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When mother-tongue education is *not* preferred

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When mother-tongue education is *not* preferred¹

Key-words

language rights, multilingualism, language shift, education, mother-tongue

Abstract

In some language situations primary education in the mother tongue may not be desirable. A number of factors may militate against education in the mother tongue.

- (1) **Difficulty in determining the mother tongue.** This is especially a problem in multilingual settings where children grow up with multiple mother tongues.
- (2) **Definition of 'a language'.** Mother tongues may be deemed to be the standard variety.
- (3) **Social and ethnic divisiveness of mother tongue education.** In multilingual settings the maintenance of social cohesiveness may be of more importance than the benefit of mother tongue education. Where patterns of language use are linked to social class, mother tongue education could further diminish access to power structures by underprivileged groups.

Ideological issues can be resolved only in the context of the particular social and political situation. There is no general rule that primary education should be in the mother tongue.

Introduction

It is hardly necessary to reiterate the arguments in favour of initial education being in a child's mother tongue. The most quoted axiom is UNESCO's:

... it is important that every effort should be made to provide education in the mother tongue. ...

On educational grounds we recommend that the use of the mother tongue be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. In particular, pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue, because they understand it best and because to begin their school life in the mother tongue will make the break between home and school as small as possible.

(UNESCO 1951:691)

Support for this view has been given by research on bilingual children's development (such as Cummins and Swain 1986), although others (Le Page 1992; Fasold 1992; Gupta 1994; Slabbert 1994) have drawn attention to some difficulties in its application. It is these difficulties I will be discussing. It is been one of the major aims of the Language Rights movement to achieve mother tongue education for all children.

The ultimate rationale for the promotion of mother tongue education is the empowerment of underprivileged groups. The arguments against it should also be based on issues of empowerment, whether for groups, or for those individuals who compose the groups. Governments choose to privilege one or more languages within a country. A privileged language is one with a special prominence either societally or officially, such that knowledge of it is one of the gateways to power. This privilege may be given legal recognition by allocating it the status of an official or national language, but a privileged language may have no such designation (English in the USA is such an example, at least at present), while in some cases a designated official language may not in reality be very greatly privileged. A privileged language is usually chosen because it is the language of an overwhelming majority of the population, or of an elite group (Gupta 1985).

The political motivations of governments should be crucial in determining their choice of linguistic policy (Gupta 1985). Governments are not always motivated by an impartial hope for empowerment for all. For example, if the ruling party wishes to ensure that a particular ethnic group does not get access to the power structure, it may wish to privilege a particular language and then deny access to that language through the schools. On the other hand, if a government sees itself as needing to facilitate access to all ethnic groups, its policy will be differently constituted (by privileging more than one language and/or by ensuring access to learning of privileged languages). Phillipson pointed out that (1992: 120) "An apparently sound focus on the mother tongue as medium of education does not in itself provide a guarantee of enlightened education". Because provision of mother tongue education has been linked (especially in Africa) with denial of access to the privileged English, "Africans in the periphery-English nations seem, with few exceptions, to feel that support for African languages is intended to confine them to an inferior position" (p127). Although the imposition of an ex-colonial language, which is now the language of an elite can be seen as a continuation of colonial dominance, the formerly colonised people should not be construed as victims.

It is important ... to resist images of those who have been colonised, or subjugated in other ways, as passive recipients of the dictates of their masters. Surely *that* is the colonial fantasy.

{Crowley 1996:52}

In reality, governments have many interests in maintaining power and privilege, and educational policies are not disinterested. However, in this paper, I will assume that, either rhetorically or in reality, one aim of education is to empower all ethno-linguistic groups equally. As far as I am concerned this is indeed a desirable aim, and I can probably safely assume that most readers of this journal agree. Although there is likely to be little argument about this standpoint, the way in which the wish impacts on the issue of

mother tongue education is controversial. I would add that, in my view, *the empowerment of individuals should have primacy over the development of an individual's mother tongue, and even over the preservation of a language*. If language maintenance gets in the way of empowerment, then the individual's language rights may be being maintained but the educational and social rights are not. An emphasis on the preservation of ancestral languages may be linked to a wish to give freedom to groups to express themselves, but also is linked (Crowley 1996) to ideologies of purity which need to be engaged with.

Education systems

Let us look first at the control of language in education systems. In all countries with which I am familiar, the management of schools is a large part of social engineering and is politically hot (e.g. France, Malaysia, UK, Singapore, India, South Africa). Language use in government schools is a major part of many countries' language planning policies. In most countries, the majority of students attend schools which are to some degree 'government schools' in the sense that they are wholly, largely, or partly funded by government agencies, and that the ruling government (whether national, state, or local) exercises some degree of control over them. There may be a 'private' sector (seldom entirely outside governmental concern), and the difference between maximally government sector and minimally government sector may be a major part of social control (as in the UK and in India), allowing an elite access to a different kind of education, which often confers greater access to power structures than the government one. In other countries (such as Singapore), in contrast, 'private' schools are essentially restricted to those who have failed in the government sector, and to non-citizens. Within these countries, the most privileged education is within the government sector.

Multilingual settings

Many modern countries are not nation states, where the majority of the population have a sense of shared ethnicity, language and culture. Where populations are relatively homogeneous there is little argument against giving primacy to the (generally) shared mother tongue. Providing mother tongue initial education is usually achievable too if the country is, as it were, composed of several nations, each relatively homogeneous. These nations can be constituted as states or provinces, and within a state primacy can be given to the dominant mother tongue. Linguistic minorities may have a hard time in these places. But it is not practicable to expect that every language group, however small, can be provided for, and in settings where there is a clearly dominant societal language most children receive substantial pre-school exposure to it, even if they speak another language alongside the societally dominant one. This means that although their language rights may be being infringed, their access to societal power structures may not be. However, there is one kind of country where the situation becomes very much more difficult.

[Fig. 1 about here]

Let me create an imaginary country (Figure 1) in which each province is relatively homogeneous, with a dominant ethnic group and a dominant language. But the capital city has attracted migrants from all three provinces, and has also (being a major trading port) attracted migrants from further afield who have brought other languages with them. It has no single dominant language or ethnic group.

This pattern is a very prevalent and ancient one -- the cosmopolitan cities of Asia, Africa, and South America are very often multilingual islands surrounded by relatively homogeneous rural areas, and in some cases have been for thousands of years. The 1996

Habitat II conference in Istanbul has indicated that city dwelling of this type is increasingly the dominant experience of most humans. Istanbul is of course itself a good example of a historic cosmopolis.

In these cosmopolitan cities, most residents expect to speak several languages in the course of daily life. Within the city, the provision of enclaves may allow a child the experience of growing up within a close and relatively homogeneous community, while other children may grow up in mixed families or mixed neighbourhoods -- the experiences of children growing up in one of these cities are very variable. Attitudes towards language learning and language shift are typically relaxed, and ethnic identity may be very weakly linked to language.

Mother tongue education in the cosmopolis

In these cosmopolises, educational decisions about the language of education become harder.

(1) Determining the mother tongue.

When a child is first admitted to school, who decides what that child's mother tongue is? In practice there seem to be two most likely possibilities. either that the child has an officially assigned ethnicity which determines an official "mother tongue", or that the parents report on what the child's mother tongue is.

Le Page (1988) has discussed the political and emotional meaning of the term *mother tongue* in many cultures, and for many linguists, politicians, and people in general, mother tongue is an ancestral property. It is common to find mother tongue determined for a child by patrilineal ancestry. This is especially the case where the mother tongue is officially assigned to a child: patrilineal ancestral language is easy enough to determine. However, it is not the case that all children will be able to speak their patrilineal ancestral language. Although there are sound educational reasons for educating a child in a language they speak, I do not see any educational justification for educating a child in an ancestral language which the child does not speak. Many of us have ancestors who spoke a language which we do not speak, and individuals from families which have experienced language shift are legitimate native speakers of languages that were not the languages of all

or of any of their ancestors. However, many programs of mother tongue education are predicated upon some sort of ancestral definition of *mother tongue*.

The only definition of *mother tongue* that has ever made any sense to me is the one that links mother tongue to a person's early language experiences. A mother tongue is a language learnt before any other language has been learnt. Under this definition, a person may have more than one mother tongue. A mother tongue of a pre-school child will therefore be a language the child actually speaks.

There is a problem in determining actual mother tongues, and many children do not have a single, easily identifiable mother tongue. In the cosmopolis, children are more likely to be the product of a mixed marriage. Children of mixed ethnicity have two (or more) ancestral lineages. Furthermore, the common language between the parents may not be the ancestral language of either of them. Inter-marriage is one factor that leads to more than one language being used in the home. But when different ethnic and linguistic groups have been living side by side for generations, there may be considerable language shift even without mixed marriages. This also leads to the possibility that several languages may be used in the home, and to the possible loss of the ancestral language in the home.

Problems arise if mother tongue is to be parentally declared. Where two or three languages are spoken in the home, must the parent choose or can initial education be multilingual? Parents may identify certain languages as giving better access to power structures than others, thus having a vested interest in declaring certain languages to be the main home language. even if they are not. Is their veracity to be tested?

- (2) **Definition of 'a language'**. The 'language' may be defined as the standard variety, so that the mother tongue of those speaking related varieties may be deemed to be the standard variety (Le Page 1992; Slabbert 1994), which in some cases may be very different from the variety spoken by the child.. Where a language is newly standardised, the choice of a standard variety may be especially divisive. The requirement to use another variety of one's own language may be more threatening to self-esteem than the requirement to use another language. It may not be recognised in the education system that children need to learn the standard variety of their own language, and they may be castigated for using the language 'wrongly'.
- (3) **Social and ethnic divisiveness of mother tongue education.** If education in the mother tongue is promoted, there will be extensive separation of ethnic groups in the education system. In some multilingual cities, there is a tradition of separation of ethno-linguistic groups, which may facilitate separate provision. Although residential congregation may be motivated by the communal and natural wish of minority ethnic groups to form a community, this pattern of segregation is often associated with invidious social distinctions, and is sometimes enforced (as in traditional *ghettos*). Some modern cities (such as Singapore) have made efforts to break down traditional congregations and enforce ethnic mixing, a policy which can have negative and positive effects on minority groups (e.g. Chua 1995). In a

cosmopolitan ethnic congregation may be socially undesirable, as maintenance of links of language and friendship can help maintain peace between groups. If a country wishes to promote social cohesiveness, it may be felt that this is best achieved by giving a common education to the children, which facilitates mixing of ethnic groups.

The relationship of ethnicity and privilege is a fraught one in many countries. Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) and Cummins and Swain (1986) discuss groups in terms of both their minority/majority status and of their social prestige. In some countries, certain ethnic groups tend to be socially privileged, and others underprivileged. In others, social class cuts across ethnic groups. Children from low social classes, in all countries known to me, are disadvantaged educationally, whether they are native speakers of the privileged language or not, while privileged children who do not speak the privileged language appear not to be thereby disadvantaged (see for example Moon Lee 1996, which deals with high-prestige Korean expatriate children in Hong Kong). Little research has been done on children from high-prestige backgrounds who are not educated in their mother tongue.

However, where patterns of language use are linked to social class, mother tongue education could further diminish access to power structures by underprivileged groups. If the privileged language is the language of the dominant group, then the skills of members of other groups in that language may suffer if they have mother tongue primary education, and they will also suffer from diminished personal contact with members of the privileged group.

The effects of integration or separation need to be assessed for each situation. One factor to consider is how many children come to school without skills in the school language(s). The effect of numbers will vary depending on many factors. On the one hand, a child who does not speak the school language and who comes to a school where most children do speak it, will have enough exposure to the language to learn it quickly. On the other hand, if most children come to school unable to speak the school language, they are less likely to be stigmatised than if they are in a minority, and more likely to receive appropriate teaching.

Case Study: Malaysia and Singapore

I will illustrate the undesirability of mother tongue education with an example from two countries which have also been discussed in recent books by Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (1994). These are neighbouring countries, with similar ethnic compositions, the three major groups being termed Malays, Chinese, and Indians. In Malaysia the designated majority ethnic group among Malaysians are Malays (officially 50%), while in Singapore the designated majority ethnic group among Singaporeans are Chinese

(officially 78%). However, the ethnic composition of Malaysian *cities* is very similar to the composition of Singapore, with a lower proportion of Malays, and a higher proportion of Chinese and Indians (Figure 2).

[Figure 2 about here]

The educational linguistic privilege in these two countries can be summarised as in Figure 3. Neither country has a policy of mother tongue education: rather national unity is a major concern, while Singapore has an additional aim of maintaining culture based on racial groupings (Benjamin 1976). Both countries have a leading language and a runner-up language of privilege. Both countries have been very successful in teaching the most privileged language in the schools.

[Fig. 3 about here]

Both Malaysia and Singapore assign an ethnicity and racial identity to citizens, and have policies based on race which affect more than just language. The *bumiputera* policy of Malaysia privileges the groups who are defined as indigenous, the largest of whom are 'Malays'. On average the financial and educational performance of the bumiputera groups is (even now) lower than the performance of the non-bumiputeras. The bumiputera policy impacts most heavily on poor non-bumiputeras (Schiffman 1996 discusses the impact on the Indian community). However, the aspect of the bumiputera policy which causes problems is the individual's *race*, not something which is easy to change. Although Malay is the language of the major bumiputera group, the privileging of the *language* Malay does not in itself discriminate against non-Malays, because knowledge of Malay has always been widespread, and because the educational system supports its learning. The non-bumiputeras (such as the Chinese and the Indians) continue to be ahead of the Malays on most economic, social and educational indexes (Khoo 1995) and achieve, on

average, higher results than bumiputeras in the Malay-based education system (Schiffman 1996).

In Singapore too, racial classification affects several areas of life where racial quotas apply (especially education and housing), and, as in Malaysia, the main negative impact is on the minorities, which in Singapore are the Malays and the Indians (see for example Gupta 1994; Tremewan 1994; Chua 1995). Thus in both countries there are racially based quota systems which impact negatively on the minorities. The reach of these systems is greater in Malaysia than in Singapore, but, as we will see, in Malaysia there is more scope for alternatives than in Singapore.

In Malaysia the two privileged languages are Malay and English. All government education is in Malay medium, and English is studied mainly as a (compulsory) subject. However, even within the fully government funded schools, the important languages of major ethnic groups may be taught as subjects and to some extent used as mediums of instruction. There are also opportunities to learn cross-ethnic languages (Malays can study Mandarin, for example). Outside the state schools however, there is a great diversity in schools. There are schools that teach in a variety of mediums (including English, Mandarin, and Tamil), often in multiple mediums (e.g. English and Malay), and some of these receive government finance. Access to these alternatives is determined by region, cost, and personal choice. In Malaysia, citizens are also permitted to be educated outside the government sector.

In Singapore the privileged languages are English and Mandarin. Although Singapore has four official languages (the other two are Malay and Tamil), Mandarin is privileged above Malay and Tamil through being the official language which represents the majority group, and through being the subject of annual “Speak Mandarin Campaigns” (since 1979),

which promote its use by ethnic Chinese as an alternative both to other varieties of Chinese and to English. Over the last twenty years, Mandarin has become the largest native language of the young (and English has become the second largest). The prominence of Mandarin is essentially oral. Although *spoken* Mandarin has to some extent flourished at the expense of English, *written* Chinese has not noticeably encroached on English as a result of the campaigns.

All education in government schools in Singapore is in English medium. The official language of one's own official ethnic group, which is designated as the "mother tongue" must be studied as a subject. This means that Chinese must study Mandarin, the Malays must study Malay, and the South Indians must study Tamil. Other groups may choose from these three languages. Some North Indian languages have recently been made available for students of appropriate ancestry who wish to offer them. Only a small proportion of high achievers receive the opportunity to study a third language (French, German, Malay or Japanese). There is thus virtually no opportunity for learning cross-ethnic languages. Citizens must be given permission to be educated out of government sector within Singapore². The private sector caters principally for those students who have failed in the state sector, and for non-citizens. Within the government sector, the type of school attended is largely determined by examination score.

The Malay which is the main privileged language in Malaysia is a standardised variety of the single largest native language of Malaysia, and a language widely spoken by non-native speakers for at least four hundred years. But the varieties brought to school by native speaking children may differ substantially from the standard variety (although as a result of dialect shift increasing numbers of children are now growing up speaking the standard variety). Minority groups in Malaysia have undergone some language shift

towards both (Standard) Malay and towards English, and children from privileged families of all ethnicities are likely to be exposed to Malay and English before coming school. In Singapore, the two most privileged languages have become major native languages only in the last 20 years. English is now an important native language among all ethnic groups (usually alongside other languages), and, as a result of its official promotion, Mandarin has become the largest single native language among the present generation of pre-school children, ousting other varieties of Chinese.

In both countries, there is good access for all ethnic groups to the major privileged language (Malay in Malaysia, English in Singapore) but there is less uniform access to the runner up language. In both countries, the minorities (the Chinese and Indians in Malaysia, and the Indians and Malays in Singapore) are ahead in English use and support. This is a cause of concern in Malaysia, and there have been various initiatives to promote better learning of English among the Malays, especially among the rural Malays. The discrepancy in Singapore is smaller, and has so far given rise to no official concern, presumably because the Chinese majority continue to have the highest average scholastic attainment despite a lower domestic use of English. However, the minorities in Singapore are aware that increasingly Mandarin is being spoken in ethnically mixed domains (such as the workplace, or in grassroots organisations) where once English was dominant. The use of Mandarin in such areas empowers the working class Chinese but disempowers the ethnic minorities (Gupta 1994). There has been criticism of the use of Mandarin in such contexts, but there have also been demands from members of the minorities for access to the learning of Mandarin. At present nearly all non-Chinese Singaporeans are debarred from learning Mandarin at school. The provision of Mandarin as a third language available to all would meet these demands. Oral Mandarin is what would seem to be needed: the Chinese writing system is intrinsically difficult to learn, and

in Singapore it is at the oral level that Mandarin is privileged. If Mandarin, as seems likely, maintains or improves its position of privilege, the minorities will be increasingly marginalised unless they are given access to the learning of oral Mandarin in schools.

In Singapore ability to use cross-ethnic languages has decreased in the second half of the twentieth century as a result of government policies (Gupta and Siew 1995), while in Malaysia use of cross-ethnic languages continues to be widespread. There is some ethnic separation in schools in both countries. In Malaysia it is the minorities (Indian and Chinese) who are most likely to be in monoethnic schools while in Singapore it is the majority (ethnic Chinese). In Malaysia, non-Chinese can and do attend Chinese schools (which teach Malay, English and Mandarin). The ethnic quota system for schools in Singapore caps the proportion of minority children allowed in any single school, but does not prevent monoethnic Chinese schools. In fact, there are several schools which offer only Mandarin as a language of study (English is still the medium of instruction), thus ensuring that they will be monoethnic Chinese. Some of these schools are elite schools, attended by high achievers.. In both countries, there are a small number of monoethnic (Malay) Islamic schools. Once again, we see the presence of a tightly controlled system in Singapore, compared to a more open system in Malaysia.

In Singapore, and in the cities of Malaysia, multilingualism is so entrenched that mother tongue education would be impossible. Many children grow up speaking more than one language at home. In both countries, there are groups who speak English as a home language, many of whom can be described as elite. In both countries, individual families have histories of language shift from unprivileged to privileged languages, often with the express motivation of advantaging their children (David 1992; Siew & Gupta 1995). Crowley (1996) describes the same process of pragmatic language shift in nineteenth

century Ireland, where a move from Irish to English was motivated by parental ambitions for their children.

In both Singapore and Malaysia a requirement for children to have mother tongue education would definitely be seen as denial of access to languages of privilege. If it was on offer it would not be taken up to any great extent by minorities. Most parents who use non-privileged language at home refuse the option. The urban middle class Tamils of Malaysia generally “declared that they would not put their children in Tamil schools in Malaysia because Tamil schools are a dead-end professionally and socially” (Schiffman 1996). The primary concern of parents is their children’s educational success.

The logistics of providing for (or even worse, requiring) mother tongue education would also be mind boggling. The language repertoires of teachers and children would have to be matched, materials in languages which are not traditionally languages of education would have to be developed, and teachers would have to be trained.

Conclusion

There is evidence that in a cosmopolis, the problems of minority bilinguals such as those described in Cummins and Swain (1986), are not as severe as they are when minority bilinguals are an identifiable and underprivileged group within a more homogeneous society. In the cosmopolis, language shift is an accepted part of life, and seems not to be emotionally fraught. Children do not seem to suffer emotionally or educationally by not receiving education in the mother tongue, which in any case may not be clearly defined or of much importance to the child or family. There is a long tradition of “school languages” and part of the purpose of going to school is precisely to develop skill in the school languages.

Many countries, like Malaysia and Singapore, have a long history of multilingual cities. In these cities, citizens have a relaxed attitude towards learning and speaking a variety of languages. They accept that some languages are privileged and that the learning of them will confer advantages. If a majority language is privileged, like Malay in Malaysia, it is not necessarily the case that minority groups will be disadvantaged, as long as other groups are enabled to learn the language. If access to the language is linked to ethnicity (as is the case of Mandarin in Singapore), then groups who do not speak it will be disadvantaged. If a former imperial language, like English, is privileged (as it is in both Singapore and Malaysia) this may disadvantage non-elite members of the majority group, who, if their own language is also privileged, have less motivation to develop skill in the ex-imperial language than do members of minority groups.

It is likely to be prohibitively expensive and logistically impractical to expect all countries to make provision for mother tongue primary education for all children. In the cosmopolitan cities of the world especially, the very concept of mother tongue as a language of personal identification is questionable. What matters most is easing access to an empowering education, the routes of which vary very much from one country to another. Education in languages other than the mother tongue may facilitate access of a child to such routes and is not necessarily detrimental in any way.

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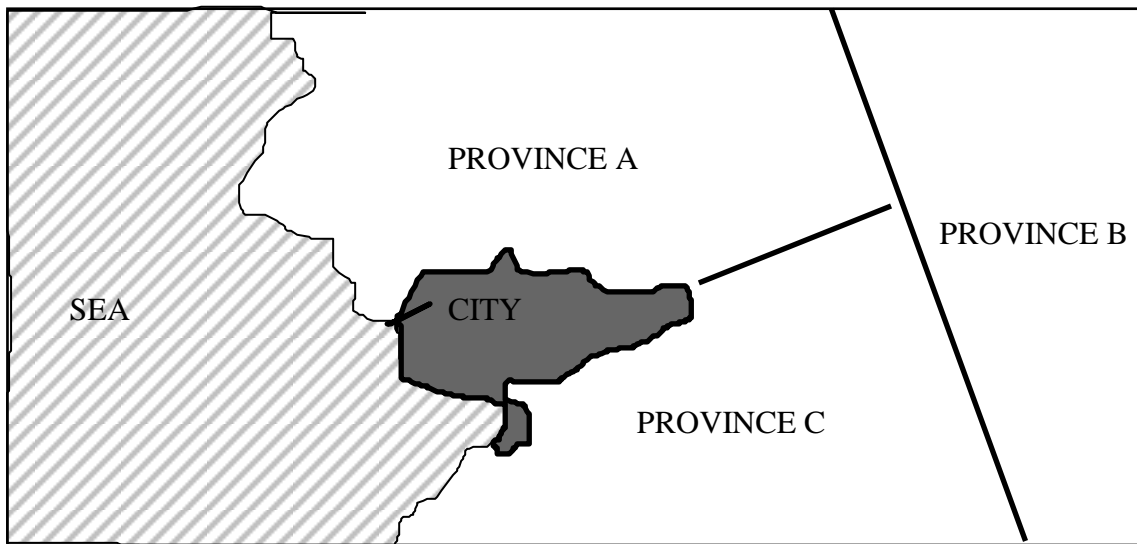


Figure 1: The imaginary cosmopolis

	"RACE"		
	Chinese	Malay	Indian
All Malaysia	28%	50%	8%
Kuala Lumpur (Malaysian capital)	48%	39%	12%
Singapore	78%	14%	7%

Note: The figures for all three locations do not add up to 100% because of the presence of a number of small ethnic groups. The reason the figure for All Malaysia is so far short of 100% is that a further 11% of the population (principally in Sabah and Sarawak) are classified as "other bumiputera", the largest group of bumiputera being the Malays.

Figure 2: Ethnic composition of Malaysia and Singapore. Data for Malaysia from Khoo 1995, and for Singapore from Lau 1992.

	MALAYSIA	SINGAPORE
Most privileged language	Malay	English
Other privileged language	English	Mandarin
Government education	Malay medium	English medium
Citizens may attend schools in other mediums?	Yes	No
Citizens may attend private schools?	Yes	Almost never
Who learns second most privileged language?	All	Ethnic Chinese

Figure 3: Educational linguistic privilege in Malaysia and Singapore.

11 April, 2013

Dear Professor Edwards

I enclose four copies of a paper, 'When mother-tongue education is *not* preferred', for consideration for *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. The paper was given at the Language Rights conference, but will not be published in the collection emanating from that conference. I have not submitted it to any other journal.

Looking forward to your reply.

Yours

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Dear John

Thank you for your letter of 7 December -- I hope that the health problems in your family are improved.

I'm enclosing 2 copies of the revised paper. I've revised it in terms of the stylesheet (you didn't send the guidelines but I looked at an old copy. Hope that is OK.

I've also made one or two other small changes and clarifications, the most major of which is adding references to Crowley 1996, which I read after sending off my last draft.

Rather than sending the file on disk, I have (as you will already know before reading this of course....) sent the file as an attachment to an email.

Best wishes

¹ This paper is based on a paper given at Language Rights Conference, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, June 1996. At the time of giving the oral presentation, Anthea Fraser Gupta was attached to English Language & Literature, National University of Singapore

² Permission is usually given if the child has special needs, has failed in the state system, has lived abroad for some time, or has a parent who is a non-Asian, non-Singaporean. Singaporeans who can afford it are permitted to send their children overseas for education.