

PM: Don't lose bilingual edge

Economic advantage in remaining bicultural. New centre to improve teaching of Chinese

Clarissa Oon
Political Correspondent

Singapore must spare no effort to preserve its mother tongues and will set up a centre to improve the teaching of Chinese, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said last night.

He stressed that Singaporeans must remain bilingual and bicultural, as an English-only environment would put Singapore at an economic disadvantage with the rise of China.

Half of all Chinese Singaporean kids now speak English at home, which means Chinese teachers "have a more difficult job trying to

stimulate their interest" in the subject.

More research needs to be done on how to teach Chinese better as most of the advances in pedagogy in the West have been for English, said Mr Lee.

He was speaking in Mandarin at the 85th anniversary dinner of Chinese-language daily Lianhe Zaobao. Held at the St Regis Hotel, it was attended by over 300 Chinese community leaders and media representatives.

The new Singapore Centre for Chinese Language (SCCL) will be established in the middle of next year by the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education (NIE).

The centre's chairman will be Mr Robin Hu, executive vice-president of Singapore Press Holdings' Chinese newspapers division, while Senior Minister of State for

Education and National Development Grace Fu will be adviser to the centre's board of directors.

Dr Chin Chee Kuen, an experienced Chinese-language educator and NIE assistant professor, will head the centre's academic and day-to-day operations.

Mr Hu earlier sounded the alarm on declining standards of Chinese language proficiency.

The proportion of Primary 1 Chinese pupils who speak mostly English at home rose from 20 per cent in 1988 to 55 per cent last year, according to an Education Ministry survey.

"What we are seeing is the Chinese language changing from a mother tongue to a functional language, even a foreign language for some," he told reporters.

Noting that there were also immigrant students in the schools with Chinese as their mother tongue, Mr Hu emphasised the

need to equip Chinese language teachers here to engage these different types of students.

Amid the worldwide interest in learning Chinese, the SCCL hopes to become "a regional hub" for the teaching of Chinese as a second language, Ms Fu told reporters.

Zaobao editor Lim Jim Koon said the newspaper will be happy to share its expertise in "newspaper-in-education" and work with the centre to promote Chinese language and culture.

The daily has started various supplements to attract younger readers over the years. It has an average daily readership of 700,000 and is the second most widely read daily after The Straits Times.

In his speech, the Prime Minister said Singapore had made a "wise choice" to have English as its working language due to its multiracial society and ambitions of being a global city.

However, if Singaporeans lose touch with their mother tongues and cultural heritage, this could compromise their ability to deal with a complex world.

More importantly, it could also weaken social cohesion and reduce their sense of identity and nationhood, he said.

There is another good reason to keep Chinese language and culture alive in Singapore - it keeps China, Hong Kong and Taiwan interested in our experiences, which gives Singapore an edge in the region, added the PM.

"Ours is not the only development model...nor have we found the answers to all our problems. But we are an Asian society, and the solutions we come up with are closer to their circumstances."

clare@sph.com.sg