

Singapore Government

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Information Division, Ministry of Communications & Information, 36th Storey, PSA Building, 460 Alexandra Road, Singapore 0511. Tel: 2798794/5

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SPEECH BY DR TONY TAN KENG YAM, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION,  
AT THE LAUNCHING CEREMONY OF THE 1987 SPEAK MANDARIN  
CAMPAIGN AT THE SLF AUDITORIUM, 512 THOMSON ROAD  
ON THURSDAY, 8 OCTOBER 1987 AT 8.00 PM

We meet once again to launch our Speak Mandarin Campaign. We have been consistently doing this for the past eight years. Why have we persisted to sustain these efforts of persuading Chinese Singaporeans to eschew dialects and speak Mandarin? There are very cogent reasons why we must continue these efforts.

One of the most important reasons is that we have made considerable progress and any let up in our efforts may lead to backsliding and undo what we have achieved so far. And what we have achieved is impressive by any standard.

Let me illustrate. When we commenced our first Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979, dialects were predominantly spoken by a large majority of Chinese pupils at home. My Ministry's statistics show that two-thirds of the cohort of Chinese pupils entering Primary One in 1980 spoke dialects most frequently at home. Only a quarter of the pupils spoke Mandarin (Table I). The sustained efforts in promoting Mandarin over the years have resulted in Mandarin overtaking dialects as a home language. Today 68 per cent of the 1987 Primary One cohort of Chinese pupils come from homes where Mandarin is spoken as a matter of course. Only 12.5 per cent communicate in dialect at home. The Speak Mandarin Campaign has contributed significantly to changing our Chinese pupils' home language.

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Outside the home environment, in traditional predominantly dialect-speaking areas such as hawker centres, markets and Zhongyuan Jie auctions, more people are switching to Mandarin in conversation.

The latest survey conducted by the Research and Information Department of the Straits Times shows that 37 per cent of Chinese Singaporeans aged 12 and above can speak Mandarin either fairly well or fluently. In 1985, the figure was 82 per cent. This shows that the number of Chinese Singaporeans, who can speak Mandarin, is increasing year by year.

What is even more impressive is the percentage of grandparents who speak Mandarin. This figure has increased from four per cent in 1982 to 22 per cent in 1987. That this group of older Chinese Singaporeans, whose language habits have been fixed through long usage, are able to switch to Mandarin shows the remarkable achievement of the Speak Mandarin Campaign.

Moreover, the Speak Mandarin Campaign has assisted the Ministry of Education in the implementation of our bilingual policy. The Campaign has helped to cut down the language-learning burden of our children by bringing about a linguistic environment which provides our children the opportunity to practice and use Mandarin at home and in social interactions. Learning a language without the environment to use the language is nothing more than an academic exercise, soon to be forgotten when the examinations are over. It is the frequent use of a language that reinforces its learning in school and provides the necessary motivation to learn it.

The learning of a language involves the mastering of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The first two are audio, and the last two are visual by nature. A pupil will find learning Chinese much easier when Mandarin,

instead of dialects, is used at home. He would have developed the audio skills and all he needs to do in school would be to master the visual aspects of the language.

The combined efforts of the Government, the private sector, the clan associations, the educational organisations and the whole Chinese community in promoting the Speak Mandarin Campaign, have achieved significant results in changing entrenched language habits. This is not something that is easily achieved. It will take at least one generation to achieve the target of making Mandarin the common language of all Chinese Singaporeans. However, there must be no let up in pressing on to achieve the target. What has been achieved so far is laudable and all who are involved in the Campaign have cause to be proud of the achievements.

It is now my pleasure to launch the 1987 Speak Mandarin Campaign and wish it the success it deserves.

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Table I

DISTRIBUTION OF PRIMARY ONE CHINESE PUPILS  
 BY LANGUAGE MOST FREQUENTLY SPOKEN AT HOME  
 FOR YEARS 1980 - 1987

Year	Dialect	Mandarin	English	Others
1980	64.4	25.9	9.3	0.3
1981	52.9	35.9	10.7	0.4
1982	42.7	44.7	12.0	0.5
1983	31.9	54.4	13.4	0.5
1984	26.9	58.7	13.9	0.4
1985	16.1	66.7	16.9	0.2
1986	16.1	67.1	16.5	0.3
1987	12.5	68.0	19.1	0.4

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