Chapter 1

Challenges facing the language education policy and foreign language education in Singapore

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1 Introduction: Singapore's migratory past and its ethnic / language situation

Despite being this tiny island city-state that has been nicknamed "the little red dot" for having a land area of only 716 km^2 at the southern tip of Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore has a unique and diverse language situation, with as many as four official languages and at least three major ethnic communities living harmoniously together. As a result, it has a one-of-a-kind language education policy (see Section 2). The uniqueness of Singapore's language situation can be traced back to its not-so-distant migratory past: after the British arrived in 1819 to set up their trading hub on this equatorial island of only about 1 000 inhabitants, it quickly transformed into a bustling and prosperous port that attracted both immigrants and traders seeking employment and business opportunities in this new-found trade haven. This was, in a way, Singapore's globalization in its earliest stages, in the sense of a relatively easy or uncontrolled migration for economic purposes.

Among the very first to arrive were Malays, Straits Chinese and Peranakans from Melaka (in Peninsular Malaysia), and by 1824, there had been a tenfold increase in population to 10 683 inhabitants, made up mostly of Malays. Thereafter, the immigrants who arrived were mostly Chinese, and from 1827 up to this very day, the Chinese overtook the Malays as the largest ethnic group making up the population of Singapore. At the same time, there were also Indian, Arab, Jewish, Armenian, Eurasian and European immigrants, although their numbers were and have always been in the relative minority (Chua & Zhuang, 2010). The result of all these migrant arrivals is a growing population that is not only ethnically but also linguistically diverse.

From that point on, the population growth just kept skyrocketing: it easily reached 1.3 million in 1955 when the British granted Singapore partial self-governance, and 1.6 million in 1959 when full self-governance was granted; this number then continued to grow steadily to 1.9 million when Singapore became independent in 1965, before it reached its current figure of 5.47 million some 50 years later, in 2015.

1.1 The current ethnic situation and diversity of Singapore

The latest population census conducted in 2010 (Wong, 2011) showed that the Chinese still made up the majority of the population (74.2%), while Malays and Indians made up 13.3% and 9.1% respectively. Of particular interest is the make-up of the remaining 3.4% of the population falling into the "Others" category, with Filipinos currently making up the largest part of that category. Details of the population make-up are given below in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: Breakdown of Singapore's population by ethnic origins in 2010 (Wong, 2011, p. 9)

Ethnic group	**Population**	**% of the total population**
Chinese	2,793,980	74.1%
Malay	503,868	13.4%
Indian	348,119	9.2%
Others	125,754	3.3%
Total	3,771,721	100%

Table 2: Breakdown of the category "Others" of Table 1 above (Wong, 2011, p. 39)

Ethnic group	**Population**	**% of the "Others" category**
Filipino	39,918	31,7%
Caucasian	25,308	20,1%
Eurasians	15,581	12,4%
Arab	8,419	6,7%
Thai	5,650	4,5%
Japanese	4,941	3,9%
Other minority groups (combined)	25,937	20,6%

It may be argued that the categorisation of Singapore's population along ethnic lines may not give the full picture of ethnic diversity in Singapore, for instance, with the number of children born of inter-ethnic marriages on the rise, the categorisation of the population along ethnic lines may not be so clear-cut. Nonetheless, it gives an idea of the wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds among its people who make up the melting pot of Singapore.

1.2 The current language situation and diversity of Singapore

The language situation and diversity of Singapore are also quite exceptional, although it is less clear-cut (when) compared to its ethnic diversity. *The Republic of Singapore Independence Act* (1965) (cited in Rappa & Wee, 2006, p. 82) states that:

> (1) Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English shall be the four official languages in Singapore.
>
> (2) The national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in the Roman script; Provided that –
>
> > (i) no person shall be prohibited or prevented from using or from teaching or learning any other language;
> >
> > (ii) and nothing in this section shall prejudice the right of the Government to preserve and sustain the use and study of the language or any other community in Singapore (Government Gazette Acts Supplement, no. 1965, p. 100).

Of these four official languages, only English is used as the medium of instruction in Singaporean schools. The remaining three official languages, *i.e.* Mandarin, Malay and Tamil have been recognised as such because, at the time of Singapore's independence in 1965, they were thought to best represent the three major ethnic groups of the population, *i.e.* the Chinese, the Malays and Indians. In reality, however, the fact that one belongs to a particular ethnic group does not always imply proficiency in the language (officially) associated with that ethnic group, or in some cases, it may not even mean an ability to speak or understand that language at all. The example of Chinese Singaporeans is a case in point, most of whom can trace their roots back to a southern province in China, where a Chinese dialect like Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese or Hakka is the actual mother tongue, and not Mandarin, which is just the Chinese national language from the northern part of China. Some of the older generation Chinese Singaporeans are more comfortable and fluent in their southern dialects than they are in Mandarin if they can speak the latter at all (see Table 3 below).

Table 3: First language spoken at home by Singapore Chinese (Leow, 2001, p. 25; Wong, 2011, p. 139)

	English	Mandarin	Chinese dialects	Malay	Tamil	Other languages
1980	11.6	10.2	59.5	13.9	3.1	1.7
1990	18.8	23.7	39.6	14.3	2.9	0.8
2000	23.0	35.0	23.8	14.1	3.2	0.9
2010	32.3	35.6	14.3	12.2	3.3	1.1

Table 4: First language spoken at home by Singapore Chinese (Wong, 2011, p. 139)

Age Group (Years)	English	%	Mandarin	%	Chinese dialects	%	Others	%	Total
5 - 9	78,936	55.0	62,020	43.2	1,911	1.3	606	0.4	143,473
10 - 14	85,385	49.3	84,922	49.0	2,532	1.5	535	0.3	173,374
15 - 19	84,669	44.3	100,864	52.8	5,066	2.7	624	0.3	191,223
20 - 24	62,000	36.7	98,536	58.3	7,900	4.7	714	0.4	169,150
25 - 29	50,372	28.7	107,035	61.1	16,573	9.5	1,258	0.7	175,238
30 - 34	59,749	30.1	111,699	56.2	25,855	13.0	1,494	0.8	198,797
35 - 39	75,114	34.3	111,113	50.7	31,833	14.5	1,239	0.6	219,299
40 - 44	72,164	34.5	103,512	49.4	32,950	15.7	806	0.4	209,432
45 - 49	71,293	31.7	113,559	50.5	39,131	17.4	740	0.3	224,723
50 - 54	69,315	31.3	105,181	47.4	46,643	21.0	605	0.3	221,744
55 - 59	49,330	25.9	89,554	47.0	51,236	26.9	487	0.3	190,607
60 - 64	34,680	23.0	58,613	38.9	56,910	37.8	354	0.2	150,557
65 - 69	13,753	15.6	28,232	32.1	45,771	52.0	259	0.3	88,015
70 - 74	9,128	12.7	18,022	25.1	44,309	61.7	320	0.5	71,779
75 - 79	4,753	9.8	8,270	17.0	35,350	72.7	246	0.5	48,619
80 - 84	2,445	8.2	3,720	12.4	23,575	78.8	177	0.6	29,917
>85	1,529	7.1	1,705	7.9	18,220	84.3	161	0.7	21,615

What is noteworthy in the statistics shown in Table 3 is firstly, that there are at least four or five languages in close contact among the people of Singapore. Secondly, that while the percentages for Malay, Tamil and Other Languages have remained relatively stable over the forty years surveyed here, there is clearly a gradual but major shift from the use at home of Chinese dialects (59.5% in 1980) to the use of English and Mandarin (32.3% and 35.6% respectively). The ostensibly gradual disappearance of Chinese dialects from the linguistic landscape can be accounted for by the government's stated beliefs that the use of those dialects would prevent Chinese Singaporean students from mastering Mandarin, which was felt to be economically advantageous for them in the future, and which would serve as a common *lingua franca* for all the Chinese Singaporeans regardless of their dialect group. These beliefs were expressed in various ways as part of the Speak Mandarin Campaign, which saw not only the promotion of the use of Mandarin, but also a quasi-absolute ban on the broadcast of TV / radio programmes or songs that may contain some dialect. The efforts have somewhat paid off since the younger generations tend not to be speaking their heritage dialects. As highlighted in the table below, there is a clear decrease in the percentage of Chinese dialect speakers with each successive each generation; Table 4 below shows in particular the change over the years in the language being used at home by the Chinese population of Singapore, according to the census reports over the past four decades.

What Tables 3 and 4 fail to show, however, are the cases of bilingual / multilingual code-switching families, or as Xu and Li (2003, p. 278) rightly pointed out, "the indecisiveness of many Singaporeans, when asked, about what is the language they use most frequently in a specific type of situation, *e.g.* at home [...] [and] the practice of code-switching among the young people".

1.3 Research questions

Having laid down the background to the ethnic and language situation and diversity in Singapore, we will attempt to answer the following questions regarding Singapore's language education policy and the foreign language (FL) programmes in the Singapore education system.

(a) How has Singapore's language education policy evolved over the years?

(b) What is the place of FL as a subject in the Singapore education system?

(c) How is the FL education delivered in the Singapore education system?

(d) What effects does Singapore's language education policy have on the FL education programmes, especially in the context of globalization?

2 An evolving language education policy: From trilingualism to bilingualism

2.1 Pre-independence: The rise of a language education policy

When Singapore was under the British rule, there were hardly any attempts by the colonial government to integrate the various ethnic communities into one national education system. In fact, each of the major communities was given free rein to create its own schools and syllabuses, and as a result, there were four different education streams, depending on whether the medium of instruction was English, Malay, Chinese or Tamil.

The lack of a common education stream between the ethnic groups was problematic for the following three reasons. Firstly, students across the different streams were not given equal attention or support. For instance, the English language stream, which catered mainly to the elite, received as much as 73.6% of the budget allocated to education in 1954 (Wilson, 1978, p. 126). The other streams were left to their own resources, which could sometimes be insufficient. Secondly, due to the lack of resources in the so-called "vernacular" streams (*i.e.* Chinese, Malay or Tamil language streams), they were not well monitored by the colonial government. In fact, the Chinese-medium schools used mainly textbooks that were imported from China and this favoured a sense of loyalty in the Chinese language stream students towards the new communist government in China. Thirdly, all the students who were not in the English-medium schools would be deemed to be insufficiently proficient in English and would subsequently find it difficult to pursue higher studies or to obtain jobs in the public service. This proved to be a source of pent-up frustration among the Chinese students, which broke out in a series of some rather violent riots in 1956, when 142 Chinese students were expelled for involvement in pro-communist activism.

These problems and the disruptive events that were caused by them culminated in the formation of an "All-Party Committee of the Singapore Legislative Assembly on Chinese Education", which proposed an education system reform calling for so that all students in the various language medium to be given equal treatment with a common syllabus, that would inculcate a sense of loyalty to Singapore. More interestingly, another recommendation included in the reform was for bilingual education to be offered in all primary schools (*i.e.* the equivalent of Grades 1 to 6 in the US) and for trilingual education to offer in all secondary schools (*i.e.* the equivalent of Grades 7 to 10 in the US), regardless of the students' ethnic origins. Specifically, the bilingual education in primary schools would begin with either Mandarin, Malay or Tamil, followed by English, while the trilingual education would include a third language that students would have to study for at least two years. (All-Party Committee on Chinese Education, 1956).

2.2 Post-independence: English-knowing bilingualism and the "Mother Tongue requirement"

After Singapore gained independence in 1965, the push for a trilingual education quietly died down, and in its place, the government adopted what Pakir (1997, p.58)

later named an "English-knowing bilingualism", *i.e.* all students had to learn English first and foremost, followed by one of the other three official languages (Mandarin, Malay or Tamil) which represented their "mother tongue language" (MTL) depending on their ethnic origin. The requirement for a second language in addition to English also came to be known as the "Mother Tongue Language requirement" (MTL requirement).

The choice of English as the first language for all schools was not because it was a convenient colonial inheritance; instead, it was a calculated move by the government, since Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew declared in a speech at Singapore Teachers Union dinner on 5 November 1972, that "[. . .] the facility of the English language gives access to the science and technology of the West. It also provides a convenient common ground on which the Chinese, Indians, Ceylonese, Malays, Eurasians, everybody competes in a neutral medium", while the MTL requirement was for students to learn "a whole value system, a whole philosophy of life, that can maintain the fabric of our society intact, in spite of exposure to all the current madnesses [*sic*] around the world. [. . .] If we fail to resolve effectively our problem of languages and preserve what is best in our respective cultural values, we could become an even more enfeebled version of the deculturalised Caribbean calypso-type society" (Summary of Mr Lee's speech: "Bilingualism is more than just learning two languages", *The Straits Times*, 11 November 1972).

However, even this English-knowing bilingualism did not achieve the outcomes that were expected in the 1970s. In a televised discussion in 1978, Lee gave his own negative opinion of the bilingual system:

> It's a very patchy, uneven achievement. At the top of the segment of the educated in our schools, we would have about 3% to 5% who are effectively bilingual in that they can speak, understand and respond to, two of the languages we teach in schools and read and write them effectively. These 3% to 5% are the most successful ones. [. . .] Then you would have about 10%, maybe 15%, who are very much at home with one language and perhaps adequate in the second language. Then you will have the bulk, the majority, who would be adequate in one language. They can speak it, they can write it, but they are unable to have that same command, that same facility in the second language. ["Lee looks to the day when 80 per cent of the people are bilingual", *The Straits Times*, 7 April 1978.]

Furthermore, the English-knowing bilingualism adopted in the education system was also plagued with some other problems. Firstly, in this system, English was used to teach the main subjects that were considered to be more important while the official MTL was used to teach only civics and moral education, and the so-called MTL itself. This made the learning of MTL less motivating for students, which in term caused less attention to be devoted to mastering those second languages. This also meant that students had fewer contact hours for lessons in those second languages, which not only contributed to widening the divide between English and the MTLs, but also

increased the perception of their difficulty. This was particularly true for Mandarin as a MTL, which involves the writing and recognition of Chinese characters.

The second problem was that the MTL assigned to each student was dependent on the "race" or ethnic origin indicated on the national identity card of the father. Yet, racial categories can be rather complex and heterogeneous. For example, the language spoken at home for many Singapore Chinese students may not be Mandarin, but some Chinese dialect. So, in fact, the official MTL (Mandarin) could end up being a third or even a foreign language (FL) for those students who spoke a Chinese dialect at home. This is on top of having to learn English in school. In the same way, there are in fact many more Indian languages other than Tamil spoken in Singaporean Indian families' homes, and in some cases, Tamil could end up being a third or a FL to those non-Tamil speaking students. The situation is similar regarding students who may have grown up in families that only speak the English language (EL), so the official MTL that they have to study as a second language is hardly a mother tongue of the student in the traditional sense of that term. The additional language puts extra pressure on the students and adds on to the perceived difficulty of learning an MTL.

The essence of this problem is summed up in a report by the Ministry of Education, put by Goh and The Education Study Team (1979):

> It has not occurred to many Singaporeans how unnatural the present school system is. Most school children are taught in two languages—English and Mandarin. Eighty-five per cent of them do not speak either of these languages at home. Our system is largely modelled on the British pattern, but the social and demographic background could hardly be more dissimilar. If as a result of a world calamity, children in England were taught Russian and Mandarin, while they continue to speak English at home, the British education system would run into some of the problems which have been plaguing the schools in Singapore and the Ministry of Education.

Thirdly, there may be some resistance in the Malay and Indian communities about being obliged to learn Malay and Tamil (or some other minority Indian languages), which could be perceived as less useful on an international level than other languages (Gopinathan, Ho, & Saravan, 2004).

Lastly, with the increasing international mobility of Singapore residents, there would be students who have been schooled overseas for an extended period of time, without having maintained the study of their respective official MTL while being away. In such cases, it would be very challenging for the students to be expected to do well in their respective MTLs after re-entering the system.

2.3 Revised language education policy

Even though not all the above-mentioned problems have easy solutions, there had been attempts to solve them by revising and refining the language education policy.

The first measure, was introduced in 1981, aimed to incentivise and encourage students to put in a reasonable effort in the second language / mother tongue subject by making it necessary for pre-university students to meet minimum grade requirements for their second language / mother tongue subject before they could be admitted to local universities. In 1983, the rule was amended so that students who did not meet the second language / mother tongue subject requirement would still be able to go to university provided that they continued to study the language, and passed it before graduating and receiving their degrees.

Another measure was the relaxation of the MTL requirement for Indian students, announced in 1989 by the Education minister Dr Tony Tan. Five more minority Indian languages (namely Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu) could be chosen in place of Tamil in schools. However, other minority Indian languages spoken at home, such as Malayalam, Sindhi and Sinhalese were still not represented.

Interestingly, the choice of those additional five non-Indian languages does not seem to be based on the proportion of Indians speaking those languages. For example, although Malayalam speakers make up the next biggest number of Indian residents of Singapore after Tamil speakers (see Table 5), Malayalam is not a language that students can study in lieu of the official MTL.

Table 5: The number and percentages of the various Indian language communities in Singapore as of 2010 (Wong, 2011, p. 31)

Indian language communities	**No. of residents**	**% of total no. of Indian residents**
Tamil	18 8591	54.2%
Malayalee	26 348	7.6%
Sikh / Punjabi	18 624	5.5%
Hindi	13 085	3.8%
Hindustani	4 818	1.4%
Urdu	4 773	1.4%
Gujarati	4 124	1.2%
Sindhi	3 971	1.1%
Sinhalese	3 140	0.9%
Other Indians	80 645	23.2%
TOTAL	**348 119**	**100.0%**

At the same time, students who have been away from Singapore "for a significant amount of time" (Ministry of Education, 2004) who have either not kept up with the study of their MTL, and those whose parents are not of Chinese, Malay or Tamil ethnic origin and do not speak any of the languages offered as a subject in the Singapore-

Cambridge GCE Examinations, would also have the option of studying a foreign language (either French, Japanese, or German) or an Asian language (either Arabic, Burmese, or Thai) that is offered as a subject in the Singapore-Cambridge GCE Examinations. Those opting to study a foreign language (FL) (*i.e.* French, Japanese, or German), on the other hand, were allowed to join the students taking the FL as a third language (see Section 4), provided they had either the Singapore citizenship or Permanent Resident status, while students opting to study another Asian language (Arabic, Burmese, or Thai) would have to take private lessons on their own, outside school hours, as these languages are not offered anywhere in the school curriculum. Further options were also made available from 2004, as students could also apply for consideration to take MTL at a lower level (for example, MTL 'B' Syllabus, designed for students with "exceptional difficulties" in coping with MTL), or to be exempted from the MTL requirement altogether (subject to approval on a case-by-case basis) (*ibid.*).

The creation of lower levels of MTL courses was a solution that not only for returning Singaporean students, but also for those with different language abilities. For the linguistically more able students, there had already been a "Higher Mother Tongue Language" syllabus in place for Chinese since 1979 (when it was previously known as CL1 for "Chinese as a First Language"), and Malay / Tamil since 1986 (initially referred to as ML1 or TL1). The new, simpler syllabus known as "Mother Tongue B syllabus" was designed for students struggling with the MTL subject, as explained by Mr Teo Chee Hean, the Minister of Education at that time (Teo, 2002):

> [...] the growing proportion of English speaking families, and the large difference home language background makes, means that we cannot ignore the real problems some children have learning the mother tongue. That is why we introduced the Mother Tongue B syllabus. This syllabus focuses more on speaking and listening aspects, and is designed to make the attainment of a basic level of competency in mother tongue to proceed to the next educational level less of a hurdle for students who face exceptional difficulties in learning their mother tongue.

In fact, in the latest series of changes to the MTL courses, there were five different levels of Mother Tongue syllabuses (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 26):

> A mass customisation approach that allows us to meet the needs of different groups of students has been adopted in the teaching of MTL. This approach enables the MTL to be taught at a level and pace suitable for students from different language backgrounds and with different language abilities. Five Mother Tongue syllabuses —Basic MTL, MTL 'B', MTL for N(A) course, MTL and HMTL— are thus available to encourage every Singaporean to study his MTL to as high a level as he is capable of. [Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 24.]

Finally, to tackle the problem of English-speaking Singaporean Chinese students finding it hard to learn Mandarin, it was decided that Primary One students from 1999

would start their language course by first learning *Hanyu Pinyin* (the phonetic system used for the transcription of Mandarin pronunciations using the Latin alphabet), which helps "to improve pupils' ability to speak fluent Mandarin with accurate pronunciation" (Ministry of Education, 1998) as well as to equip students with an important "tool for keying in Chinese in the world of computers, electronic dictionaries and the Internet" (Fu, 2009a).

3 Globalization and the FL education policy: From bilingualism back to trilingualism

Early globalization, in the form of a relatively uncontrolled migration for economic purposes, enabled the growth of Singapore in the nineteenth century as a free trade port by attracting migrants onto the island for business and job opportunities. In the post-independence era of Singapore, globalization —this time in the sense of a smaller world with easier access to people from foreign countries, languages and cultures— was also the reason for a new development in the language education in Singapore, specifically the introduction of FL in the education system.

Indeed, the government explicitly acknowledged the need for the study of FL from as early as the start of Singapore's independence. This can be seen in the following statement made by S. Rajaratnam, Singapore's first Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1966:

> Singapore must prepare itself to live in a world where peoples of various countries speaking different languages had become its close neighbours. A century ago, it was all right for the good citizens to be educated in one chosen language. But in this world of the future, the man who was educated in only one language must take second place to the man who can read and speak in two or more languages. That is why in Singapore our education policy is not based on linguaphobia—fear of languages. [...] We want to create not a monolingual but a multilingual population. In fact, I would say that we should encourage the study of not just the four official languages, but other languages as well—like Punjabi, Hindi, German, French and Russian. ["Vital to know more than one language", *The Straits Times*, 27 July 1966.]

However, the official introduction of FLs into the education system only came about some 11 years after that speech by S. Rajaratnam. Nonetheless, the push for FLs in the language education policy, interestingly, meant a return to advocating trilingualism among students, since in the context of Singapore (as explained earlier in Section 2.2), there was already an "English-knowing bilingualism" adopted in all schools (*i.e.* all students are taught English as a first language and are taught the core subjects *in* English as well), while a second language —the official mother tongue (either Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil)— is assigned according to the students' ethnicity.

In the rest of this section, we will look at the place of FL education in Singapore, how it meets the needs of Singapore, as well as the choice of FLs introduced throughout the past few decades.

3.1 The needs of Singapore that FL education would meet

When it was announced that FL would be introduced into the education system in 1977, the primary objective was to meet Singapore's economic and diplomatic needs, *i.e.* "to build up a pool of people able in different tongues to service the commercial, industrial and diplomatic sectors" ("Choice of 3rd language in secondary schools", *The Straits Times*, 15 October 1977, p. 9). When languages of the neighbouring countries were subsequently considered for inclusion in the FL education programme in 2007, it became obvious that FLs would also serve Singapore's geopolitical and security needs, as explained by Chan and Chi (2008, pp. 8–9):

> Singapore has always been acutely aware that it represents —as an enclave with a Chinese majority in a predominantly Malay / Indonesian region— an anomaly and that it would be viewed with some suspicion by its neighbours. Learning the languages of the neighbours and cultivating close political, economic and military relationships have long been viewed by the Singapore government as a means to ensure Singapore's geopolitical well-being.

More generally, the teaching of FLs reflects an important socio-cultural need for Singapore to adapt to the inevitable phenomenon of globalization, or in the terms of Chua (2010, p. 418):

> [...] the increasing number of Permanent Residents, foreigners, international students and mixed-race Singaporeans demands a redefinition of familial, cultural and linguistic capital, because global, national and personal resources require a new way of conceptualising multilingualism. Any new language policy (or a redefined bilingual policy) must take into consideration the changing social landscape of Singapore so that language policy can continue to benefit all Singaporeans, serving both local and global language needs.

3.2 The FLs taught and the target student groups

In attempting to meet the above-mentioned economic, diplomatic, geopolitical, security and socio-cultural needs, the Singapore Ministry of Education introduced a selection of FLs in the education system, albeit in different phases, as shown in Table 6.

As the Education Ministry felt that most students were already struggling with the imposed "English-knowing bilingualism" (see Section 2.2), it was decided that these courses would only be restricted to the top 10% of each graduating primary school cohort based on the results of the national Primary School Leaving Examination.

Table 6: Chronology of foreign languages introduced in the education system

Year	Languages introduced into the Foreign Language Education Programme
1978	Introduction of French and Japanese
1979	Introduction of German
1986	Introduction of Malay as a third language to non-Malay students
2004	Introduction of Chinese as a third language to non-Chinese students
2008	Introduction of Arabic and Indonesian
2014	Introduction of Spanish

The reason the FL programme targeted only students in the Secondary One and not primary school students was, according to John Yip, the Education Ministry's Director of Schools, because "Secondary 1 pupils, being more mature, may be able to grasp the language faster than primary school children" (Tan, 1986).

The first three FLs to be taught to the top secondary school students were French and Japanese (introduced in 1978) and German (introduced in 1979). The choice of these FLs was initially motivated by the international collaboration with the three respective countries (France, Japan and Germany). At that time, the three governments had provided financial and technical aid for the setting up of three of technology within the Nanyang Polytechnic in Singapore Institutes of Technology, namely the French-Singapore Institute, the German-Singapore Institute and the Japanese-Singapore Institute. Besides the stringent selection of only the best students to be eligible for these courses, there was a further entrance criterion for choosing Japanese: students must have done Chinese in their primary school years to ensure that they have prior knowledge of Chinese characters (Japanese *kanji*).

There are two major compulsory milestones for the FL course for French and Japanese (introduced in 1978) and German (introduced in 1979). The first milestone takes place at the end of the fourth year of secondary school when the students sit for the Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Level FL examinations), while the second takes place either at the end of the fifth year (for students taking Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'H1' Level examinations for the respective FL) or at the end of the sixth year (for students taking Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'H2' Level examinations for the respective FL). These milestones are independent from the various paid language proficiency tests (DELF / DALF for French, DAF for German, and JLPT for Japanese), which are organised by the respective countries. Students may take these optionally on their own, at any time during their course.

Subsequently, in 1986, Malay —the national language of Singapore and its northern neighbour, Malaysia, which is very similar to Bahasa Indonesia spoken in Indonesia, its southern neighbour— was also offered as a third language to "non-ethnic Malay students", for whom Malay is not already one of the first two languages learnt in

school. When it first started, the programme named Malay (Special Programme) or M(SP) was also only offered to the top 10% of students starting their secondary school education based on their results of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). It specifically "aimed at grooming a breed of future leaders proficient in the language of the region" as it was "an advantage for Singaporeans with frequent diplomatic and trade contacts with Asian neighbours to know Malay" (Tan, 1986). The eligibility requirement for the programme was relaxed slightly when Chinese as a third language, also known as Chinese (Special Programme), came into the picture in 2004, from which point Malay and Chinese as third languages could be taken by the top 30% of the primary-school-leaving students (More should learn Malay, 2002). More recently, from 2007 onwards, the requirement for Malay (Special Programme) and Chinese (Special Programme) was almost completely waived for all students, provided they are not from the so-called "Normal (Technical)" stream catering to the academically weakest students.

In the same vein, Bahasa Indonesia and Arabic were added in 2008 to the range of FLs taught with the aim of nurturing a "pool of Singaporeans with the facility to engage with Indonesia and act as bridges to the Middle East, a fast-growing region in the world" (Ministry of Education, 2007). To be allowed to take Bahasa Indonesia or Arabic as a subject at the secondary school level, the student or one of his / her parents one parent would have to be either a Singapore Citizen or a Singapore Permanent Resident, and the student must not be from the so-called "Normal (Technical)" stream that is designed for the academically weakest students. Furthermore, students interested in Bahasa Indonesia must not already have taken Malay (or Higher Malay) at the Primary School Leaving Examination due to the similarities between the two languages.

The latest addition in 2014 was Spanish, bringing the number of third languages offered by the Singapore Ministry of Education to eight. It has been made clear in the media that Spanish was introduced to enhance bilateral ties between Singapore and Spain (Wong, 2012).

> The decision to offer Spanish is the result of an agreement on cultural, educational and scientific cooperation signed by Spain and Singapore during the official visit of former Prime Minister Zapatero of Spain in April 2011. Ties between Singapore and Spain are already strong, with Spain being Singapore's 12th largest trading partner in the EU. There are over 70 Spanish companies in Singapore and this number is set to grow. In 2010, the city of Bilbao was awarded the inaugural Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize. Our two countries are also well-connected, with the introduction of SIA's daily flights to Barcelona in 2008, which has led to a significant increase in the number of visitors from Spain to Singapore. In 2011, SIA and Spanair inaugurated code share services between Singapore and Sao Paolo *via* Barcelona. This happy and natural extension of the growing connections between Singapore and Spain has increased the connectivity of both Singapore and Spain to our mutual benefit. With the agreement on cultural, educational and scientific cooperation, Singapore hopes to

further deepen its bilateral ties with Spain, just like it has with France, Germany and Japan.

4 Delivery of FL language courses in the Singapore education system

4.1 Course venue, duration and lesson frequency

Since the FL courses were conceived with the elite top 10% of each secondary school cohort in mind, students accepted in the FL courses can come from very different secondary schools. In order to optimise the use of teachers and teaching resources, it therefore made better sense for these courses to be conducted at centralised locations. Apart from the Chinese (Special Programme) and Malay (Special Programme), which are conveniently conducted in certain nearby schools and "zonal centres", all the other FL courses are centralised for all students in a single location, known as the Ministry of Education Language Centre (MOELC), which came into existence in 1978, when it was still first known as the Foreign Language Centre. (Prior to the creation of the MOELC, FL courses were originally held in a handful of regional foreign language centres.) This means that most FL learners have to travel some distance away from their school for their FL classes, which are conducted during after-school hours in the afternoons.

The entire FL course takes six years to complete (from Secondary One to Four, followed by two years in Junior College / Pre-University classes —roughly Grades 7 to 12 in the US system— for students who follow the FL programme through to the end, although most students typically pursue it only up to the end of the fourth year of the secondary school Secondary 4 year, when the Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Level Examinations are taken. Those who continue with the FL course for the fifth and sixth years are expected to obtain a minimum grade of B3 (*i.e.* 65%) in their 'O' level examinations, to ensure that only the better students go on to take the 'A' level examinations at the end of their sixth year.

In terms of lesson times, students used to attend two-hour-long lessons twice a week in the afternoons before 2009. This gave about 120 hours of lessons per year for all six years, totalling about 720 hours of lessons of FL classes in all. When it was revealed that more and more students found it hard to turn up twice a week for FL lessons, it was decided that the timetable be revamped, and from 2009 all Secondary One to Secondary Four classes were conducted only once every week for three hours and 15 minutes, followed by 45 minutes of e-learning and assignments or lesson preparations at home (which students may or may not do, since there was no supervision of how this time is spent by the students at their own time). Only the fifth and sixth year (pre-university) students were not affected by the change, and continued to attend classes twice a week for two hours each time.

As there are only about 30 school weeks in a year (after excluding test / examination periods and other school term periods during which no lessons are conducted), this translates to about 97.5 hours of FL classes per year for the first four years of FL classes, and 120 hours of FL classes per year for the fifth and sixth years of FL classes.

Table 7: Cumulative number of classroom contact hours of FL lessons by level before and after 2009

Year	Age	Cumulative no. of hours of classroom hours up to 2008	Cumulative no. of hours of classroom house from 2009
Sec 1	12–13 years old	About 120 hours	About 97.5 hours
Sec 2	13–14 years old	About 240 hours	About 195 hours
Sec 3	14–15 years old	About 360 hours	About 292.5 hours
Sec 4	15–16 years old	About 480 hours	About 390 hours
*** Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Levels ***			
JC 1	16–17 years old	About 600 hours	About 510 hours
*** Singapore-Cambridge GCE H1 Levels ***			
JC 2	17–18 years old	About 720 hours	About 630 hours
*** Singapore-Cambridge GCE H2 Levels ***			

Cumulatively, this gives a maximum of about 630 hours of classes over six years of study. The table above shows the number of hours completed by students at the end of each year before and after the timetable revamp.

4.2 The case of the French language programme

Due to the fact that they cater mainly to the elite top 10% of each primary school graduating cohort, the FL courses present some noteworthy characteristics. Let us illustrate with the case of the French language programme, which —at the time of this printing— adopts the use of Hachette's series of textbooks named *Alter Ego* whose progression follows the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

Firstly, the FL programmes are rather quick-paced and intensive, and this has become all the more so after the timetable revamp that led to fewer classrooms contact hours. Table 8 below shows —for the French language programme— a comparison between the actual number of contact hours accomplished for at the MOELC and the number of hours of classroom instruction for each of the CEFR levels, as recommended by the *Centre international d'études pédagogiques* (International Centre for Pedagogical Studies, or CIEP) for the French Ministry of Education.

As can be seen in Table 8, the pace at the MOELC is rather intensive, given that the figures fall either near the lower end of the recommended durations for levels A1, A2 and B1, or below the recommended durations for the B2 and C1 levels. However, some students manage to pass the DALF C1 and even the DALF C2 examination by the sixth year of French language studies.

Table 8: Comparison between the CIEP-recommended no. of hours required for each CEFR level(Campus France, 2016, p. 4) and the actual number of hours completed at the MOELC

CEFR level	**No. of hours recommended by the CIEP (*Centre international d'études pédagogiques*)**	**Actual no. of classroom hours completed at MOELC since 2009**
A1	80 to 150 hours	About 65 hours
A2	180 to 300 hours	About 165 hours
B1	330 to 550 hours	About 390 hours
B2	500 to 690 hours	About 510 hours
C1	700 to 900 hours	About 630 hours

Secondly, the textbooks used are not always suited for the age group of these learners. To cite the example of French, the past textbooks used —which have been invariably published in France, such as *Sans Frontières* (Clé International), *Nouveaux Sans Frontières* (Clé International), *Panorama* (Clé International), and *Alter Ego* (Hachette)— sometimes contain themes that are more suited for the adult learner, involving situations between adults, such as speed dating (for the purposes of learning adjectives describing one's qualities and flaws in talking about oneself), announcing the birth of one's child (for learning how to write a French *faire-part*), and going for job interviews that involve talking about one's previous education and work experience; these are themes that 12 to 16 year-old students would probably find hard to identify with.

The solution adopted was to change the themes in the textbook to those more relevant to teenagers. In the case of the theme on employment and talking about one's previous education, the topic was changed to school and education.

5 Globalization and the effects on FL education

Globalization was the driving force behind the rise and development of FL programmes in Singapore's education system—although it is today still restricted to only the top 10% of each secondary school cohort in the cases of French, Japanese and German (see Section 3). Paradoxically, the globalization processes have presented some challenges for FL Education in Singapore as well. In particular, globalization has had an impact on Singapore's population make-up, and, because of the MTL requirement of Singapore's language education policy, this has in turn had some indirect consequences for the FL programmes.

5.1 Globalization and its effect on Singapore's population growth

The growth of Singapore's economy was accompanied by a strong demand for foreign labour and foreign-born professionals. This demand was especially strong because "as a country with no natural resources, Singapore depends heavily on its human capital" (Fu, 2009b). Singaporeans were not only reluctant to take up blue-collar

jobs or those involving housekeeping or caring for the elderly and the young, but an increasing number of Singaporean families were emigrating overseas. In addition to this, there was a declining birth rate in Singapore due the increasing number of people remaining unmarried, getting married later, delaying having their first child, or having fewer children.

The solutions adopted by the government were to open the doors from as early as 1971 to foreign workers, some of whom saw employment in Singapore as an opportunity to a better life. Then incentives were implement from 1989 onwards to attract foreign talent (bankers, engineers, investors, businessmen, etc.), while scholarships were granted to attract top foreign students (Ng, 1998). As David Lim, who was the chairman of the Singapore 21 Committee for Foreign Talent, said in 1999: "Foreign talent is the yeast in the pudding and that's what makes Singapore 21 rise." (Chua & Zhuang, 2010, p. 42.) The third prime minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, reiterated the necessity of selective immigration, in the 2006 national day rally speech:

> [...] we must continue to promote immigration into Singapore because just as we accept that Singaporeans have the world as their oyster, so too we must promote immigration here and let this be one of the options which talent from around the world will look for when [Singaporeans] are considering where to go and live. Many countries are doing this. The Australians are working hard at it, the Canadians are working hard at it, even the Americans have lucky draws for green cards. You know what the green card is. It's a PR. And even China is scouting for talent. China with 1 300 million people looking for talent. They're offering scholarships to top students from other countries. Their professional football teams are hiring foreign footballers. They want to get into the World Cup finals. And we must do the same. We have to do this. So, we are setting up a Citizenship and Population Unit, also in PMO. So, we'll have two, one OSU (Overseas Singaporeans), one Citizenship and Population to bring people into Singapore. And we have to promote our immigration programme overseas.

One inevitable effect of these measures can be seen in the demographics of Singapore, with the permanent residents and non-residents (*i.e.* foreigners on short-term permits) forming a more and more substantial proportion of the Singapore population (38.9% in 2014). This is illustrated in table 9 below:

5.2 Globalization and its effect on the MTL requirement

The MTL requirement, mentioned earlier in Section 2.2, is fulfilled when students study a second language, which is either one of the three official mother tongue languages (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) that best represents their ethnic heritage and/or the language spoken in the family at home, or one of five other minority Indian languages (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu), or an approved foreign language (Arabic, Burmese, French, German, Japanese, or Thai) (see Section 2.3), and when

Table 9: Demographics of Singapore (in thousands) (Department of Statistics Singapore, n.d.)

Year	Singapore citizens (A)	Permanent residents (B)	Non-residents (C)	Foreign population (B+C)	Total population (A+B+C)	% of non-Singaporean population (B+C) / (A+B+C)
2007	3133.8	449.2	1005.5	1454.7	4588.6	31.7%
2008	3164.4	478.2	1196.7	1684.9	4839.4	34.6%
2009	3200.7	533.2	1253.7	1786.9	4987.6	35.8%
2010	3230.7	541.0	1305.0	1846.0	5076.7	36.4%
2011	3257.2	532.0	1394.4	1926.4	5183.7	37.2%
2012	3285.1	533.1	1494.2	2027.3	5312.4	38.2%
2013	3313.5	531.2	1554.4	2085.6	5399.2	38.6%
2014	3343.0	527.7	1599.0	2126.7	5469.7	38.9%

they meet the minimum grade requirements obtained at the Singapore-Cambridge GCE Examinations.

Because of globalization and the changes in the demographic landscape as described in the previous section (see Section 5.1), there has also been an increasing proportion of students who are not eligible to take any of the official MTLs, because neither of the students' parents are of Chinese, Malay or Tamil ethnic origin. As result, these students have to study an approved foreign language in lieu of MTL, and the number of such students has been on the rise.

5.3 Globalization and its effect on FL programmes

The total number of students taking FL has increased manifold ever since the FL programmes were introduced. According to *The Straits Times* (18 July 1983), there were a total of 617 students in the first four levels (Secondary One to Four) in all three FL programmes combined (French, Japanese and German). By 2007, there were 1,200 students in the first year of the FL study alone for all three languages (Ho, 2007). This was partly due to the changing demographic landscape (Section 5.1) and the MTL requirement (Section 5.2).

On one hand, as specified in Section 3.2, the FL programmes were created initially with the elite top 10% of each Secondary School cohort in mind; these students could study French, Japanese or German (or Spanish from 2014) as a third language in order to become trilingual to meet Singapore's economic, diplomatic, geopolitical, security and socio-cultural needs. As this FL programme is an elective programme for them, they have an option of dropping out of the programme if they find the course too demanding or have problems juggling their core curriculum and this optional elective

subject. In fact, the dropout rate for this category is about 2 in 3, since the number of students who take the O level examinations after four years is about 1 in 3 (Ho, 2007).

On the other hand, with globalization gaining increasing significance in Singapore, there is also a rise in the number of non-elite students who are eligible and opt to do French, Japanese, German or Spanish in lieu of a MTL (*i.e.* as a second language), either because the students' parents are not Malay, Chinese or Tamil ethnic origin or because the students have spent some time in an overseas education system. But unlike the former group of 'elite' students, the latter group of students, who have been granted approval to study FL in lieu of a MTL, are not allowed to drop out of the FL programme, since they have no other language to fall back on to meet the MTL requirement. The growth of this group of students —mainly students with foreign parents, whose actual mother tongue is Tagalog, Thai, Korean, etc. (see Table 2)— was not something that the Education ministry expected or foresaw. This was evident in an announcement by the Ministry of Education in 1977:

> Pupils under the second scheme may be allowed to take a foreign language as their second language from Secondary One. The number of students involved is expected to be 'very small' *as most Singaporeans are of Malay, Chinese or Indian origin.* ["Choice of 3rd language in sec schools", *The Straits Times*, 15 October 1977, p. 9 (emphasis added).]

As an example, the following table shows the number of students taking French as a subject at the Singapore-Cambridge GCE 'O' Level examinations over three years (from 2009 to 2011).

Table 10: Proportion of students taking French as a third language (L3) and those taking French as a second language (L2) in lieu of MTL

Year	**No. of students taking O Levels French as an L3 subject**	**No. of students taking O Levels French as an L2 in lieu of MTL**	**Total no. of students taking O Levels French**
2009	102 (76%)	32 (24%)	134
2010	130 (69%)	57 (31%)	187
2011	118 (76%)	38 (24%)	156

What this table shows is that the average percentage of students who are taking French as a second language (L2) in lieu of MTL is between 24% and 31%. Such a relatively high proportion of students in the French class can cause problems for the French Language programme for the following reasons. Firstly, the fact that the FL course is an intensive one, catering to the elite top 10% of each primary school graduating cohort, means that the L2 students may not be able to keep up with the elite L3 students. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that there is no differentiation

between L2 and L3 students in the syllabus: they are placed in the same class, which ends up being quite heterogeneous in some cases. It is not always possible to group L2 students in their own separate due to constraints on the timetable, the number of teachers available and the students' availability to attend classes in the afternoon after school hours. So, while the L3 students who want to drop out of the course may do so on their own accord, the L2 students are obliged to stay on with the programme, as they need to meet the MTL requirement for university admission later on, when they finish their pre-university education.

The second reason is a consequence of the first reason: as the course gets progressively advanced, the students often find it harder and harder to follow the lessons, and this tends to cause them to lose their motivation in learning the FL. In many cases, the students stop attending classes as a result, but their names remain on the class register. Teachers may try to help these students if they have the time, but what they can do is limited as the objective of the programme is still ultimately to give priority to the L3 students, for whom the course was designed in the first place.

Some L2 students would actually have been better off choosing another language that is linguistically closer to their own mother tongue to meet the MTL requirement. For instance, Filipino students, who make up the biggest portion of foreign students (see Table 2), would find more similarities between Malay and Tagalog due to the numerous lexical borrowings between the two languages. However, the perception that many students, or their parents have is that French is more prestigious or will be more useful in the child's future than Malay or some other language.

Finally, sometimes it happens that some of these L2 students only find out rather late in the year, or in their secondary school years about their obligation to take a FL in lieu of MTL. By the time they join the FL programme after it has already advanced quite a bit, it becomes twice as hard to catch up what they have with the other students, for whom, the late arrival of these new, lower level students can be very disruptive and disturbing.

6 Conclusion

What this chapter has tried to show, is that while it is true that the official language education policy of a country is usually formulated mainly in terms of the official languages of the country, language education policies (for instance, the MTL requirement) can have important effects on the teaching of foreign languages as well, although these effects are rather indirect. Just as there is a need to maintain the MTL in Singapore so that "all three mother tongues are guaranteed equality of treatment" (Rappa & Wee, 2006, p. 104), challenges that arise in a changing social and demographic landscape of a country, caused by globalization, should be a sufficient reason to push policy makers to review or to refine the current language education policy.

To combat those problems faced by foreign language programmes that have been created as a result of globalization, some of the following solutions may be considered:

(a) Better integration of L2 students in the programme.

(b) Better anticipation of the demands of L2 as soon as primary school education is over to ensure that the students do not miss lessons from the start of Secondary One.

(c) Creation of a separate FL course for L2 students.

(d) Proposal of more language options for L2 students.

(e) Increased teachers and teaching resources.

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