

Vital for S'pore to maintain bilingual edge, say experts

Malays have the highest bilingual literacy in English and mother tongue among races here

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Among the three major races in Singapore, Malays have the highest bilingual literacy in both English and their mother tongue when compared with Chinese and Indians, said two professors at the Singapore University of Social Sci-

ences (SUSS).

The Republic has been persistent in promoting bilingualism, but the degree of success varies among different races here, said Professor Eddie Kuo and Associate Professor Luo Futeng.

And even with Singapore's six-decades-long bilingual education policy, there is room for improvement in the standards of mother tongues here, they added.

"I suspect that the Chinese com-

munity here is still divided. There are those of the older generation who use and embrace Mandarin and Chinese, and others who resist them and just rely on English," Prof Kuo, SUSS' academic adviser, told The Straits Times.

On the contrary, the Malays are more homogeneous and united in their common faith and culture, which helps entrench their mother tongue in the community.

Singapore's proximity to Indonesia and Malaysia also helps cement the status of the language here, he said.

Tamil is less widely used, given that Indians here use many other



Professors Eddie Kuo (left) and Luo Futeng with their book, *Unity In Diversity: Language And Society In Singapore*. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

languages, with new immigrants bringing these in from different parts of India, added Prof Kuo, who is also emeritus professor at Nanyang Technological University.

Prof Kuo, 82, co-authored a Chinese book, titled *Unity In Diversity: Language And Society In Singapore*, with Prof Luo, head of Chinese programme at SUSS. The 276-page book, which discusses issues like Singapore's language planning and bilingual education policy, was launched in July and will be translated to English next year.

Data on language use from the Population Census 2020 by the Singapore Department of Statistics support the professors' observations.

Among literate Chinese residents, the proportion who were literate in both English and Chinese was 62.3 per cent, while the corresponding proportion of Malays who were literate in both English and Malay was 82.8 per cent. In the Indian population, 41.8 per cent were literate in both English and Tamil.

English was the language most frequently spoken at home for 48.3 per cent of the resident population aged five years and older in 2020, up from 32.3 per cent in 2010.

In time to come, Singapore will be an Asian country where English is predominantly used in all sectors, said Prof Kuo and Prof Luo.

However, keeping Singapore's bilingualism edge is essential, and the increasing number of bilingual speakers among third- and fourth-generation political leaders, compared with their earlier cohorts, is a positive sign, they said.

Even as more Chinese here speak English instead of Mandarin, all is not lost for the mother tongue, they added.

There are ongoing efforts to pro-

mote the use of Mandarin. This includes the Speak Mandarin Campaign, ongoing since 1979, which has successfully replaced dialects with Mandarin as the common language among Chinese here.

The Chinese mass media, Chinese clan associations and new immigrants from China help keep the language alive and active. Singaporeans also trade with Chinese in China and other countries, hence retaining the language's functional use, the professors said.

Prof Luo, 62, said there is a need to distinguish between proficiency in conversational and written language. "Most Chinese here can speak conversational Mandarin, but their standard of written Chinese could be improved," he added.

Former politician George Yeo had recently suggested that Ngee Ann Polytechnic be turned into a Special Assistance Plan (SAP) polytechnic, and NTU a SAP university. The SAP programme emphasises bilingualism in English and Chinese.

Mr Yeo said that the closure in 1980 of Nanyang University, or Nantah, marked the end of the use of Chinese as a main medium of instruction at a university here. His chief concern is that Singapore does not have successors to the Nantah generation across all its institutions, including the Chinese media.

But the professors said it is too late.

"NTU has its own unique positioning and international standing today," said Prof Kuo.

"What we can do is to have different universities pool resources and work with international partners to groom new generations of SAP-type bilingual Singaporeans at the tertiary level and beyond," he added.

On a positive note, Singaporeans are well-poised to be not just bilingual, but also multilingual and multicultural.

"Multicultural experiences are so much in our life that they are almost uniquely Singaporean," said Prof Kuo.

Prof Luo added: "Singapore's multicultural and multi-racial environment is conducive for learning more than one language. Singaporeans must not take their multilingualism for granted as it is a competitive advantage."

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