THE STRAITS TIMES

Premium

Speaking up in Mandarin and other mother tongue languages

Leong Chan-Hoong For The Straits Times

PUBLISHED MAR 16, 2020, 3:30 PM SGT

When was the last time you did something you thought you were not good at doing?

I did that recently. I was interviewed live in Mandarin on FM96.3 about the Singapore 2020 Budget.

Giving a live interview on the media is not new. It has been part of my job scope as a university faculty for the past decade. Notwithstanding the past experience, I must confess it has always been nerve-racking whenever the interview is conducted in Mandarin.

There are many reasons.

For starters, the technical terms used in the Chinese language are more specific and less likely to be used in academia, where the lingua franca is English for the majority.

Unless Mandarin is your first language, or if you happen to be a newscaster, you are unlikely to recall the Chinese terminologies of our policies with ease and confidence.

A few seconds of hesitation, speechlessness and stuttering on air can be a lifetime of embarrassment.

And if the translational hurdles are not bad enough, most English-educated faculty have to process the question in English before code-switching to verbalise in the mother tongue.

The amount of time required to prepare for a Mandarin interview is double of an equivalent English programme.

BILINGUAL EDUCATION AND THE CULTURE-LANGUAGE DYNAMICS

Bilingual Chinese Singaporeans enjoy many privileges to help them sharpen their linguistic proficiency in primary and secondary education. The Special Assistance Plan schools, in particular, encourage the learning of the Chinese language for today's global economy.

Scholarships for bicultural studies programmes are offered at the post-secondary level to support and strengthen students' interest in the Chinese mother tongue. Many students have since graduated with distinction and are able to speak with natural ease and fluency, at least in examinations.

Sadly though, the English-dominated tertiary education system in the subsequent years has invariably suppressed and eroded this oratorical capability.

Producers of local mainstream media lament that too few Singaporeans are comfortable in expressing their views on Chinese programmes, compared with English language ones.

Many Chinese Singaporeans who are bilingual have reverted to using English as the dominant language outside of classrooms, so that 71 per cent of Chinese households with Primary 1 children indicated that they speak mainly English at home, compared with 42 per cent two decades ago.

Public intellectuals from the media, business community and civil societies who are passionate about the Chinese language had, in the past, attempted to rekindle the spirit by promoting a public discourse using Chinese as the medium of exchange.

For example, The Tangent, a civil organisation set up some 20 years ago, published a bilingual journal discussing Singapore culture, politics, and economics. The journal ceased publication in 2007, and the society faded from the public radar about a decade ago.

WEAVING NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING SINGAPOREANS INTO OUR NATIONAL FABRIC

More critically, there is a substantive segment of Singaporeans who remain deeply rooted in the Chinese-speaking realm, including older Chinese-educated Singaporeans and recent migrants from the region.

The mainstream public discourse in social policies are, however, tilted towards the English-speaking universe. Few policy conferences and public debates organised by the think-tanks are conducted in Mandarin or other vernacular languages.

If we wish to build bridges between Chinese Singaporeans from different generations and backgrounds, we must ensure that no one is marginalised and left out of the national conversation.

This goes beyond speaking Mandarin for the sake of ethnic maintenance or gaining economic benefits from doing business in the region.

The imperative for inter-generation engagement applies to other racial groups too. English has become the dominant language among ethnic minorities with young children. In Malay households, 67 per cent speak mainly English at home, compared with 18 per cent two decades ago. For Indian households, the figures are 70 per cent and 55 per cent, respectively.

In The Straits Times Insight article on Nov 7, 2019, Dr Nazry Bahrawi, a senior lecturer from the Singapore University of Technology and Design, opined that Singapore now lies at the crossroads of a "linguistic hierarchy", where English becomes the "prestigious language of science and progress" and "mother tongues are confined to the spheres of tradition and heritage".

The failure to alter the disequilibrium will make us an "anglicised society", he argued, warning that Singapore can become socially fragmented and culturally rudderless.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL MEDIA

The local media can play a role in mitigating role in this challenge. For instance, it can cross-post opinion pieces published in a different language mediums, including essays from the Forum pages, where the voices of ordinary Singaporeans can be heard.

Last September, Singapore Press Holdings launched ThinkChina, an English-language e-magazine that carries articles about China from the perspectives of Singapore-Chinese newspapers. It features eminent Chinese writers who are well known in Greater China but relatively less publicised in the English media.

The non-English news agencies, including print, TV and radio stations, can invite amateur bilingual scholars to share their perspectives in their mother tongue.

And those of us who have a sufficient level of bilingual fluency should speak out, even if we fear that we cannot express ourselves well enough in the vernacular language.

Few, if any of the English educated academics, will ever speak with the eloquence of the Chinese language newscaster. But doing things that we suspect we are not good still beats doing nothing at all.

To quote the slogan for 2019 Speak Mandarin Campaign: Speak Mandarin? Yes I can.

• Leong Chan-Hoong is an associate professor at the Centre for Applied Research at the Singapore University of Social Sciences.