

Fostering an element of culture in Singapore's preschool education: The implementation of mother tongue language

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Abstract: In the process of learning multiple languages, children are exposed to different cultural backgrounds and modes of communication, which not only enhance their language proficiency but also foster their understanding and respect for cultural diversity. At the same time, this learning process helps children develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as they need to switch and adapt between different languages and cultures. Moreover, multilingual learning promotes social connections, enabling children to interact more easily with people from diverse backgrounds, thereby laying a solid foundation for their future life and career development. In the process of students learning multiple languages, the learning of the mother tongue is extremely important. Many countries emphasize the importance of mother tongue education. Therefore, the Nurturing Early Learners – A Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens in Singapore: Guidelines for Teaching Chinese in Preschool, which integrates content related to the mother tongue curriculum and teaching into the overall framework, expands the scope of the “Language and Literacy” domain to include mother tongue and local cultural elements. The preschool stage is a critical period for young children to learn their mother tongue. Preschool teachers need to reflect on the learning aims and objectives of mother tongue education. Through this discussion, it is hoped to gain a deeper understanding of mother tongue education among young children and foster an element of culture in Singapore's preschool education.

Keywords: Cultural diversity, Mother tongue, Preschool education, Singapore.

1. Introduction

Education plays a fundamental role in the identity of young people. One key question is how it intersects with increasing linguistic diversity in schools. In the process of learning multiple languages, children are exposed to different cultural backgrounds and modes of communication, which not only enhances their language proficiency but also fosters their understanding and respect for diversity. Moreover, multilingual learning promotes social connections, enabling children to interact more easily with people from diverse backgrounds. Many countries emphasize the importance of mother tongue learning. However, mother tongue teaching is not the same as “bilingual education.” The former refers to language courses, while the latter uses two languages as medium of instruction for teaching content other than language courses [1-7].

In Singapore, one of its key features is its multiculturalism. The diverse social reality has also driven Singapore's education policies to adopt multicultural education. As an essential part of the education system, preschool education places great emphasis on multicultural education during the early years. Singaporeans generally hold a positive attitude toward implementing multicultural education in

preschools [8]. Language is one of the important elements of culture. It is not only a tool for communication but also a carrier of cultural transmission and expression, deeply reflecting the values, ways of thinking, and lifestyles of specific groups. Language is at the core of group identity. For example, a mother tongue is a primary symbol of cultural belonging for many people, and the loss of language is often accompanied by a weakening of cultural identity [4, 8].

In 1966, the Singapore Government implemented the English-knowing bilingual policy which made it mandatory for all Chinese students to study English as a 'First Language' [9]. Bilingualism is the cornerstone of Singapore's education system. Under the bilingual education policy, all students are required to learn both English and their respective mother tongues. English serves not only as a subject for all students but also as the medium of instruction for other core examination subjects such as mathematics, science, and humanities. The Singapore government emphasizes that all students must learn at least one native tongue (Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil), as the official mother tongue is not only the moral foundation for honoring traditions but also a tool for students to understand their respective ethnic traditions, cultures, and values [10].

Moreover, the learning of a mother tongue holds significant importance during early childhood. Therefore, the preschool stage is a critical period for young children to learn their mother tongue is emphasized in Singapore preschool teachers need to reflect on the purpose and objectives of mother tongue learning [11, 12]. Through this discussion, it is hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the learning of mother tongues among young children in Singapore, and fostering an element of culture in Singapore's preschool education.

2. The Background of Mother Tongue Teaching in Singapore's Preschool Education

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give meaning on a topic [13, 14]. The researchers used documentary analysis documentary analysis methods to analyze the background of mother tongue teaching in Singapore's preschool education

In colonial Singapore, all ethnic groups were allowed to use their mother tongue to teach their children in their self-run schools [14]. Singapore is a multiethnic country with three dominant ethnic groups, including Chinese, Malay, and Indian heritage groups. The government then took a pragmatic approach to manage the linguistic diversity both within and between ethnic groups by assigning Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil as the official mother tongues for the Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities, respectively [15].

The curriculum landscape in Singapore has been undergoing significant changes recently. In Singapore's preschool education, the learning of mother tongue is part of the "Language and Literacy" domain, one of the five key learning areas [11, 16].

The Nurturing Early Learners– A Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens in Singapore, which emphasizes language is about making meaning and communicating within a system that has its own rules and conventions. In Singapore, language and literacy development includes both English Language (EL) and Mother Tongue Language (MTL). The bilingual policy is a cornerstone of our education system. While EL is the common language of communication in multi-cultural Singapore, the bilingual policy promotes the study of MTL as it plays an important part in affirming a sense of cultural identity among Singaporeans, ensuring the transmission of cultural heritage and values between generations. Research has also shown that there are cognitive benefits in learning two languages such as having greater focus and stronger concentration skills [11].

3. The Aims of Mother Tongue Teaching in Singapore's Preschool Education

The Nurturing Early Learners– A Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens in Singapore: Guidelines for Teaching Chinese in Preschool, which integrates content related to the mother tongue curriculum and teaching into the overall framework. This expands the scope of the "Language and Literacy" domain to include mother tongue and local cultural elements. Such an approach aligns the description and

guidance of this learning area more closely with the linguistic landscape of young children in Singapore, where they learn and acquire both English and their mother tongue [11]. The aims of preschool mother tongue education are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

The aims of preschool mother tongue education.

	The aims of preschool mother tongue education
Communication	Developing young children's basic language skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening • Oral expression • Literacy and emergent reading • Expressing ideas through symbols, signs, or writing
Culture	Cultivating young children's initial understanding and appreciation of local culture. The content includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Festivals, customs, and traditions • Folktales and stories
Connection	Strengthening young children's communication with their family, friends, and community members through the following ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the mother tongue in daily life and sharing experiences of learning the mother tongue • Actively participating in festivals, folk activities, and traditional cultural events

Source: Ministry of Education Republic of Singapore [11].

According to Table 1, the aims of preschool mother tongue education in Singapore focus on three key aspects: (1) Communication: Emphasizes the development of children's basic language skills in their mother tongue, enabling them to listen, speak, read, and write with confidence in daily communication; (2) Culture: Children can understand and appreciate their cultural heritage through language learning, fostering a sense of cultural identity and an appreciation for diverse cultural values and traditions; (3) Connection: Strengthens children's emotional and cultural connections with their families, communities, and society, and making the mother tongue a vital bridge for fostering familial bonds and facilitating social interactions. These aspects are interconnected, highlighting not only language proficiency but also cultural heritage and social connections. These aims to ensure that young children thrive in a multilingual and multicultural environment [11].

4. The Objectives of Mother Tongue Teaching in Singapore's Preschool Education

The learning objectives of preschool mother tongue clearly define the expected knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that young child should achieve in their mother tongue learning. Teachers should inspire children's interest in learning their mother tongue, helping them enjoy the process and use mother tongue regularly. The preschool stage is a crucial period for children's language development. Teachers should employ age-appropriate and diverse methods to cultivate children's basic language skills, create opportunities for them to learn and use their mother tongue in authentic situations, and enhance their understanding of local culture through language learning. This approach enriches their learning experiences and stimulates their interest in mastering their mother tongue [11]. The learning objectives of preschool mother tongue are as follows:

4.1. Young Children Are Interested in Learning Their Mother Tongue

Young children tend to exhibit greater attention, curiosity, and desire for knowledge. There is a close relationship between interest and learning motivation. Learning motivation continuously drives children to explore and discover the joy of learning their mother tongue. Moreover, when they encounter challenges, it encourages them to persist and try various strategies to solve problems [11].

4.2. Young Children Can Master Basic Language Skills

Foundational language skills refer to the ability to listen, speak, recognize words, engage in emergent reading, and express thoughts through symbols, signs, or writing. While cultivating

children's listening and speaking abilities, teachers should also help prepare them for reading and writing. The development of listening and speaking skills is the focus of mother tongue learning in the preschool stage. Experiences in listening and oral expression lay the foundation for the development of reading and writing abilities, and following the natural sequence of language acquisition [11].

4.3. Young Children Have an Initial Understanding of Local Culture

The mother tongue education component of Singapore's bilingual policy aims at achieving a dual goal of empowering its citizens with linguistic capital [17]. Mother tongue learning is closely connected to cultural learning. Although young, children already have some awareness of their ethnic group and its culture. By learning about the cultural traditions and customs in their surroundings, children can develop a positive sense of identity. While learning their mother tongue, children rely not only on the guidance of teachers but also on the support of family, friends, and community members. Similarly, through communication with those around them, firsthand experiences, and active participation in culturally specific activities, children will gradually develop a sense of recognition and belonging to the local culture [11].

5. Reflections

This article explores the integration of cultural identity and mother tongue education in Singapore's preschool system, aligning with the country's multicultural ethos and bilingual policy. Key aspects to consider in such an exploration:

5.1. Cultural Context and Importance of Mother Tongue Learning

Singapore's diverse cultural makeup includes the Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian communities, making mother tongue education vital for cultural preservation and social harmony. Mother tongue learning (Chinese, Malay, or Tamil) nurtures children's connection to their cultural heritage and family traditions, fostering a sense of identity. However, how do Singapore's preschools balance cultural diversity while maintaining national unity? Singapore's preschools balance cultural diversity and national unity through carefully designed policies, curriculum frameworks, and practices that honor its multicultural fabric while promoting shared values and cohesion [11, 18].

In addition, the mother tongue is not just a linguistic tool but also a carrier of culture. It embodies a community's history, values, worldview, traditions, and way of life. Through their mother tongue, people learn to understand the world, express their emotions, engage in social interactions, and even construct their self-identity.

5.2. Mother Tongue as a Cultural Expression

Mother tongue is an inseparable element of his or her culture and that everyone has the right to learn his or her mother tongue. Mother tongue as a cultural expression: (1) In terms of values and thinking patterns: The structure and vocabulary of a language influence how people think. For example, some languages have an extensive kinship terminology, reflecting the culture's emphasis on family relationships; (2) In terms of history and traditions: Many folktales, myths, proverbs, and poems are passed down through the mother tongue, shaping a community's collective memory; (3) In terms of emotions and identity: Using one's mother tongue fosters emotional connections with the community. This is especially significant for immigrant or minority groups, as the mother tongue serves as an important marker of cultural identity; (4) In terms of social interaction and etiquette: Different languages have distinct ways of expressing politeness and social norms. For instance, some languages have strict honorific systems that highlight social hierarchy [19].

5.3. Mother Tongue and Cultural Transmission

Under the influence of globalization, many mother tongues face the challenge of decline. However, preserving the mother tongue is crucial for maintaining cultural continuity. Educational systems, family

environments, and community activities can all serve as spaces for language and cultural transmission. In Taiwan, for example, promoting mother tongue education is not only an effort in language revitalization but also a means to strengthen local cultural identity. For example, the implementation of Hakka immersion teaching in Taiwanese preschools is a highly meaningful initiative, especially for preserving and passing on Hakka culture and language. The immersive teaching method allows young children to naturally engage with and learn Hakka in their daily lives. This learning approach not only helps them acquire language skills but also deepens their understanding and appreciation of Hakka culture [20, 21].

5.4. The Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) Framework

Mother tongue is an inseparable element of his or her culture and that everyone has the right to learn his or her mother tongue [19, 21]. The NEL Framework, Singapore's national preschool curriculum guide, emphasizes a holistic approach to learning that effective social and emotional development instills healthy self-esteem in children. Children are taught to manage their feelings, thoughts and behaviour which will allow them to form strong and meaningful relationships later in life. The NEL Framework, which incorporates multicultural education while fostering a common national identity. It ensures that cultural diversity is celebrated through exposure to stories, songs, festivals, and traditions from all major ethnic groups—Chinese, Malay, Indian, and others. Core values, such as respect, harmony, and inclusiveness, are embedded in daily activities, teaching children to appreciate diversity while cultivating a shared sense of belonging [11].

5.5. Bilingual Education Policy

In second language learning, ingrained native thinking deeply influences people, and native thinking is then applied to learning the language [22]. English serves as the common working language to unite children from different linguistic backgrounds, ensuring communication across cultural groups. At the same time, children learn their mother tongue languages (Chinese, Malay, Tamil), which reinforces their cultural heritage and fosters pride in their ethnic identity. This dual-language approach promotes cross-cultural understanding while maintaining national unity through a shared medium of communication [11].

5.6. Celebration of Multicultural Festivals

The implementation of education affects a country's development and success, Wang and Shih [13]. In a multicultural society, teachers need the ability to design culturally responsive curricula (CRC), which not only shape students' learning experiences but also influence their cultural identity and understanding of others. A culturally responsive curriculum is a teaching approach centered on students' cultural backgrounds. A culturally responsive curriculum is developed in Singapore's preschools, and preschool teachers can incorporate celebrations of Singapore's key festivals, such as Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Puasa, Deepavali, and National Day, into their curriculum planning. Through interactive activities like traditional crafts, costumes, dances, and food-tasting, children develop respect for and awareness of different cultures. These celebrations also provide opportunities for children to learn about shared values, such as family, gratitude, and harmony, that transcend cultural boundaries [11, 23].

5.7. Parental Involvement

Parents know that the early years are important in building a strong foundation for life-long learning. Schools engage parents through events like multicultural family days, where parents contribute food, traditional attire, or stories from their culture. Such initiatives strengthen ties between families of diverse backgrounds, fostering a community spirit beyond the classroom [11].

5.8. *Government Support for Harmony and Unity*

Singapore's policies, such as the Ethnic Integration Policy and efforts to promote racial harmony, are reflected in the preschool sector. Government campaigns like Racial Harmony Day are incorporated into preschool programs to teach children about living harmoniously in a multicultural society [24].

6. Conclusions

Bilingualism has been the cornerstone of Singapore's language policy since 1959. Given Singapore's diverse population, it is crucial to understand how immigrant parents from various cultural backgrounds perceive and engage with the country's bilingual education system [25-27].

From 2025, Kindergarten 1 children attending the upcoming MOE Kindergarten will have an extra 30 minutes of Chinese, Malay or Tamil learning each day. Currently, MOE kindergarten children spend one hour on MTL activities daily [28]. Based on the comprehensive analysis, the aims of preschool mother tongue education in Singapore can be summarized as follows:

6.1. *Developing Young Children's Foundational Language Skills*

Promoting young children to build essential listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities through mother tongue learning, and laying a solid foundation for future language acquisition.

6.2. *Cultivating Young Children's Initial Understanding and Appreciation of Local Culture*

Enabling young children to engage with and understand local culture during language learning, fostering cultural identity and an appreciation for multiculturalism.

6.3. *Strengthening Young Children's Communication with Their Family, Friends, and Community Members*

Enhancing young children's interaction with their family and community through the use of their mother tongue, and fostering stronger emotional connections and improving social communication skills.

These objectives are interconnected, collectively promoting young children's linguistic, cultural, and social development, aligning with the educational needs of Singapore's multilingual and multicultural society. In addition, the learning objectives of preschool mother tongue are as follows: (1) Young children are interested in learning their mother tongue; (2) Young children can master foundational language skills; (3) Young children have an initial understanding of local culture. Singapore's bilingual policy legitimises English as the language of governmental administration and interethnic communication [29]. The bilingual policy in Singapore mandates English as the medium of instruction alongside mother tongue languages. Learning multiple languages in early childhood supports cognitive development, cultural appreciation, and future opportunities. In curriculum design for mother tongue learning, preschool teachers should develop culturally responsive curricula that integrate storytelling, traditional music, art, and festivals to immerse children in their native culture. Incorporating play-based learning to make language acquisition enjoyable and meaningful. In addition, preschool teachers should think what pedagogical strategies best promote native tongue learning for young children? How can traditional cultural practices be modernized to engage young learners? Finally, enhancing mother language development from a young age, and children's substantial brain development occurs in the developmental period from birth to 6 years old, and this period represents a crucial window for educational interventions [30, 31]. Singapore's goals of education include nurturing their children to become good persons in character, nurturing responsible citizens who promote social cohesion and contribute to society, and guiding all our students to realise their full potential in their learning [32]. However, policy decision and curriculum planning in Singapore should be not only cohesive, but also consistent with regard to the goals and ideological positions. Our analysis shows that inconsistencies between and within policies can cause confusion among teachers, students and parents, thus contributing to conflicting attitudes towards bilingual education and MT learning. Such conflict

will not only hinder the development of a 'strong foundation for MTL learning' but also impede the smooth transition from kindergarten to primary school.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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