



THE ROTARY CLUB OF JURONG TOWN

WEEKLY TUESDAY MEETINGS: 12.30pm, The Tanglin Club * Tel: 67376011
Mailing Address: Rotary Club of Jurong Town,
c/o Block 346 Clementi Avenue 5, Singapore 120346
Chartered June 11, 1971 * RI District 3310 No. 16245 * MITA Permit 261/04/96



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Literacy Month

by P N Avadhani

In the Rotary calendar, the month of July is designated as the literacy month. In the context of Singapore, where we have almost 100% literacy, we need not go out of our way to promote literacy. However, there is one area, often mentioned, where English literacy is less adequate, is our service sector, especially the retail sector. I believe there are inadequacies in this regard, in other frontline areas as well. Majority of our schools adopted English as the main medium of teaching in the early sixties. Thus most of our people who were in the primary school in the early or even mid sixties should be around fifty years of age. Thus there is no reason for Singaporeans to be less than competent in the use of the English language. There might be a cohort who did not have the benefit of education during that period and may have difficulty. Nevertheless, majority of Singaporeans should be adequately equipped with English language skill.

The other group that may be inadequate in that respect may be recent immigrants. I would imagine that reasonable competency in English should be expected of such immigrants either before or after their being admitted here. Thus while we can regard English as the working knowledge of our nation, we may have individuals from these two groups who might need assistance. Certainly it is not beyond the scope of Rotarians to help towards this. Ideally it would be commendable if Rotarians volunteer to undertake the teaching projects for some of these people. However, knowing the track record of Rotarians for hands on volunteerism, it may be an unrealistic expectation. A reasonable alternative may be to identify some of the institutions or organizations involved in this and offer whatever support we can provide.

Another area of concern is about “mother tongue” (second language) proficiency. If such mother tongue proficiency is for promoting cultural values and ancestral wisdom, the main place for acquiring such skills is the home and family with parents and grand parents taking the major role. The school can only offer the tools for acquisition and the process should not create undue burden on the pupils. There have been a lot of opinions expressed in the media in past few months and most of the opinions were very polarize reflecting inadequate objectivity and wisdom. This is true of not only about this issue but generally true of many issues aired in public.

For most Singaporeans, naturally, bilingualism is seen in the context of English and Mandarin. A recent issue regarding the speeches at an art exhibition is a case in point. While in the case of Chinese, dialects are subsumed by Mandarin which becomes the mother tongue. In case of Singaporean Indians, while Tamil is the predominant language, it is not the national language of India and today the Indian Diaspora here represents several languages and some of these are recognized as “mother tongues”. Malay seems to be the only language which is the sole mother tongue of Malay Singaporeans, which incidentally is also our “national language”. True bilingualism comes from the heart.

In the context of Singapore “bilingualism” should mean English and one of the other languages; some call it mother tongue, others call it second language. In actual fact many Singaporean speak more than two languages. I feel this is something Rotarians should think about.