) and the Malay Language Elective Programme (MLEP) in Junior Colleges. Many students have enrolled and benefited from these special programmes. We have one example, who is here with us, Mr Harianto Diman. He needs no introduction, but let me tell you a bit about his story.

16. Mr Hairianto Diman hosts Hangout with ST, a live video series. He was an MLEP student in Tampines Junior College. He went on to get a degree in English language from NUS, became a journalist at Berita Harian, and then The Straits Times. Mr Hairianto is an avid user of social media and now hosts events in English and Malay. He is a bilingual role model, and has been appointed as Duta Bahasa for Bulan Bahasa since 2015. Thank you very much.

17. Another example is Dr Azhar Ibrahim, currently Deputy Head at the NUS Malay Studies Department. He studied Malay language and literature in University. After completing his Masters and PhD at NUS, he received fellowships at Copenhagen University and Stanford University. He currently chairs major language and literature programmes for the National Library, the National Arts Council, the National Heritage Board and is an active member of the Malay Language Council. His expertise is well-recognised and well sought after throughout the region and beyond. He is not here, but i think he also deserves a big applause from us.

18. Other communities are also finding the value of learning Malay. Since 2007, several schools, such as CHIJ St Nicholas (Primary),

Rulang Primary, Nan Chiau High and Riverside Secondary, have been offering Conversational Malay as a school-based enrichment programme.

19. Cedar Girls', Chung Cheng High (Main), Raffles Girls' School and Raffles Institution have also been offering Malay (Special Programme) as a third language. This is a four-year programme that leads to the GCE 'O'-Level examination.

20. In addition, schools such as Anglo Chinese School (Independent) and Victoria School have been offering students the opportunity to learn Malay Language and Bahasa Indonesia under the Regional Studies Programme (RSP), where they learn about South-east Asian culture and contemporary society. Interest in all these special programmes has been encouraging, and the numbers have been holding very steady over several years now.

21. In the universities, there is also an increasing number of non-Malay graduates taking Malay-related modules at University. The number has risen from 700 in 2009 to about 1,100 in 2018.

22. Non-Malays are also benefitting from these programmes. One example is Ms Low Jia Li, a Resident Oncologist with NUH. She took up the Malay Special Programme while she was at Dunman High . Because of her knowledge of the Malay language and culture, she can now communicate with her patients, and she has become a better doctor for it.

23. Besides the education system, parents too can play a big part, by supporting and encouraging the learning of Mother Tongue and even third languages, and allow our children to discover their interests in language learning at a pace that will benefit them and sustain their interest. And if they have a talent for learning languages, encourage and support them to take it up at a higher level. It is an asset that they will treasure in many years to come.

24. Language is alive. It is the window to history, culture, emotions, drama, aesthetics and beauty. Every year, new literary works are created to enrich our understanding of people, society, nature and life. Every year, new words and phrases are expressed and formally or informally recognised as part of our cultural lexicons. Likewise, learning a language is a lively process. We need to be constantly in touch with it,

and use it. So, beyond schools, we should have opportunities to speak, read, watch and create in Mother Tongue. Which is why festivals like Bulan Bahasa are so important.

25. Let us celebrate and make the most of our multi-cultural roots – whether it is to understand our own multi-faceted identity or to reach out to others beyond the shores of Singapore.

26. Bahasa Kita. Gunakanlah. Terima kasih.

Source: <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/speech-by-mr-ong-yek-kung--minister-for-education---at-the-launch-of-bulan-bahasa-2018>
(MOE, 2018)