

LITERACY AND LANGUAGE

4



LITERACY

Literacy had improved in the last decade, in tandem with the upgrading of the educational level of Singapore residents. The general literacy rate among the resident population aged 15 years and over rose from 89 per cent in 1990 to 93 per cent in 2000. The increase in literacy rate occurred for all ethnic groups.

Rise in Multi-Language Literacy

Among the literate population, the proportion literate in two or more languages had increased – from 45 per cent in 1990 to 56 per cent in 2000. All ethnic groups showed similar trends. Compared with the Chinese, the Malays had a higher proportion who were literate in English and their native language – 77 per cent as against 48 per cent (Table 1). Among the Indians, some 55 per cent were literate in English and either Tamil or Malay.

**TABLE 1 LITERATE RESIDENT POPULATION
AGED 15 YEARS AND OVER BY LANGUAGE LITERATE IN**

Ethnic Group/Language Literate In	Per Cent	
	1990	2000
Chinese	100.0	100.0
English Only	19.8	16.4
Chinese Only	40.6	32.0
English & Chinese Only	37.8	48.3
Others	1.9	3.3
Malays	100.0	100.0
English Only	3.2	2.0
Malay Only	27.3	19.8
English & Malay Only	68.1	76.7
Others	1.4	1.5
Indians	100.0	100.0
English Only	22.1	21.5
Tamil Only	14.5	8.9
English & Tamil Only	31.5	37.5
English & Malay Only	19.1	17.4
Others	12.8	14.6

Higher Literacy in English

English had emerged as the lingua franca of the Singapore resident population over the last ten years. Among the literate resident population aged 15 years and over, literacy in English (English only or Multi-language) increased from 63 per cent in 1990 to 71 per cent in 2000 (Table 2). The increased literacy in English was partly due to the adoption of English as the main medium of instruction in schools and partly due to the use of English as the working language for administration and business.

In comparison, literacy in Chinese (Chinese only or Multi-language) increased more slowly from 62 per cent in 1990 to 65 per cent in 2000. Overall literacy in the other two official languages (Malay and Tamil) remained unchanged during the last decade.

For the Chinese and Malay resident population, literacy in their mother tongue was higher than English. Of the literate Chinese, 82 per cent were literate in Chinese compared with 68 per cent in English in 2000 (Table 2). Similarly in the case of Malays, 97 per cent were literate in the Malay language and 80 per cent in English. In contrast, for the Indians, literacy in English was higher than Tamil – 87 per cent as against 51 per cent. The Indians had the highest literacy in English amongst the three main ethnic groups.

**TABLE 2 LITERACY IN SPECIFIC OFFICIAL LANGUAGES
BY ETHNIC GROUP AMONG LITERATE RESIDENT POPULATION**

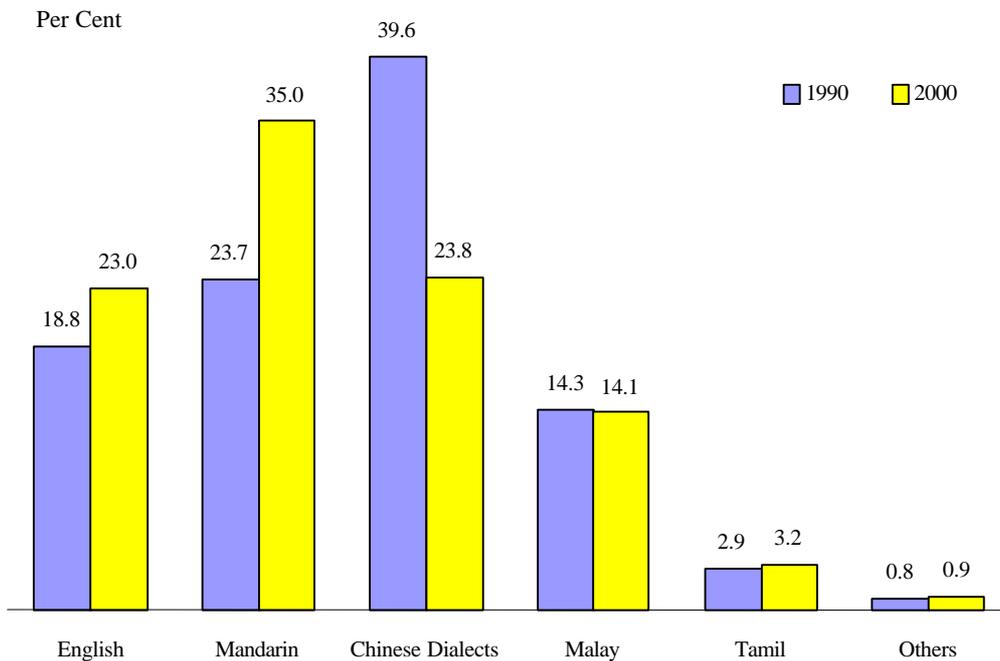
Official Language	Per Cent									
	Total		Chinese		Malays		Indians		Others	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
English	62.8	70.9	59.2	67.6	72.0	79.7	80.2	87.0	92.2	90.4
Chinese	62.2	64.7	79.1	82.2	0.5	0.3	1.0	0.7	5.4	5.9
Malay	16.3	16.8	1.6	2.8	95.9	97.3	27.1	24.9	31.1	26.8
Tamil	3.7	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	50.5	51.3	0.2	0.3

LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME

More Speaking English and Mandarin at Home

The usage of English and Mandarin at home had become more prevalent among Singapore residents in 2000 (Chart 1). This reflected the influence of the bilingual education on the home environment and the official encouragement to speak Mandarin instead of dialects. The use of the school languages had reduced the predominance of Chinese dialects as the language most frequently spoken at home. The overall proportions speaking Malay and Tamil at home remained virtually unchanged during the last ten years.

**CHART 1 RESIDENT POPULATION AGED 5 YEARS AND OVER
BY LANGUAGE MOST FREQUENTLY SPOKEN AT HOME**



Predominance of Vernacular Languages among Main Ethnic Groups

Vernacular languages continued to be the most common languages spoken at home by the three main ethnic groups. In 2000, 76 per cent of the Chinese spoke either Mandarin or Chinese dialects, 92 per cent of Malays spoke Malay and 43 per cent of Indians spoke Tamil (Table 3).

Overall, Mandarin had superseded Chinese dialects as the predominant home language of the Chinese resident population. The proportion of Mandarin-speaking Chinese increased from 30 per cent in 1990 to 45 per cent in 2000. There was a corresponding decline in the proportion who spoke dialects, from 50 per cent to 31 per cent.

Compared with 1990, English had become more popular as a home language for all the ethnic groups. The proportion speaking English most frequently at home increased from 19 per cent to 24 per cent among the Chinese, from 6.1 per cent to 7.9 per cent among the Malays and from 32 per cent to 36 per cent among the Indians.

**TABLE 3 RESIDENT POPULATION AGED 5 YEARS AND OVER
BY LANGUAGE MOST FREQUENTLY SPOKEN AT HOME**

Ethnic Group/Language	Per Cent	
	1990	2000
Chinese	100.0	100.0
English	19.3	23.9
Mandarin	30.1	45.1
Chinese Dialects	50.3	30.7
Others	0.3	0.4
Malays	100.0	100.0
English	6.1	7.9
Malay	93.7	91.6
Others	0.1	0.5
Indians	100.0	100.0
English	32.3	35.6
Malay	14.5	11.6
Tamil	43.2	42.9
Others	10.0	9.9

Age Differentials in Home Language

(a) *Among the Chinese*

English appeared to be emerging as the language of the young among the Chinese resident population in 2000. Proportionately more children used English most frequently at home than youths and adults. In 2000, 36 per cent of the children aged 5–14 years spoke English compared with 22 per cent of youths aged 15–24 years and 25 per cent of those aged 25–54 years (Table 4).

Mandarin remained as the predominant language spoken at home by the majority of the Chinese below 55 years old. In 2000, three-fifths of the children and youths below 25 years old and about 45 per cent of adults aged 25–54 years were Mandarin-speaking. Chinese dialects were fast disappearing among the younger generations of the Chinese, and were being used mainly by older persons aged 55 years and over.

(b) *Among the Indians*

The Indians experienced a similar trend in usage of English at home, with children registering the largest increase during the last decade. In 2000, English had become the home language spoken by almost half of the Indian children aged 5–14 years. Tamil continued to be the second most important language spoken at home among the children, with a share of 36 per cent.

Among the Indians aged 15–54 years, Tamil and English were the principal languages spoken at home though a slightly higher proportion used Tamil than English. Like the older Chinese most of whom used dialects, the majority of the Indians aged 55 years and over spoke their native language, Tamil.

(c) *Among the Malays*

Malay was the predominant home language for the Malays across all age groups, though the usage of English had increased slightly over the years. The increase in usage of English at home between 1990 and 2000 was largest among the young working adults of ages between 25 and 39 years.

TABLE 4 RESIDENT POPULATION BY LANGUAGE MOST FREQUENTLY SPOKEN AT HOME AND AGE GROUP

Ethnic Group/ Language	Per Cent									
	5-14		15-24		25-39		40-54		55 & Over	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
Chinese	100.0									
English	23.3	35.8	19.9	21.5	24.6	25.2	16.1	25.1	5.3	9.9
Mandarin	57.6	59.6	28.5	59.8	30.4	46.5	24.8	43.9	6.1	17.8
Chinese Dialects	18.9	4.3	51.5	18.4	44.8	28.0	58.8	30.7	87.7	71.8
Others	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.9	0.5
Malays	100.0									
English	8.3	9.4	7.0	8.2	7.3	10.5	3.4	6.1	0.7	1.7
Malay	91.6	90.1	92.9	91.3	92.6	89.0	96.4	93.4	99.1	97.6
Others	0.1	0.5	0.1	0.5	0.1	0.5	0.1	0.5	0.2	0.6
Indians	100.0									
English	39.6	43.6	37.0	37.9	36.3	35.5	25.7	35.5	13.4	20.5
Malay	18.4	12.9	15.1	14.7	14.5	9.6	13.7	12.5	9.4	9.2
Tamil	35.6	36.3	41.0	40.6	41.3	43.0	47.5	43.6	56.2	54.6
Others	6.3	7.2	6.9	6.7	8.0	11.9	13.0	8.4	21.1	15.7

More Speaking English among the Better-Educated

In general, the proportion speaking English increases with higher educational qualification. Among university graduates, 47 per cent of the Chinese, 38 per cent of the Malays and 43 per cent of the Indians spoke English most frequently at home in 2000 (Table 5). In comparison, English was used by less than 10 per cent of those with no qualifications for all the three main ethnic groups.

For those with primary or secondary education, vernacular languages (Mandarin, Malay or Tamil) tended to be the most common languages spoken at home by residents of the three main ethnic groups. Chinese dialects continued to be used predominantly by Chinese residents who had no qualifications.

**TABLE 5 RESIDENT NON-STUDENT POPULATION AGED 15 YEARS AND OVER
BY LANGUAGE MOST FREQUENTLY SPOKEN AT HOME
AND HIGHEST QUALIFICATION ATTAINED, 2000**

Ethnic Group/ Language	Total	Per Cent				
		No Qualification	Primary	Secondary	Post- Secondary	University
Chinese	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
English	21.3	1.3	6.8	27.3	32.5	47.1
Mandarin	40.6	22.8	50.7	46.0	44.0	34.7
Chinese Dialects	37.8	75.5	42.2	26.5	23.2	17.5
Others	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.6
Malays	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
English	7.2	0.6	2.8	9.4	15.7	38.1
Malay	92.3	98.8	96.7	90.2	84.0	60.5
Others	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.3	1.4
Indians	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
English	32.7	6.5	19.4	39.9	48.7	42.6
Malay	11.1	18.1	15.8	12.2	7.4	0.9
Tamil	45.3	64.5	59.0	40.6	32.8	32.3
Others	10.9	10.9	5.7	7.3	11.1	24.2

Variations in Home Language by House Type

There was a positive relationship between socio-economic status and the use of English at home, with higher usage of English among occupants of the larger types of housing. Among residents in private housing, 56 per cent of the Chinese, 41 per cent of the Malays and 65 per cent of the Indians indicated English as their most frequently used home language (Table 6). The corresponding proportion was only 11 per cent of Indians and less than 5 per cent of Chinese and Malays who occupied HDB 1- and 2-room flats.

Chinese dialects remained as the dominant home language among the Chinese dwellers of HDB 1- and 2-room flats. However, among the Chinese staying in the bigger HDB flats, Mandarin had replaced dialects as the language most frequently spoken at home.

For the Malays and Indians, occupants of the smaller HDB flats tended to have higher proportions speaking the vernacular languages (Malay or Tamil) than those in bigger flats.

**TABLE 6 RESIDENT POPULATION AGED 5 YEARS AND OVER
BY LANGUAGE MOST FREQUENTLY SPOKEN AT HOME
AND TYPE OF DWELLING, 2000**

Ethnic Group/ Language	Total	Per Cent				
		HDB 1- & 2-Room	HDB 3-Room	HDB 4-Room	HDB 5-Room & Executive	Private Flats & Houses
Chinese	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
English	23.9	4.4	9.3	14.3	33.5	55.9
Mandarin	45.1	31.5	45.9	52.6	45.2	26.4
Chinese Dialects	30.7	63.3	44.4	32.8	21.1	17.1
Others	0.4	0.8	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.6
Malays	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
English	7.9	3.6	3.7	6.1	14.1	41.1
Malay	91.6	95.4	95.8	93.5	85.4	56.8
Others	0.5	1.0	0.5	0.4	0.5	2.1
Indians	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
English	35.6	11.4	19.9	29.8	46.8	64.9
Malay	11.6	15.0	13.3	13.7	11.0	1.7
Tamil	42.9	67.5	56.2	47.2	34.3	16.4
Others	9.9	6.1	10.6	9.3	8.0	17.0