

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Singapore language policy designates English as ‘first language’, and Chinese, Malay and Tamil as ‘mother tongue’. This distinction sees first language as a means for all ethnic groups to use in their communication; in other words it is a ‘functional language’. On the other hand, mother tongue implies that it is a ‘cultural language’ that reflects ethnic identity and cultural values.

Chapter 1 has given a brief historical background of the linguistic situation in Singapore. Prior to 1819, before the establishment of trading settlement by the British, Singapore was a small fishing village occupied by Malays. After 1819, the Chinese population has grown and become the majority group in the island, currently the figure is 74%, according to the latest statistics in 2009. Malays and Indians constitute 13% and 9.2% respectively (Statistics Singapore 2009) English is the neutral language among the ethnic groups and it is studied as first language in the bilingual educational system, while Chinese, Malay and Tamil are taught as mother tongue. A discussion of bilingualism and bilingual education has been included to understand the case in Singapore. The phenomenon of language shift has highlighted current predominance of English and its implication on Singapore Chinese language education, and thus the purpose of this study to focus on ‘language learning strategies’.

As stated in Chapter 2, language learning strategies in this paper, thus ‘will be Chinese learning strategies and they are the procedures and actions taken by the learner in the process of leaning the language’. Besides providing a review on the literature from the early development in cognitive psychological field to the influence of culture and context on language learning strategies, its literature in Singapore was also included. It is an attempt to show the significance of conducting the investigation of learning Chinese in the context of Singapore.

Taking a sociolinguistic approach in this study, there is a need to find out students’ language background. Therefore, the research methodology in Chapter 3 explains the research design and procedures in collecting the data. Survey instrument such as the questionnaire was used to gather information on students’ language background, and the strategy inventory for language learning was adapted for the purpose of this study. The translation task was used as an attempt to ascertain students’ first language (L1). And a selected group of students were interviewed for further in-depth understanding of the results.

Even though English and Chinese is studied as first languages by the SAP students, the findings in Chapter 4 show that students use English and Chinese to different people and in different situations, and in this sense, ‘first language’ in school and at home may not be the same. The language appraisal also revealed that students find themselves more proficient in English reading and writing, and that English reading and writing is easier than Chinese. In addition to this, the results also show that students have a strongly positive attitude towards learning English and a moderately positive attitude towards learning Chinese. And there is a high instrumental motivation to learn English and Chinese, though the former is slightly stronger than the latter.

For this group of SAP students, the findings from the strategy inventory for language learning show that they generally use 'compensation strategies' as compared to the rest of the strategies. The use of compensation strategies were reported by students who expressed that Chinese is their most familiar language as well as those whose most familiar language is English. Based on the assumption that translation task $L2 \rightarrow L1$ has less difficulty than $L1 \rightarrow L2$, $L1$ could then be regarded as the students' most familiar language. Hence, students were asked to do a translation task and it was interesting to find out that 4 students whose familiar language is Chinese and speak Chinese at home, show a preference to choose Chinese text and translate it into English. Contextual factors certainly have an influence on their language use and language learning, and this was further analyzed in Chapter 5. Prior to this, an interview was conducted on the selected group of students in order to elicit their response on the use of language learning strategies and highlight the influence of contextual factors that will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

In Chapter 5, three contextual factors-- the education system, the language status of English and Chinese, and the value of meritocracy that influence language learning strategies (LLS) use are discussed. In regards to the patterns of LLS, 12 selected students have revealed using the following strategies; formally practice writing systems (cognitive strategy), self-evaluating (metacognitive strategy) and asking for clarification (social strategy) which are identified as the patterns of LLS. The pedagogical implications pointed out that English is generally the dominant language for the students, even for those who had expressed that Chinese is their familiar language. An overview on SAP students' language background, language choice and *SILL* scores for compensation strategies was presented in order to discuss the different groups of students based on the assumption mentioned earlier in regards to translation task and familiar language. In sum, this group of SAP students who are studying both English and Chinese as first language are dominant in the use of English, and this is much related to the current context of Singapore. I have also point out that these SAP students show a high frequency use of compensation strategies which can be attributed to their bilingual abilities but the frequent use of compensation strategies could possibly prevent acquisition, thus hindering the achievement of 'effective bilingualism'. Following a summary on the chapters, we shall move on to give a thought on Singapore bilingualism in the world of globalization.

Understanding a language is also a way to understand its culture, and it would seem natural to associate language and culture to ethnic identity. In this case, then language is not a mere communication tool, but has an important role in identity, thus learners can have integrative motivation for learning a language in order to have a sense of community belonging. Even in Singapore, the necessity to learning Chinese is often based on the ground of identifying with Chinese culture. However, the integrative motivation to learn Chinese is not high as we can see from the findings reported in Chapter 4 (See Table 4.10). The instrumental motivation is high to study Chinese (mean of 12.7) but still, it is lower than the instrumental motivation to study English (mean of 13.23). Also, the instrumental motivation is higher than the identity motivation (mean of 12.05) to learn Chinese and the integration motivation (mean of 10.89) is the lowest.

One of the emphases in the 2004 Report of the Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee is to develop a core group of 'bicultural elite' students who are effectively bilingual and bicultural (Tan 2006: 47). But Minister Mentor (MM) Lee Kuan Yew

has pointed out that there is a gap between the Chinese elites in the present and the past, as reported by Lin (1999). MM Lee does not think that Singapore can produce Chinese elites like those in the 50s. This group, according to him, had about half of the students who received Chinese-medium lessons in Chinese schools, and some of them went to Chinese university, thus receiving a complete Chinese education.

It can be argued that that the motivation for Chinese language learning is ‘integrative’ in the 1950s and in the present situation, ‘instrumental’ seems to be the main driving force. After the Japanese Occupation ended in 1945, there was an ‘unprecedented post-war demand for education’ resulting in a growth of Chinese schools (Doraisamy 1969: 90). There was a ‘strong China-orientation’ in the local Chinese community till 1949, as pointed out by Yip and Sim (1990: 4). The Chinese had showed an interest in sending their children to China for further education during the pre-war period (Doraisamy 1969: 94) and it seems that this emotional connection with China was immediately revived in the post-war. Even though, the opportunities were closed due to China’s political situation in 1949, this ‘integrative motivation’ was reflected in the call for the establishment of Nanyang University, with a specific purpose ‘to meet the demand for higher education for students from the Chinese secondary schools’ (Doraisamy 1969: 95). Doraisamy (1969: 98) had noted that from 1959, the situation was reversed when there were more children going to English schools than Chinese schools. In fact, 1959 was the year that the People’s Action Party led by Lee Kuan Yew had won the first election and Ohara (1997: 93) had observed that the members of the new political party were made up of Chinese who were English educated. This would certainly have an impact on the language policy in Singapore, since it was mainly charted by the government. However, parents who saw the practical and economic value of English were more willing to send their children to English schools than Chinese ones.

As seen from the above, the group of Chinese elites in the 1950s is different when compared to current SAP schools where English is the medium of instruction. However, that does not mean that the Singapore government has plans to reestablish those former Chinese medium schools. In the words of MM Lee, “No parents would send their children to receive twelve years of Chinese education. Because they know that by doing so, they would put their children at a disadvantage position”. The past and current situation of Chinese language learning can be understood from the words of former Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loon, who said that “In the 1950s, many of the Chinese-educated in Singapore had a yearning for China....The situation is completely different now....Singaporeans are in China to do business” (Goh 1999: 86). Hence, we see the distinction between an ‘integrative’ and ‘instrumental’ motivation for Chinese learning in the past and present.

Under such circumstances whereby English is dominant in the Singapore bilingual education system, students are more likely to be called “English-knowing bilinguals”. This term was first used by Kachru (1982: 42) and referred to someone who learns two languages and one of them is English. Also, Kachru does not distinguish whether English is first or second language but Pakir (1992) made the differences when she related the term to Singapore bilingualism. Hence, first language refers to English and second language would be the mother tongue of different ethnic groups. Theoretically speaking, it is possible to distinguish first and second language in Singapore bilingual education or bilingualism. However, in reality, it is not easy to make the identification as we can see from the findings of students’ language background in this

survey. Pakir called the students “English-knowing bilinguals”, because the first language that refers to English, is mainly used in education as compared to Chinese, which is learnt as a subject during mother tongue lesson and not a medium of instruction in the Singapore bilingual education.

Indeed, English has a dominant position in Singapore society and this has an influence on Chinese language learning. However, this factor alone does not account for the changes proposed in the recent Chinese language education. There is also the consideration for global trends in order to develop talents or human resources to meet future demands and needs. One instance would be the growing importance of China and its accelerating growth of economy. The bilateral trade between China and Singapore has also surged from 36.9 billion in 2003 to 85.3 billion in 2006.¹ And with the ethnic Chinese group forming the majority population of Singapore, it would be an advantage to maintain a historically and culturally close relationship with China. Due to such developments, the economic value of Chinese language in Singapore has certainly increased. In other words, Chinese language has provided an opportunity for Singapore to ride on the economic developments of China.

In general, the objective of Singapore bilingual education is driven mainly by economic motivation, even though it states English having a functional role and Chinese (the mother tongue) having a cultural role (英语为用, 母语为本). This is to ensure Singapore maintains its global competitiveness with its continuing economic development and prosperity. Thus, the term “pragmatism” would seem more apt to understand the characteristics of Singapore language policy (Tan 2006, Gopinathan 2001).

However, even with the growing importance of China, this could not be a reason to change the curriculum from English to Chinese. English has a role in maintaining a harmonious relationship between the majority Chinese and the minority ethnic groups. Racial harmony and stable society are also crucial for contributing to the economic success of Singapore. Therefore, English is still chosen to be the neutral language and the common working language, and mother tongue, on the other hand, will assume an identity role for the three ethnic groups and act as cultural ballast to Western cultures and values.

To conclude, the findings by focusing on the contextual influences that are particular to Singapore and its effect on students’ language use and language learning strategies have been discussed. In addition to this, patterns of Chinese language learning strategies use of Singapore SAP students were identified. It is shown that the instrumental motivation to learn Chinese is more evident than integrative motivation. Compensation strategies have the highest frequency use but it remains an area for further exploration, to study whether it enables or prevents language acquisition. Also, in the literature of language learning strategies, the focus has been on the learner and how effective learning strategies from good learners can be taught. From this study, students had reported the use of learning strategies that are directly or indirectly taught by

¹ Statistics Singapore-Theme on External Trade <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/economy/trade.html>

their parents. Thus, a study on parental role in the teaching of learning strategies can perhaps also help us understand how students learn.