

The role of English as a lingua franca in institutions of higher education in Singapore

Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew

Department of English Language and Literature, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

This paper discusses the place of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in institutions of higher learning in Singapore and how the promotion of ELF in such a domain has contributed to the making of modern Singapore. It also discusses the link between ELF in higher institutions of learning and the processes of globalization. The paper is organized through the lens of Bourdieu's (1985) concept of capital formation, not least because an economic motive stands solidly behind the existence of ELF in Singapore. More specifically, the paper focuses on the formation of "cultural capital" which refers to assets that promote social mobility, and which entails accumulated knowledge and skills, such as, educational qualifications, intellect and style of speech. The paper argues that the prominent use of ELF has played a significant role in propelling Singapore on to the world stage and enabling it to brave internationalization and globalization with relative ease.

Keywords: ELF; globalization; cultural capital; higher education; Singapore

Introduction

Many factors have been ascribed to account for Singapore's fast track from third world to first within a generation and these reasons may be grouped broadly under geographical, economic, social and political. Geographically, the island is of considerable strategic importance and is an excellent transit point for international air and shipping services. Its economic policies have been highly commended for creating a free economy, an innovative, competitive, and business-friendly environment and low levels of corruption. Socially, the population is work-oriented and educationally minded, and are loyal to their job and country. The political stability that Singapore has enjoyed in the last half century has also contributed to its success. While the success of Singapore is frequently attributed to the foregoing reasons, less is known about the place of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in institutions of higher learning in Singapore and how its promotion has also contributed to the making of modern Singapore. In this paper, ELF refers to the use of English among multilingual interlocutors whose common language is English and who do not share the same mother tongues or cultural background. Relative to Singlish, it is a variety which uses Standard English as a base for its functionality since this allows it to be easily comprehensible across space and time. In 1959, on becoming Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew explained his pragmatic preference for retaining ELF in a heated post-colonial era where newly-independent states were passionately committed to the promotion of their own mother tongues as the symbol of their liberation from their colonial masters:

We realized that English had to be the language of the workplace and the common language. As an international trading community, we would not make a living if we used Malay, Chinese or Tamil. With English, no race would have an advantage (Lee as cited in Silver, 2005).

The argument of ELF “neutrality” and functionality among disparate peoples continued to be espoused by Lee 52 years later when he launched the English Institute of Singapore, as a means to drive excellence in the teaching and learning of the English language in all schools and higher institutions in Singapore:

The choice of English as our *lingua franca* gave all races equal opportunities through a common language to learn, communicate and work in (Lee, 2011).

Such a pragmatic approach was designed to allow proficiency in a global language which enables Singaporeans to plug into the rest of the world and earn a sustainable living. In this light, Singapore may be designated a post-ideological state which used language as a means to engage with multinationals at a time in the 1960s, when such processes were critically described as neo-colonialist (Wee, 2008). This is in direct contrast to its nearest neighbour, Malaysia which at the dawn of independence began the process of emplacing Bahasa Melayu as the MOI in its schools and higher institutions as a means of affirming the legitimacy of the dominant group in the country and of providing a strong sense of cultural identity at the national level (David, 2004).

In this paper, my focus will be on ELF in higher institutions of learning in Singapore. I will discuss this with the help of Bourdieu’s (1985) concept of “capital”, not least because an economic motive stands solidly behind the existence of ELF in Singapore. Here, capital is defined as “all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation” (Bourdieu, as cited in Harker, 1990, p. 13). Capital is constructed through investment strategies which will give benefit to the group. Capital also connotes a tendency, as in the case of Singapore, to pay more attention to the “economics” of a situation rather than the “culture” of a situation based on the assumption that “culture” and social well-being can only be sustained if basic economic necessities are met first. Singapore, termed “the firm” in some circles, may thus be cited as an excellent case study of a nation where language policies are solidly focussed on capital formation.

According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) there are three forms of capital – economic, social and cultural - all closely related since in having one, it is often easy to possess the others, as they are all easily convertible one to another. Economic capital refers to financial assets such as factories, stockpiles, intellectual property, stockholdings and the actual holdings in the bank. Social capital is made up of group membership or relationship to others, measured not so much in hard cash but primarily through the accumulation of obligations according to the norms of reciprocity. Finally, there is cultural capital which refers to assets that promote social mobility, and which entails accumulated knowledge and skills, such as, educational qualifications, intellect, style of speech; and which is the specific focus of this paper.

Cultural capital is a capital which is acquired over time and from the surrounding culture, and which impresses itself upon one’s “habitus” (character and way of thinking) which in turn becomes more attentive or more primed to receiving similar influences. Such a capital is termed “embodied” not least because it represents a means of communication and self-representation (Bourdieu, 1985). However, cultural capital may also be manifested in an objectified form. In institutions of higher learning, it is seen in the form of investment-endowment funds which are managed by investment committees

and which are used to purchase objects of status and prestige such as properties, scientific instruments and art works, all of which are also easily convertible to economic profit, should the context be appropriate. The ownership of such capital helps the university's "brand" and unique standing. Cultural capital is also termed "institutionalized" when its academic credentials and qualifications helps it to gain widespread recognition. In brief, the accelerated acquisition of cultural capital, be it embodied, objectified or institutionalized, may be seen as a response to globalization. This response may be summarized as efforts at internationalization which I will show are impossible without a global lingua franca.

Background to Singapore

Like many post-colonial states, Singapore is multiracial, multi-religious and multi-lingual. Its population of four million is ethnically heterogeneous, with about 77% Chinese, 15% Malays, 6% of Indian origin and 2% of other ethnic definitions. The Singapore 2010 census (Department of Statistics, 2011) lists 20 specific "dialect groups", speaking an array of local languages under four ethnic categories. Understandably, lingua francas are not alien to Singapore's history. For example, Papiah Kristang dates from a 15th century Portuguese pidgin which creolized with Malay following the establishment of a Portuguese presence in Malacca in the 16th Century (Waas, 2002). Taking its place were subsequent lingua francas such as Baba Malay, a language spoken by the early Chinese migrants to Singapore; Hokien, the language of the majority of Chinese migrants to Singapore; Mandarin, the Putonghua of China; and English, the language of the colonial administrators of Singapore between 1819 and 1959. Of these, only English and Mandarin continue today as major lingua francas in Singapore.

The widespread use of both English and Mandarin throughout the education system in Singapore is not surprising since they are the foremost lingua francas of the world today. English is the language with the highest currency as it is not only linked to modernity, technology, economic and scientific knowhow but also manifested in the service, fashion, advertising and entertainment industries (see He et al., 2011). As for Mandarin, Lee is of the opinion that barring any major disruption, the speed at which China is modernizing makes it the most likely candidate to challenge English globally (Lee, 2011). The use of the two top lingua francas gives Singapore an inherent advantage in the 21st century global village:

English-speaking Singaporeans are sought after by MNCs [multi-national corporations], international organizations and NGOs [non-governmental organisations] because they can connect with the English-speaking world, and can operate comfortably in multi-cultural environments, in countries like China, India, Malaysia and Indonesia. Singaporeans add value to these economies by being able to speak both English and Mandarin and other major Asian languages, acting as a bridge between them and the peoples of America, Europe, Japan, India and ASEAN countries (Lee, 2011).

Indeed, as early as 1968, Lee had personally elected for the Regional Language Centre (RELC), an educational project of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), to be located in Singapore (Lee, 2000). Since then, SEAMEO RELC has worked to develop and support language education in the countries of Southeast Asia to assist in the development of language teacher education in the SEAMEO region (see Kirkpatrick, 2010). It has promoted cooperation between and contact among language professionals in the region and beyond. Lee had calculated then that because English was the language of diplomacy among all the members of the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), it would bring with it other advantages such as multinational and intraregional trade and travel which would add to the economic and social capital of the nation.

The embodiment of ELF in the economy and society

The implication of Singapore's strategic choice of ELF may be best understood in economic terms. In the early 1960s, Singapore had a per-capita GDP of around USD 2,200 per annum, no different from many sub-Saharan African states in the decade of independence. However, by the 1990s, it had left its third-world counterparts behind, having transformed itself into the "first world", with a per-capita GDP of more than USD 60,000.

ELF in higher education has been important for the ongoing development of the Singapore economy. The advent of globalization in the 1990s drew many of Singapore's neighbours into multinational engagement and it is noteworthy that their strategies have not only been economic but also linguistic, for example, the mandating of compulsory English language learning in schools initiated in 2011 by Japan and Vietnam (Ha, 2013). As a result, Singapore faced competition from countries which could not only use English but also produce goods at a much lower cost. Its survival strategy was to move from the production of factory goods into higher value industries such as pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, international finance and international law, which meant raising the bar for English proficiency since high-end products often involved technological and scientific knowledge, which are accessible only through a good competency in English. An example is Biopolis used by Singapore to position itself as a global biomedical hub and workplace of choice for the world's best scientists. Biopolis works closely with institutions of higher education to build a thriving base of both local and foreign talent in a high value-added sector that has become a key pillar of the Singaporean economy. This 10-year old research hub hosts nine research institutes under the Agency for Science, Technology and Research and nearly 40 corporate labs including facilities belonging to global companies which employ hundreds of scientists, physicians and business professionals all using English to participate in cutting edge research. A very high competency in English has been equally as important for the development of Singapore as a global financial hub. The development of Singapore as an international educational hub ready to receive fee-paying international students is another result of the widespread use of ELF. There is an ample supply of English teachers who have native-like proficiency. For Asian students Singapore presents a lower cost option than the US or UK.

It is noteworthy that the importance of ELF for the economy has also permeated into society. For example, the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) was launched around the time that the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong warned: "We cannot be a first-world economy or go global with Singlish... Poor English reflects badly on us and makes us seem less intelligent" (Goh, 1999). He later elaborated (Goh, 2000) that the success of the financial and media industries depended on good English and that "this will affect the first-world economy we hope to achieve" (Goh, 2000). Since that time the mass media has discreetly cut down on its use of Singlish (a unique blend of English, Chinese, Malay, Tamil and local dialects and the unofficial language of Singapore), especially in popular television sitcoms (Chew, 2013). The predominance of English is increasing among Singaporeans. For example, a survey shows that the number of children entering Primary 1 who spoke predominantly English has risen from 36% in 1994 to 50% in 2004 (Vaish, 2007).

The embodiment of ELF in education

Although the focus of this paper is on ELF in higher education, it is important to understand that in Singapore, ELF is “embodied” in the medium of education from pre-school to university and thus needs to be seen in this wider context. ELF is prized not least because the Republic of Singapore is tiny and vulnerable. It is a small island without natural resources. Thus, its survival is entirely dependent on the talents of its people; hence the intimate relationship between education and political-economic survival. Its language policies hinge on the important realization that language is the wrench to lift it comfortably to the competitive international stage.

In the 1960s the newly independent state continued with the four language medium stream education of Tamil, Malay, Mandarin and English as an interim measure but by the 1970s it became obvious that English medium schools would offer the most linguistic capital to its citizenry at which point ELF became the medium of instruction in the whole Singapore education system. From primary to tertiary level, all lessons are conducted in English with the exception of mother tongue classes. This strategy encourages pupils to use English as a first language, enabling them to evaluate the media and respond creatively to problems and new technology, in much the same way as a native-speaker of the language, without the intercession of their mother tongue. Indeed, Singapore students fare as well, if not better, than native-speakers as seen in international benchmark tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Progress in International Reading Study (PIRLS) which measure the capacity of students near the end of secondary education, to apply knowledge and skills in Reading, Mathematics and Science in a variety of real-life situations (see: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/> and <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pirls> for more details).

Two other indications of the importance placed on the embodiment of ELF in education are: the founding of the English Language Institute of Singapore in 2011 and the closing of Nanyang University. The former has been created to work with external partners to offer customised training to meet the different needs of teachers. Its ultimate goal is to become a Centre of Excellence for the teaching of English in Asia and beyond. The latter was Singapore’s only higher institution using Chinese as a medium of instruction but in 1980 it was merged with the University of Singapore to form the National University of Singapore, in part to promote the English language as the premier instrument for more efficient economic growth and also because it was facing declining enrolments.

Currently, there are five universities in Singapore all of which use ELF in their administration, teaching, learning and working relationships both within and outside the country. This is in line with developments around the world in the last few decades which have seen an increase in the dominance of English in international academic life. Hence, the use of ELF has become crucial in institutions of higher education in Singapore as elsewhere and there is strong pressure on scholars to become internationally viable and to contribute to the global ranking of their institutions, measured through indexed publications of high impact, which are often in English.

The creation of objectified and institutional capital in institutions of higher education

Singapore’s desire to brand itself as being in the same league as the best of English and American universities is linked to the creation of economic, social and cultural capital. Effective branding will elevate a university from being just one amongst many, to

become an entity with a unique character and promise. Branding creates an emotional resonance in the minds of consumers who choose products and services using both emotional and pragmatic judgements. Singapore's desire to brand itself as being in the same league as the best of English and American universities is linked to the creation of economic, social and cultural capital. Effective branding will elevate a university from being just one amongst many, to become an entity with a unique character and promise. Branding creates an emotional resonance in the minds of consumers who choose products and services using both emotional and pragmatic judgements.

To this end, the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and Singapore Management University (SMU) were radically transformed in 2006 into autonomous companies with the freedom to chart their own identities and competitive strategies. This empowered them to optimize use of resources, generate income and engage in marketization. Within this context, positioning on world ranking league tables has become increasingly important. A case in point is the QS World University Rankings which explores the world's top 800 universities in which these three institutions have performed well within relevant subject areas. The QS rankings are compiled using criteria such as academic reputation, employer reputation, citations per faculty and research output. These criteria are often not as objective as they may appear to be as they are predicated on the efficient use of the ELF. Universities which rank lower are more often from non-English speaking countries that are at a disadvantage in publishing and sharing research across borders. The fact that Singapore ranks high in research is doubtless due in great part to its early adoption of ELF. For example, in the case of citations, the more often a piece of research is cited by others, the more influential it is. So the more highly cited research papers a university publishes, the stronger its research output is considered. QS collects this information using Scopus, the world's largest database of research abstracts and citations. Here, the latest five complete years of data are used, and the total citation count is assessed in relation to the number of academic faculty members at the university. What this implies is that academics have to write in English if they are to acquire a broader international authorship and readership and to reach higher impact (number of citations). Under-representation of non-native English speaking scholars in international English journals attests to the many disadvantages encountered when they are compared to native English authors. Most non-native English speaking scholars face problems of costs in time and effort, since they typically need more time to turn their papers into English, often relying on professional translators. Research on scientific journals has found significant differences in acceptance rates for non-native authors compared to native authors as well as longer processes of revision and resubmissions in the case of the latter (Berghammer, 2010).

The international standing of a university is measured by the proportion of international students and faculty members in relation to overall numbers in the QS World ranking system. Thus, it is to the advantage of universities to be truly "international" but to achieve this, universities will have to teach in English if their courses are to be made more accessible to international faculty and students. It should also be noted that while a highly international student or faculty body is not in itself a measure of quality, there is a clear correlation between international intake and success in other areas such as academic reputation and research citations.

Institutional capital is also amassed through international collaborations with other "branded" universities, a strategy made feasible through the use of the ELF. Among such collaborations is the newly established Singapore University of Technology and Design, developed in partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

and Zhejiang University, China. There is also the recently opened Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, a collaboration between NTU and the UK's Imperial College London; and the Yale-NUS College which is Singapore's first liberal arts college, established in partnership with Yale University. In addition, many smaller private academies, such as the PSB Academy and the MDIS Academy, have partnered with foreign universities, such as California State University and the University of Western Australia to offer a multitude of certificates, diplomas, degrees, and post-graduate courses (MOE, 2011). There are also diplomas, masters and doctoral dual degrees or joint programmes, research opportunities and student exchange programmes. Indeed, institutions of higher education in Singapore have been applying credit transfer systems over the past two decades to ensure mobility of students and researchers. In this respect, the higher education sector is more market-driven in comparison to mass education, as it is the sector most concerned with academic exchange, which is only really possible if a *lingua franca* is in effective use.

Even at a pre-university level the use of ELF in Singapore is significant in its contribution to the linguistic capital of its citizens in seeking higher education opportunities at home and in the international arena. An international brand that Singapore has been associated with since its independence is that of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), a school-leaving certificate well-known by employers and universities around the world. Students in Singapore take the UCLES "O" and "A" level examinations, which continue to be graded and processed in the United Kingdom. The Cambridge School Leaving Certificate has long been the exit examinations for graduating high school students. Performance in these examinations determines eligibility for entry into further education in tertiary institutions in Singapore and elsewhere. In contrast, neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia have replaced the School Leaving Certificate with their own national version which is examined in Malay and Indonesian respectively (David, 2004). Because of these changes graduates of Singapore schools, compared with their neighbours, retain the capital which enables them easier entry into branded universities in English-speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, often without the need to obtain additional linguistic capital such as the TOEFL and IELTS qualifications.

Conclusion

Singapore is an interesting case study in which ELF has been enabled not just in higher education but throughout the educational system and within industry, and to an extent society. Certain languages have a higher premium or cultural capital than others. Not surprisingly, in view of its pragmatic orientation, English with its higher capital value, has replaced the traditional *lingua francas* of Hokien and Malay within one generation (Chew, 2013). Indeed, English today is not just a *lingua franca* but also a mother tongue, especially where the younger generation is concerned.

It must be noted that Singapore was a supporter of ELF long before globalization was a buzzword. ELF was adopted at a time when aspiring nation states wanted most of all to cut the knot with their colonial masters. Pinpointing English as the global *lingua franca* today is likely to be a no-brainer, but envisioning it in the 1960s may be said to be remarkable.

The attainment of cultural capital such as higher educational qualifications, which entails accumulating knowledge and skills, and which is the specific focus of this paper, was made possible mainly through the educational system and the stable, single-minded authoritarian system set in place in the early days of Singapore's independence by its

first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew. The education system in Singapore is underpinned by ELF, the medium of instruction in all schools and higher institutions and the working language of Singapore. ELF is used in teaching, learning and administering. It is used to facilitate academic communication within and between educational institutions both in and out of the country. It is also seen as a “neutral” medium to bridge the linguistic gap of Singapore’s multiracial, multilingual population. The prominent use of ELF has doubtless played its part in propelling Singapore on to the world stage and enabling it to brave internationalization and globalization with relative ease.

About the author

Phyllis Chew is an associate professor at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She has wide-ranging research and teaching interests spanning English as a global/international language, the sociolinguistics of identities, gender and language; and faith literacies.

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