Eye on the Future:
Diverse Family Language Policy in Three Singaporean Malay Homes with Preschool Children

Chen-Chen Cheng[1]

National Kaohsiung Normal University

Abstract

Singapore's bilingual education policy mandates children study English and a mother-tongue in school. To understand the language shift from Malay to English in Malay homes from the perspective of family language policy, this paper reports on the diverse language ideologies and practices of three Singaporean Malay mothers of preschool children. The in-depth interviews were conducted in 2013-2014 and transcribed verbatim by a bilingual English-Malay transcriptionist. Although the mothers were of similar ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds, their home language practices were distinctly different. Their language practices reflected the beliefs, values, and feelings they ascribed to Malay, English, and Mandarin, languages their preschool-age children were exposed to as well as their ideas about language development and bilingualism in Singapore. While subscribing to some state bilingual education policy assumptions, mothers actively formed different family language policies to resist the state bilingual policy, shield their children from academic pressure, and carve out a unique Malay identity. Major forces such as Malay as a minority, language and social mobility, and English ownership, in addition to state bilingual policy and education system, were discussed in connection to mothers' family language policy.

Key words : family language policy, preschool children, Singaporean Malay, multilingual development

Corresponding author, [1] chenchen@nknu.edu.tw

Introduction

Singapore is surrounded by Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia where mostly interchangeable Bahasa Malayu (Malay) and Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian) are the dominant languages. With ethnic Chinese as its largest ethnic group (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2018) and four official languages of English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, Singapore stands out in this Malay-dominant region as a unique multilingual and multicultural country. In Singapore, English reigns supreme and Mandarin, the mother tongue for the Singaporean Chinese, is gaining popularity and prestige given its growing utilitarian and commercial values (Chua, 2010; Pennycook, 1994; Wee, 2010).

Language shift from Malay to English

With English's unbeatable position, a language shift from mother-tongues to English has been taking place in all Singaporean families (Bokhorst-Heng & Silver, 2017; Leimgruber, 2013). Of the three official mother-tongues, Malay, compared to Mandarin and Tamil, has been conventionally regarded as best preserved and more resistant to language shift (Bolton & Ng, 2014; Chong & Seilhamer, 2014). However, studies over the last twenty years indicate a language shift from mother-tongue to English occurring at an alarming fast rate also for Malay children. In their sociolinguistic survey of 668 Primary 5 (Grade 5 of elementary school) students in Singapore in 2006, Aman et al. (2009) found 81% of Malay children used both English and Malay at home, 16.1% used Malay only, and 0.5% spoke English. The percentage of Malay children using both English and Malay was significantly higher than their Chinese and Indian peers. The percentage was 61.1% for Chinese (23.2% speaking Mandarin and 11.1% speaking English) and 76.3% for Indian (10.9% speaking mother-tongue and 7.6% using English only). These figures suggest a greater bilingual language environment in Malay homes and a potential language shift from Malay to more English in the near future, given current language shift trends.

Focusing on language use of Malay with family members, Cavallaro and Serwe (2010, p. 138) collected data from Singapore's Department of Statistics published in years 2001 and 2006 and reported that "the proportion of Singaporean Malay using English as a home

language had more than doubled within 15 years" (with an average rate from 6.1% in 1990 to 13% in 2005), especially among the cohorts of 5-14 year-olds (17.2%) and 25 to 44 year-olds (16.1%).

Recent government statistics also demonstrated the same downward trend for Malay use at home compared to other mother-tongue languages. Malay families demonstrated a steadily decline in speaking Malay at home. In 2015, "just 10.7% of residents used it most often at home last year, down from 12.2 % in 2010 and 13.2% in 2005". In comparison, Chinese families, "during this period, the use of Mandarin at home has remained relatively stable, between 35% and 36%. Similarly, Tamil stayed stable, at around 3.3%" (P. Lee, 2016).

Singapore's bilingual education policy was often cited as contributing to the rapid language shift. It holds English as the instructional language for all school subjects except for roughly 6 hours a week of mother-tongue language classes (Ministry of Education, 2018). Kassim (2008) observes that this long-standing bilingual education policy started in the 1960's and soon began taking shape to what it is today. Dixon (2005) found bilingual parents speaking more English at home, leading to more young children entering primary schools speaking English. Her observation was corroborated by the statistics noted by Cavallaro and Serwe (2010), that the age cohorts speaking English the most were school age children (ages 5-14) and adults who were the child-bearing age cohort (ages 25-44) and most likely to be parents of young children.

FLP in Singaporean Malay homes

Besides understanding Malay-English language shift from the policy perspective as Kassim (2008) did, another way to approach this phenomenon is to situate it in the domain of family language policy (FLP) to find out what Malay parents of young children think and do about English and Malay. Both FLP and national language policy and their interconnections are domains worth investigating when we attempt to develop a richer insight into Malay's language shift in Singapore.

FLP scholars study language attitudes, beliefs, and management at home and the decision making process multilingual families undergo when faced with larger social and cultural

forces (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013, 2016; M.-C. A. Lin, 2019; Spolsky, 2012). While schooling in English nationwide greatly contributes to the shift from Malay to English among school-age children, parents and the language environment in and outside the home play an essential role in shaping young children's language profiles and proficiency before they enter primary schools in Singapore.

While research points out that home language environment and interaction with core family members are important to Malay language use and maintenance (Aziz, 2014; Cavallaro & Serwe, 2010), Singaporean Malay parents' choices of languages for their young children and the rationales behind these choices remain unexplored. Two studies on Singaporean Malay parents' views on languages and their interaction with their children shed some light, to a certain extent, on parents' language attitudes, beliefs, and practices.

Bakar (2015) investigated Malay parents' language preferences (Malay and English) and reasons for these preferences. He found, while both English and Malay were important, English was the preferred language parents used at home with children for academic and schooling purposes and Malay was used as an identity marker. Parents appeared to accept English as the language for their children's generation. Although some parents wanted their children to be connected to their ethnic and religious identities through Malay, they were afraid that speaking Malay with their children might reduce their English learning opportunities. Parents with better Malay than English thought themselves inadequate in supporting their children's English development.

The Malay family in Curdt-Christiansen's (2016) study on FLP in Singapore sent their 5-year-old daughter Adena to a preschool where she was exposed to English and Mandarin. Curdt-Christiansen noted although Adena's mother claimed that Malay was the language of emotion and intimacy, she was seldom observed to use Malay with Adena. She also found conflicting language ideologies among adults in the child's family and contradictions between adults' practices and expectations. She attributed these contradictions to the national education policy favoring English, parental concerns over children's academic performance, and high status and commercial values of English. These macro-social factors "coerced" (p. 11) the parents to prioritize English over mother-tongue languages in home language practices.

In terms of home language practice, parents in both studies, either consciously or caught unaware, used more English than Malay, while claiming Malay and English are both important and Malay especially for their ethnic identity and intimate family interactions.

School as the site of language maintenance

In a country where 74.3% of the population is Chinese, 13.3% is Malay, and 9.1% is Indian, data from the state-run Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) website in 2015 indicated that 77% of preschools offered Mandarin at nursery and kindergarten levels, 4.8% had Malay, and 1.2% offered Tamil in addition to English (Cheng, 2016). Malay parents are faced with an uphill battle if they wish to see their children use more Malay. Besides the well-documented coercive societal forces pushing them towards English, the under-supplied preschool Malay programs might further complicate their language maintenance efforts.

As studies on Singaporean Malay FLP for preschool children were scarce, this study aimed to unfold three Malay mothers' different home language policies and addressed the following: What factors contribute to mothers' language choices for their children? How do they manage to achieve what they want for their children?

Mothers in this study hold different language beliefs and their attempts and efforts in shaping their children's home language environment also vary widely. Their experiences will hopefully provide insights for early childhood educators, researchers of multilingual language acquisition and instruction, and policy makers in Singapore to develop appropriate and relevant measures to support parents' efforts in their children's language learning and development.

Method

Qualitative interview study uses open-ended questions and active listening skills to achieve rich data that research participants (interviewees) and researchers (the interviewer) construct collaboratively (Silverman, 2011). This study was a part of a larger research

project on Singaporean Malay mothers' home language ideology of 10 Malay mothers with preschool-age children at the time of interview (2013-2014). For this study, three of them were selected on purpose for their distinct home language practices because in the interviews they each articulated very different and specific beliefs about languages and bilingualism.

Participants

Three participants, Elena, Noridah, and Sofia (pseudonyms), were married and lived with spouses and children. Elena's parents and Sofia's mother also lived with their daughters' families. All in their 30's, the participants were of a solid middle-class background in terms of education and employment. Elena reported speaking mostly Malay with her family. Sofia reported that she used Malay with her mother and English with her husband and children at home. Noridah reported using only Standard English with her son and mixed English and Malay with her husband. In terms of second language programs, it was Mandarin for Elena's daughter and Noridah's son and Malay for Sofia's daughter who attended a mosque kindergarten.

Data collection and analysis

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in English and initially guided by, but not limited to, open-ended questions such as "what languages do you use at home with your children?" "Why do you use Malay/English at home with your children?" "What do you think of bilingualism in Singapore?" "How did you learn all these languages growing up?" "What language programs are offered at your children's preschool?" Prompts and clarifications such as "tell me more" or "give me an example" were used throughout to elicit more detailed and extensive accounts and examples of home language beliefs and use. As I was a bilingual English and Mandarin foreigner training teachers in Singapore at the time of research, mothers were extremely willing to provide rich and detailed information and went out their way to explain their rationales when I looked puzzled listening to them. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and were audio recorded with participants' consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim by a bilingual English-Malay

professional transcriptionist. I then compared the transcripts with the audio files for accuracy. I followed the thematic analysis steps recommended by King and Horrocks (2010) to analyze the data.

Findings

Although mothers made different language decisions and adopted different practices for their children, they shared similar understanding of what their children would need to succeed in Singapore's schools and society in the future.

English is the language children must learn

Regardless of its treatment as the only language or a second language, English was placed by the participants on the top of their children's must-have language list for different reasons.

English is the first and only language for my son

Noridah reported she only used Standard English with her son. English was Singaporean government's assigned first language and she hoped her son would be immersed in a Standard English environment she created for him and practiced English daily. She also picked Standard English over Singlish and rojak Malay for she believed in Standard English's non-malleability. She contrasted Standard English with Singlish, a creolized version of English mixed with other languages and the lingua franca among Singaporeans of all ethnicities.

> But here we already put English as a first language. About the Singlish, then I don't think it qualifies. Singlish, no. Ok in context with me as a parent to a child and how I want to portray, I should feel that like I mentioned earlier, I would choose English because it is a language which I feel that it cannot be distorted by other language.

Noridah's rejection of Malay as a home language for her son was also based on the rationale that Malay spoken in Singapore was a substandard version of the one spoken in Malaysia.

> I would not object you know if the Malaysians, when they speak Malay they speak very nice Malay… for me I think I speak reasonably good with him. I can't be training him like speaking English and Malay rojak[2]. I don't want that for him. If I were to give a language to him, I better give him a language that I think is ok and it is not just plain lazy you know.

Noridah's perception about her own Malay competence precluded the possibility of her using the language with her son and that left Standard English as the only home language choice.

English was the core academic language

Elena was aware of the direct link between English and her children's academic performance in Singapore's school, especially after her daughter was enrolled in Nursery, preschool class for 4-year old. On one hand, she wanted to continue speaking Malay with her children. She was confident that her children would learn English once they started school just like what she did in the past. She also observed her teacher friends speaking Malay with their children and that observation convinced her that speaking Malay would not hurt children's academic development.

> I thought maybe teachers prefer to use English so their child is more verbal in English because English is the main core. Like if you don't know English then you wouldn't be picking up whatever topics, subjects that you are studying in school. You have to have a powerful grasp of the language in order to understand what has been taught in school. So I thought but it doesn't seem true for her because she speaks Malay to her kids. I speak Malay to my kids lah[3] without really caring whether she can grasp or not. When she goes to school, she will learn lah. I picked up English in school lah.

On the other hand, she appeared insecure as a parent for not deliberately teaching her children English literacy skills to better prepare them for future academic success.

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[2] Malay word for mix
[3] Malay word for mix. "lah" is a discourse particle in Singlish indicating pragmatic functions. I keep it in the quotes to demonstrate speaker's own voice.

> Maybe I'm a bad parent because I never really teach her English, she picks it up on her own and when we talk to her in English because now she goes to school so she is easily understanding what we are saying (in English). She just picks up herself basically.

She also associated English literacy skills with Singapore' school pressure. To avoid stressing them too early, Elena resisted the idea of teaching her children English in a more structured manner.

> Because we hear from friends, like they consciously teach their child from a young age, English or what. For me is no lah. Maybe more relaxed. We go with the flow in a way lah. Because I don't want to stress her, she's just four. And at home we try lah, to speak to her more so that she can have more vocab. English language she picks it up in school yeah since she started in January this year. Of course both my parents will speak Malay to them, or occasionally I will speak English lah …

As English was her children's second language, Elena was unsure whether she should consciously teach English literacy skills to her children to support their future academic growth or to maintain their current psychological wellbeing by just casually speaking more English in their conversation. However, when it came to required literacy activities such as school assignments and reading, it was English.

> Of course when it's time to do her (English) homework, you know four years old they do have homework! She comes back with her worksheets, she calls me ibu. ibu [4], I have to do this homework and we do it together.

> People tell me you have to read to your daughter, reading will help. Of course we will choose an English book right yeah so in reading just to get them to be interested in reading a book. Of course when we read, of course the book will be in English.

After her child entered Nursery, Elena reported she started to use more English with her. It was foreseeable that in the near future Elena would continue using English with her children as schooling is bound to figure more prominently in her children's life.

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[4] Malay word for mother

Balanced bilingual for survival: I was worried whether my children could cope with school

Sofia was interviewed when her son started his second week in Primary 1 (Grade 1). Her beginning comments worrying about her children's school adjustment set the tone for our subsequent interview.

> Looking at the developments of the education system in Singapore, so much information is being pushed to the lower levels that I was worried that my children, whether they could cope with it…I got very worried. I told myself this is demanding. But I believe that children can be stretched. I want to be sure that my children can be stretched.

A former middle school teacher, Sofia now was a stay-home mother with two children. She was the "insider" of Singapore education and determined to raise her children as balanced English and Malay bilinguals to better "cope" with Singapore's stressful school and social environments. Sofia deliberately spoke English and asked her mother to speak Malay to foster her children's bilingual development. Sofia would do two-way English-Malay translation for them to make sure they were equally exposed to English and Malay vocabularies.

> I speak English to my children, my mother speaks Malay with my children. So they understand both languages. Because I believe that even though English is important, I need to keep them rooted to Malay language… [I am] Very comfortable with English, you know and, and my mum is very good in Malay language…
>
> I find my son is able to speak both languages fluently. I do a lot of translations with him. When I'm with him, when I do things with him I tend to do a lot of both languages. I will tell him what is the Malay word for it, if I do in the Malay word I'll tell him what's the English word for it. And he even asks me now if he knows the word in English he wants to know what is the meaning in Malay, what is the word in Malay.

However, Sofia realized she translated more often for her son than for her daughter and that was why her daughter was prone to speaking English.

> When my girl was in nursery and then the teacher say she doesn't know what kuching[6] is. I said oops, I think I forgot to do translation with her so when the teacher told me that I was like I need to

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[6] Malay word for cat

do something about it.

Participants regarded English as the upmost import language for their preschool children although they believed somehow differently in what English meant and could do for their children. For Elena and Sofia, their children's school achievement and emotional wellbeing were at stake if their children's English was not strong enough to handle school work. Elena was not sure if she should push her daughters more to learn English because learning English literacy as academic tasks might affect her child's emotional wellbeing. Sofia was worried if her children could cope with school now that the English-dominant education system seemed to keep increasing the demands required of students.

Their language beliefs and practices regarding English not only reflected their concerns over their children's academic future and psychological wellbeing but also their different personal backgrounds and ideas about bilingual development. Sofia was a school teacher and structured her home language environment in a way that her children were developing both English and Malay. Elena's past schooling experiences convinced her schooling alone would cultivate her children's English skills while the home language remained Malay. Noridah was focused on her son's English development as she believed if she could only give her son one language that had to be Standard English, reflecting her views on language values and bilingual development.

Mothers' beliefs in and practices of Malay

Although all participants claimed they were competent Malay and English speakers, studied Malay as a mother tongue in primary and secondary schools, and their mothers spoke Malay with them and their children, they each viewed Malay differently.

Second language (Malay) does not matter

Knowing perfectly well that her son's mother tongue subject in primary school would be Malay, Noridah admitted her son "could not speak Malay" although he spoke "perfect English" according to his teacher.

He's in K1 (preschool for 5 year-olds) now. The teacher told me that, "Ma'am, your son speaks perfect English." But the thing, like I said, I mean in Singapore context you need to have another language that is your mother tongue language ok. Yes, I admit my son can't speak Malay.

Noridah appeared to resist the state bilingual education policy that mother-tongues were tied to the child's ethnicity. When she declared "second language (Malay) does not matter," she seemed to view language as a means of communication rather than a cultural property. She further construed government's ethnicity-based mother-tongue policy as a "this is your place" message meant to limit Malays' upward social mobility because Malay children were not allowed to learn more prestigious and useful languages in school.

This is my personal opinion. When you go into the working world, there is a big part of me that believes that at the end of the day the second language does not matter. Ok, what matters is the common language that is spoken within the working sector and then I believe that it is good to know more than 2 language. In the Singapore education system, the first language is the English, second language is your mother tongue and it has to depend on the race of the parents which I feel that is very, it's very you know, you are already like, ok sending the, ok, this is your place, that kind of thing. You know?

Rather than being connected with the Malay culture, Noridah wished for her son to lead a life speaking a language he would be comfortable with at a place he wanted to be.

Fine. He has to take Malay, fine. But I was thinking, is there an option that you can actually opt for what kind of second language if you want to speak Mandarin? I don't think we should restrict to 3 languages… Because I feel that being a linguist, you know it adds to your advantage to your upbringing. Maybe one day you might not want to work with people who speaks of this language. You may not want to live in an environment or in a country whose people… Because at the end of the day, it's not the matter the language, the root, the language you came from. It's the matter of how you want to lead your life with what kind of language you feel comfortable with if you think that is very relevant.

Noridah served as an interesting contrast to Elena who felt responsible for carrying on the Malay culture through speaking Malay and disapproved the English-only practice at some Malay homes.

As a Malay, you should know Malay

Elena linked the Malay language to her Malay ethnic identity and regarded speaking Malay an obligation and a moral decision as encouraged by her father, a former Malay teacher. She also emphasized speaking Malay at home would help children perform better in Malay as a mother-tongue subject in school. Elena did not approve some parents' English-only practice with children because it did not help with their children's mother-tongue learning in school and they have forgone their Malay identity for not speaking Malay.

> Because my dad is a Malay language teacher so he encourages us to continue to speak Malay yeah and don't just solely 100% English because that's why (her friend's) daughters are not able to understand Malay. It's because the mum speaks to them in English and English is the main language. If you had a background in Malay, there wouldn't be any issues in you picking up in primary school when you started to learn Malay formally in class. To me it doesn't reflect well on you. I mean your choice of the language is wrong lah, as a Malay you should know Malay.

Elena lamented the language gap between the old and the young and felt incredulous when Malay children failed Malay as a mother-tongue subject in school.

> It's quite sad when your child doesn't even understand Malay when you are a Malay and you know on your IC[7] shown as race is Malay but when, when someone else or speak to your child especially the aunties, the Malay aunties, you know you don't normally speak English to older, the older generation. It's quite sad when you are a Malay and you fail Malay isn't it very sad?

Malay was Elena's home language. However, as her daughter started preschool, Elena tended to speak English to her, hoping to increase her English vocabulary. Elena wanted her children to be strong in Malay and learn English in school so they could become sequential Malay English bilinguals just like her.

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[7] Identity Card. Every Singapore citizen has to have their "race" (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other) specified on their ICs.

No Malay program in the Nursery

Nevertheless, finding a childcare (for 3-year-olds) was difficult. Finding a nursery (for 4-year-olds) with a Malay program near home was nearly impossible. Elena's child went to a neighborhood preschool where they offered a Mandarin program at the nursery level and Malay and Mandarin at K1-2 (for 5 and 6 year-olds).

> My daughters didn't go to childcare because there weren't any vacancies, it's quite tough you know in Singapore, childcare is quite tough. The demand is more than the supply. When I was choosing [preschool], this one they offer Malay but they don't have it on the nursery, nursery is in Chinese and I think only when she goes to K1 or K2 then she would have Malay.

Elena's daughter attended Mandarin class because that was the only and probably the default second language program in that preschool at the nursery level. She secured a spot in the preschool for her daughter, hoping she would learn Malay later in K1 and K2.

I would rather adopt Islamic culture and Malay as a language

Like Elena, Sofia also stressed the connection between the Malay language and her Malay identity and felt shameful if her children did not speak Malay. When asked how Malay language and the Malay identity are related, Sofia pondered:

> I felt that it is something that I would be shameful of if my children don't know how to speak Malay when they are Malay.
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> True. The sense of identity is beyond the language, it's in the culture. But I would rather adopt Islamic culture and Malay as a language. Because you know Malays did not originate as Muslims. (Researcher: Right, they kind of got converted in the past few centuries). Only in the past few centuries. So if I were to think of myself as a Malay, if I go back to the roots of the Malay, they were Hindus. You're not necessarily a Muslim if you are Malay. (Researcher: You might be Hindu or Buddhist.) Yeah true! So what makes, to me, my identity as a Malay is in my language.

Sofia's Malay identity was represented by her speaking Malay rather than by her practicing Malay traditions or customs which she seemed reluctant to embrace wholeheartedly. Contrary to what Noridah believed that second language (Malay) did not matter, for Sofia, speaking Malay was the only way to identify a Malay person. Committed

to an Islamic identity, Sofia sent her children to a mosque preschool where they received language and religious instructions in mostly English with Malay and some Arabic on the side.

> I drive so 15 minutes is not an issue, it's not too far. I wanted to have an early start of proximity to the mosque, to Islam, to religion.
>
> I think the language for most of the MOE (Ministry of Education) approved most likely is English. They have to use English but they can have Arabic and Malay as the as the mother tongue or for religious instruction.

Sofia chose this preschool for its religious instruction and Malay came as bonus, not a purpose. Her son, a Primary 1 pupil at the time of interview, was a balanced bilingual. As Sofia constantly did two-way translation, he also developed an early awareness of bilingualism.

With these diverse home language beliefs and practices, it seems, though, no matter what languages they currently speak at home with their children, the language shift from Malay to English has been inevitable in all these three Malay homes. Elena's daughters will speak more English later as they enter school, so will Sofia's children as they spend more years in the school system where English is the only instructional language and Malay is taught as a subject. Noridah's son has been speaking only English. The grandparents Elena and Sofia relied on for intergenerational language transmission might decrease their influence as they get older.

Discussion and Conclusion

Highlighting three Malay mothers' distinct FLP for their preschool children, this study presents a somewhat different picture from the studies reviewed earlier (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016; Bakar, 2015) when it comes to values assigned to English and Malay and how mothers engineered their homes for their children's language development. Participants agreed that English was very important but they differed in what English meant for their children and how they facilitated their children's English development. While the participants from past studies believed that English and Malay were equally important for

they served different functions, participants in this study had more variegated opinions about the value of Malay in relation to English. Moreover, they were different in how they prioritized English and Malay in providing their children with language learning opportunities.

Noridah resisted government bilingual policy by having her son speak only English and suspected that the policy restricted Malays' social mobility in Singapore or elsewhere. Speaking Malay at home, Elena was hesitant to actively teach her preschool child English because English symbolized school pressure which she wanted to protect her young child from for now. Based on her past schooling experiences, Elena was confident her child would become bilingual as she was immersed in English in school and exposed to online English media. A former school teacher, Sofia consciously structured her home environment to cultivate her children's bilingual abilities because she worried her children might be stretched too thin later if she did not prepare them for it. She also regarded the Malay language as her Malay identity marker because she chose to observe Islamic codes of behaviors rather than Malay traditions.

FLP and "good" parenting

Similar to previous studies, Singaporean Malay parents' FLP are the results of the interaction between their individual experiences and Singapore's bilingual education policy and the highly competitive education system. However, rather than being "coerced" to "deliberately or unintentionally" prefer English in daily parent-child interactions by these external social and policy forces (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016, p. 13), participants in this study actively constructed their individual FLPs to contest the assumptions and stipulations of the government's bilingual education policy, shield their children against the looming academic pressure, or define for their children a unique Malay identify built on the Malay language and Islamic practices. In other words, their distinct FLP also reflected how they were trying to be "good" mothers for their children.

As much as mothers clearly articulated their language ideologies and reflected on their language choices and uses at home, they appeared less certain if they were doing it "right." Elena used Malay at home and asked me a few times in our interview if she was a bad

mother not teaching her children English in a more structured manner. Sofia worried if her children could be stretched further with her conscious efforts in maintaining a balanced bilingual home environment. Noridah fiercely defended her English-only position but, to my surprise, confessed if one day her son wanted to use Malay only, she would go along with it. They were anxious about their FLP because they still could not be sure if they were making the right decisions and plans for their children's future.

In her now classic study about parenting and class in the US, Lareau (2003) described how middle-class parents formed their "cultural logic of childrearing" based on advice of professionals and experts. As these childrearing knowledge and advice change with time, middle-class parents appear to respond more quickly and shift their practices more often. One factor that causes parents to feel anxious might be the ever changing and increasing ways of "good" parenting offered by a wide variety of parenting experts. In this study, mothers constantly compared their practices with the government's changing bilingual policy and other people's choices and use of languages. They were not sure if there was a best way of raising bilingual children.

Another cause of anxiety, pointed by Lareau (2003, p. 5) is because parents want to make sure "their children will get ahead" and "not (be) excluded from any opportunities that might eventually contribute to their advancement" in future. Language skill is a very important "get-ahead" skill in these middle-class Singapore Malay mothers' mind, especially English, similar to parents in other countries such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan (De Mejía, 2002; Lan, 2014; H.-Y. Lin, 2014). In the US, parents in K. King and Fogle's (2006) study perceived bilingualism as beneficial to preserving cultural ties (for Spanish speaking parents) and securing economic opportunities. In Australia, Piller and Gerber (2018) analyzed online parenting forums and found parents regarded bilingualism (English with another language) "an asset that will likely be of academic and economic value…Bilingual parenting is an investment into the competitiveness of the child and hence a form of good parenting" (p. 12).

English is minority's key to upward social mobility

For Singaporean Malays, "getting ahead" and "economic opportunities" associated with

English and bilingual language skills are all the more important. To understand the complicated and dynamic linguistic ecology of Singaporean Malay speech community, nonlinguistic political and social factors (Spolsky, 2004, p. 6) such as Malay's minority ethnic position, low socioeconomic status, and low education attainment in Singapore (Rahim, 1998) are too salient to dismiss. English language proficiency is directly linked to socioeconomic status and academic success (Bokhorst-Heng et al., 2007, p. 426) in Singapore. Given Malay community's lower socioeconomic status and education attainment, mothers knew English was crucial for Malay children to excel in school and secure future employment, on which their children's upward social mobility is predicated. The smaller Malay population in Singapore also explains the lack of Malay language programs in most preschools which are operated privately or by community foundations when market demand for Malay is indeed less than English and Mandarin.

State bilingualism and English language ownership

Earlier studies attributed parents' English preference to Singapore's official bilingual education policy. In this study, participants' understanding of bilingual language learning and development was also partially shaped by this state version of bilingualism.

Wee (2011) pointed out several ideological assumptions the state bilingual education policy rested upon. An essentialist assumption "concern[s] Singapore as a fundamentally Asian society and English is a fundamentally Western language" (Wee, 2011, p. 21). Following this assumption, the participants in this study are trapped in the seemingly dichotic opposition of identity preservation through Malay and securing children's future academic and employment opportunities through English as this is government's main reason to want Singaporeans to be bilingual at the first place.

The other major assumption the government continues to base its bilingual policy on, according to Wee (2011), is that "languages are fully developed delimitable systems. Delimitable linguistic systems are assumed to each have their own internal integrity and the maintenance of this integrity is therefore dependent on each system being kept separate from the others" (p. 211). This state bilingualism for Singaporean Malays means Standard English and academic Malay, which renders the commonly used Singlish and Rojak Malay

invisible or not qualified as languages. That fact that Noridah thought she could only give her son one language and that had to be Standard English since her Malay was not good enough reflected this assumption.

The state bilingualism also denies Singaporeans' ownership of English. While most young Singaporeans are born into English speaking homes and speak mainly English or its varieties, English is supposed to be nobody's mother tongue. In her survey of 127 Singaporean Malay's English usage, Tan (2014) found 60% of Malay met the conditions of using English as a mother tongue. However, when Bokhorst-Heng et al. (2007) examined Malay speakers' orientations towards English norms and found most of the participants in their study "expressed the view that there was only one normative standard for all speakers" (p. 441). Although younger generation of Malay relied on their intuition when they judged their use of English, suggesting a growing sense of ownership, Bokhorst-Heng et al. (2007) maintained that "the friction between exonormative government-sanctioned and school-taught norms of 'Standard English' and the indigenous endormative colloquial Singlish appeared in the discourse" of their participants (p 442), reflecting the strong influence of state bilingualism assumption on the participants that they struggled between Standard English, a Western language and could not be claimed as ones' own by Asian Singaporeans, and Singlish, which government deemed inadequate as an authentic language.

To understand the language shift phenomenon in the Singaporean Malay community from the perspective of FLP, this study contrasts three Malay mothers' distinct sets of language beliefs and practices to highlight their diverse views and understandings of language, language learning, and bilingualism in Singapore's linguistic, social, and cultural contexts which Spolsky (2004) conceptualizes as linguistic ecology in which the formation of FLP is complicated and dynamic. These mothers' language beliefs and practices are the results of their interactions with their own language environment – people, communities, policy, and so on. Their individual FLP however reflects their hopes and dreams for their children's future as minority citizens in multicultural Singapore as well as their subscription to, appropriation of, and defiance against Singapore's state bilingual educational policy, state version of bilingualism, and its education system. Despite mothers' different language beliefs and practices, a language shift from Malay to English varieties would eventually take place in all three families sooner or later. Ironically, the current bilingual policy that

requires Malay students to study Malay probably was one measure that might prevent this language shift from happening even sooner when school-age children were in contact with Malay every week (Cavallaro & Serwe, 2010) but it did not necessarily increase students' motivation to communicate in Malay, as Wee (2011) mentioned that many Singaporean students dislike studying mother-tongue as an academic subject.

To promote non-mainstream mother tongue languages in a multilingual society, Fishman (2012) proposes to start establishing "language-infused" nurseries and childcare centers (p. 481). It might be just what the Singaporean government needs to do. When private preschools do need to make a profit by providing what they believe the majority Singaporean Chinese parents want for their children, the government can support more Malay language programs for younger children in nursery and in more K1 and K2 classes so Malay parents would have more choices alongside with Mandarin. Parents like Elena would certainly appreciate a preschool close to home offering a Malay program at the same time.

In sum, FLP may not establish community or country language policy, but it explains much about when and under what conditions ownership of both minority and majority languages takes place in an officially multilingual nation-state.

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