

# 'Value of multilingual skills is growing'

But mastering mother tongue is now a challenge, minister tells conference

By AMELIA TENG

IN AN increasingly interconnected world, learning multiple languages is important in business communication and to understand different cultures.

Minister of State for Education, and Communications and Information Sim Ann made this point during her opening address yesterday at the East Asia Summit (EAS) conference on bilingualism.

Citing figures that showed half of the world's population speaks two or more languages, she told the 200-strong audience: "Many

countries today recognise the value of children learning two or more languages in school."

Singapore's bilingual policy has "prepared our children for a globalised world", she added but noted that there are still challenges in implementing the policy.

For instance, the growing number of Singaporeans speaking English at home has led to "varying levels of proficiency and abilities among our students in their Mother Tongues when compared to students of the past", she explained.

Ms Sim also told reporters on

the sidelines of the event at the Suntec Singapore Convention and Exhibition Centre that even as the home environment changes, schools are also adjusting the way they teach.

"All mother-tongue language teachers have had to really think about very innovative methods in order to engage the interest of young learners," she said.

Professor Goh Yeng Seng, who heads the National Institute of Education's (NIE) Asian Languages and Cultures Academic Group, cited Education Ministry (MOE) data showing that 60 per cent of the Primary 1 cohort come from English-speaking homes.

"More English-speaking students are entering our schools... and the big challenge is how to teach them their mother tongue,"

he told reporters at the conference.

In 2002, MOE piloted a programme allowing teachers to teach Chinese using English.

Under the scheme, which was first tried out in four primary schools, including Anglo-Chinese School (Junior), pupils are allowed to ask questions in English to clarify doubts during the early learning of Chinese.

Bilingual teachers will also occasionally use English to explain difficult Chinese characters or respond to mistakes made by pupils.

This bilingual approach caused a stir among the Chinese community when it was announced in 2003, with some seeing as it as an insult to their culture.

But Prof Goh said yesterday

that "schools are very supportive of this approach" and he has seen "more supporters".

If pupils are stronger in English, then the language should be used as a tool for learning other languages, instead of being seen as an obstacle, he explained.

A spokesman for MOE also told The Straits Times that the bilingual approach had proved effective for students coming from non-Chinese language speaking homes.

She added that teachers are still being trained to use this method, although the ministry does not track the number of schools which have adopted it.

Adjunct professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy S. Gopinathan, one of the keynote speakers at the conference which

ends today, talked about how the division between language and identity may not be as tidy as before.

For instance, someone may be Indian but grew up speaking English, making that the "cultural language" with which he expresses his Indian heritage.

The EAS, which started in 2005, is a forum to strengthen ties between Asean countries and others, including China, Japan and Australia.

This conference, which brings together experts to discuss ways of teaching and learning second languages, is co-organised by the education ministries of Singapore and China, in partnership with the NIE and the Beijing Foreign Studies University.

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