

**SPEECH BY MR LIM CHEE ONN,
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Mandarin: A Language for Teamwork

The "Promote the Use of Mandarin Campaign" has entered its fourth year this year. With concerted efforts all these years, we have made considerable progress in this respect. If we are a little more observant, we should notice that at the hawker centres, travelling in a taxi, at the bus stops, markets, shops, cinemas and shopping centres, more and more people speak Mandarin and fewer and fewer people speak dialects. This is indeed encouraging.

Worksite Language

The emphasis of this year's "Promote the Use of Mandarin Campaign" is slightly different from that of previous years. Our theme for this year's campaign is "Speak Mandarin While at Work". This means that Chinese workers, particularly those working at the worksites, are the main targets of this year's campaign. The aim is to encourage them to use Mandarin as their common language at the worksites.

Why do we choose "Speak Mandarin While at Work" as this year's theme? According to the findings of a recent survey by The Straits Times, 50 per cent of the workers indicated that more Mandarin than dialect was used at their worksites. This is, of course, a marked improvement over the past three years. However, 38 per cent of our workers indicated, on the other hand, that more dialect than Mandarin was spoken at their worksites. A great proportion of our population are workers. If we hope to make still greater achievements in our Mandarin Campaign, we will have to make still greater efforts to persuade our workers to drop the use of dialect and cultivate the habit of conversing in Mandarin.

City State

I believe all of us realize that Singapore is a city state which thrives on commerce and industry and that the greater part of its investments comes from multinational corporations, whose managers and technocrats are usually English-speaking. Therefore, out of practical need and in order to raise efficiency, our young workers are required to learn English for communication with them.

On the other hand, books on science and technology, business management and administration, and instruction manuals are mostly in English imported from Europe and

the US. In order to raise further our level of skills and technology, we have to learn to acquire such new knowledge directly and quickly, and English will naturally become the tool for learning.

Social Structure

In social structure, Singapore is a multiracial society where the various communities have their own languages. To facilitate communication, English is used as their common language. In education, parents are always free to decide for their children what language-stream schools they should go to. At present more than 90 per cent of our children go to the English-stream schools.

For all these reasons, English has become the common language of Singaporeans. In view of this, unity among the various communities is essential to national development. Such an objective social environment has made the promotion of Mandarin in Singapore all the more pressing and necessary. If we are unable to make the Chinese community learn and preserve Mandarin as their common language, it can well be imagined that in a few decades to come, only English and dialects may remain the languages of the younger generation of Chinese Singaporeans.

Teamwork

The purpose in promoting Mandarin is not to replace other languages with Mandarin but to encourage Chinese Singaporeans to drop the habit of speaking in dialects and to speak Mandarin instead. Language barrier is often the cause of misunderstanding between people at places of work and social gatherings. If non-English - speaking Chinese workers speak Mandarin among themselves while at work, it will go a long way in fostering the spirit of team work and facilitating their participation in skills training and such other activities as QC (Quality Control) circles and WITs (Work Improvement Teams) to raise productivity. Besides, since Mandarin is the mother tongue of the Chinese, a knowledge of Mandarin is useful in the propagation of Confucianism to keep alive such traditional virtues as benevolence, love, loyalty and truthfulness. The preservation of these virtues will do much to foster among the people a sense of belonging to the country they live in and the organisations they work for, as well as a sense of responsibility to their jobs and their families.

As we are all aware, most of our workers can speak Mandarin. The findings of The Straits Times survey indicated that 55 per cent of Chinese Singaporeans can speak Mandarin fluently and 26 per cent not so fluently, leaving only 19 per cent who cannot speak the language, or speak only a little of it. For those who can speak the language, however, many still prefer to converse in dialects, mainly by force of habit. We are aware that it is not easy to change people's habit that has become entrenched. But no matter how difficult it is, we must do our best to change the habit in the realisation that it has an important bearing on our future. We must try to persuade the workers by driving home to them the significance of the campaign.

Management Initiative

Management plays an important role in helping the workers change their habit of speaking dialects. Let me cite an example to illustrate the point. In the taxi trade, Hokkien was the most common dialect used. Before the Promote the Use of Mandarin Campaign was launched, Hokkien was widely used between Comfort staff and taxi drivers, in the transaction of day-to-day business, at meetings and even in the conduct of training courses. In the past three years, however, through the initiative of Comfort management and staff in making it a point to speak in Mandarin, the taxidrivers are beginning to develop the habit of speaking in Mandarin too, as evidenced by the fact that more and more of them now speak Mandarin at the Comfort office of their own accord.

The above example shows that through management initiative, a Mandarin-speaking environment can be created that will remove the psychological barriers of the workers in the learning and use of Mandarin. It is my hope that greater effort will be made in this direction by the managements of both the public and private sectors. Their support and co-operation will go a long way in promoting the use of Mandarin at places of work.