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Attitudes towards Mandarin–English bilingualism: a study of Chinese youths in Singapore

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ABSTRACT
Not only does Singapore have a unique ethnic and multilingual makeup, it also boasts unique language policies, especially with regard to the learning of the official languages. Previous studies of Singaporean youths have largely focused on the differences in attitudes and code-switching between linguistic varieties (e.g. Colloquial Singapore English [Singlish] and Standard Singapore English) as well as looking at the specific languages of Singapore’s multilingual community. This paper seeks to examine how Chinese–Singaporean youths differ in their perception of the benefits (general, communicative, cognitive and pragmatic) and disadvantages associated with Mandarin–English bilingualism and their Chinese–Singaporean identity. 165 Chinese–English bilingual youths from secondary schools, Polytechnics/Junior Colleges, University undergraduates and young working adults were stratified based their gender, socio-economic status and self-rated language proficiency. Our findings suggest that bilinguals’ self-rated proficiency is generally the best indicator of local Chinese youths’ attitudes towards Chinese–English bilingualism and identity, regardless of their current occupation, gender or socio-economic status.

Aims
This paper seeks to examine how participants stratified by gender, socio-economic status (SES), current occupation as well as individual’s perceived language proficiency would differ in their perception of the benefits (general, communicative, cognitive and pragmatic) and disadvantages associated with Mandarin–English bilingualism, and their identity as Chinese–English bilinguals.

Introduction
Attitudes have been touted as ‘the most indispensable concept’ (Allport 1935, 801) in social psychology, and have been a central component of sociolinguistic study since Labov’s (1966) pioneering work involving the stratification of speech communities by class and status.

Language attitudes are thus defined within this paper as ‘any affective, cognitive or behavioural index of evaluative reactions towards different language varieties and their speaker’ (Ryan and Giles 1982, 7). This view suggests that language attitudes have cognitive, affective and behavioural implications (Garrett 2010). Attitudes are affective as different languages evoke different emotions within speakers, cognitive because they incorporate what individuals believe about the world, and finally behavioural, as attitudes ‘predispose us to act in a certain way’ (Garrett, Coupland, and...
Bilingualism and multilingualism are the norm within Singapore. The modern-day population of Singapore consists of 74.3% Chinese, 13.3% Malay and 9.1% of Indian descent, with Eurasians and other minority ethnicities forming the remaining 3.3% (Singapore Department of Statistics 2014). It is not surprising that the linguistic diversity is inextricably tied to the multi-ethnic population within Singapore. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education (MOE) views the state’s bilingual education policy as ‘the cornerstone of [its] education system’ (2013). This policy necessitates that students undergo at least 10 years of education, 6 years in primary school and 4 years in secondary school, in both a first language as well as a mother-tongue language (MTL). In Singapore, a child’s first language and MTL differs from the common linguistic definition; rather, each student is prescribed with English as his or her first language, and generally allocated one of three MTLs that correspond to one of the government’s designated official languages – Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil, according to racial group or paternal ethnicity (Gupta 1994; Tan 2006), regardless of the household’s dominant home language. As Cavallaro and Ng (2014, 36) pointed out:

While Mandarin, Malay and Tamil may well be bona fide mother tongues for many, they were and still are second languages for many others. The only language that can be considered a true mother tongue, given Singapore’s location in the Malay Peninsula, is Malay, even though for a long time many of those classified as ethnic Malays in Singapore were in fact mother tongue speakers of other languages such as Boyanese or Javanese, more distantly related to Malay. In effect, however, English is increasingly becoming the mother tongue for more and more Singaporeans, and their ethnic languages are technically more like second languages.

Such bilingual policies are the labour of our nation’s forefathers (Schiffman 2007) who believed in the importance of having English as Singaporeans’ ‘first language’ for pragmatic reasons (Rubdy and Tupas 2009; Iswaran 2010), while MTLs serving as ‘cultural buffers’ aimed at negating ‘negative’ values associated with Westernisation. The role of the MTLs was, therefore, to promote Asian values amongst Singaporeans (MOE 2004; Rubdy and Tupas 2009). In the words of then-Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew during the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) in 1984, ‘English will not be emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue.’ This was due to the view that English is pragmatically significant and useful for Singaporeans (and Singapore) to make headway in global economies (Ng 2014) – it was the language synonymous with advancement, technology and higher education (Bokhorst-Heng and Caleon 2009). MTLs, on the other hand, served two purposes: first, they acted as anchors to the cultural roots and the respective ethnic identities of Singaporeans (Curdt-Christiansen 2014); second, they played a part in homogenising the intra-ethnic diversity manifested through the unification of the mutually unintelligible varieties within each ethnic group, as the government viewed diversity as a hindrance to nation building (Tan 2007; Lee 2009, 2011).

For Chinese Singaporeans who made up the majority of Singapore’s population, the SMC conceived in 1979 marked the beginning of government intervention to promote Mandarin Chinese and prohibit ‘dialects’ in the media, education, and in all government services (for a review, see Teo 2005; Goh 2009; Lee 2009). The campaign saw significant success in prescribing the use of Mandarin amongst Chinese Singaporeans, with homes using a Chinese ‘dialect’, such as Cantonese, Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka and Hainanese, as their dominant household language decreasing precipitously from around 80% in 1980 to just 19.2% in 2010 (Singapore Department of Statistics 2000, 2010). It should be noted here that the term ‘dialect’ in Singapore refers to a number of mutually unintelligible Chinese languages which are not, in the strict linguistic sense, dialects (Kwan-Terry 2000).

While some may argue that Mandarin Chinese was not the mother tongue of the ethnic Chinese Singaporeans when the government initially introduced Mandarin Chinese as an official language (Afendras and Kuo 1980), many in the current generation of Singaporean youths (Singapore Department of Statistics 2010) are likely to have Mandarin as their mother tongue simply because of the
success in eradicating the government defined ‘dialects’ through the SMC and various education policies. This has rooted Mandarin Chinese as the dominant household language for Chinese Singaporeans in the new millennium. For instance, families who claimed to use Mandarin as the dominant household language increased from roughly 13% in the 1980 census to 47.7% in the census taken in 2010 (Singapore Department of Statistics 2000, 2010).

Yet in recent years, many Chinese families have also seen a rise in English as their dominant home language, growing from 11.6% in 1980 to 32.6% in 2010 over a span of just 30 years (Singapore Department of Statistics 2000, 2010). This reflects the consistent trend of English gaining a substantial foothold as the language of the household – a trend that does not seem to be abating. Furthermore, data from the 2006 Sociolinguistics Survey of Singapore found that 53.6% of ethnically Chinese families used English as their dominant household language (Vaish, Jamaludeen, and Roslan 2009) while census data from 2010 indicate that 51% of five-year-old Chinese Singaporeans claim English as their home language (Singapore Department of Statistics 2010). The census data reflect the growing prevalence of English as the dominant home language amongst young Singaporeans, but do not capture the actual language practices within each household, which demonstrate a dynamic use of all the languages available to Chinese Singaporeans. The increasing rate of English use in the family reported in the censuses and the reported codemixing and code-switching between English and the Chinese languages may be the catalyst for language shift away from Mandarin (Zhao and Liu 2008; Cavallaro 2011).

Moreover, there exists a great disparity with regard to time allocation in the way English and MTL are taught in schools (Lee 2012), as English is the medium of instruction for essentially every non-MTL subject – be it the humanities, the sciences or mathematics. Conversely, MTLs are relegated to a lower status than English, as seen from the comparatively small proportion of time allotted to it in a student’s timetable. This parallels the bilingual education framework of ‘mainstream with foreign language teaching’ proposed by Baker (2011, 210), referring to an educational environment where English is used as the mainstream language, while MTLs are akin to ‘language arts’ programmes or second language ‘subject’ class (David, Cavallaro, and Coluzzi 2009). Consequently, it has been posited that Singapore’s bilingual education system simply fosters an English-knowing bilingualism (Pakir 2008; Bokhorst-Heng and Caleon 2009; Chua 2011). As a result, the great importance that has been given to the English language offers it the greatest prestige in Singapore (Zhao and Liu 2010) and essentially makes it a prerequisite for academic achievement and economic success within the local society.

Furthermore, English and General Paper are compulsory subjects for national examinations such as the GCE ‘O’ and ‘A’ level examinations, respectively, and are important pre-requisites for admission to the next rung of a student’s academic progression. Conversely, local students simply need to pass their MTL exams with a minimum grade of D7, the equivalent to scoring between 45% and 49% in the examination for MTL or E8, equivalent to scoring between 40% and 44% in the examination for higher MTL students. Furthermore, it is not mandatory to count MTL scores or grades towards the admissions criteria when entering tertiary institutions such as local universities (MOE 2008) – likely contributing to a mindset among students where English is more important than MTL, consequently acting as an impetus for language shift due to the ‘imbalanced’ value and status conferred on English (Garcia 2009; Ng 2014).

While many researchers have investigated attitudes towards the varieties of Singapore English and MTLs in Singapore, there have been no papers examining attitudes towards Chinese–English bilingualism amongst youths in Singapore to the best of our knowledge. Some research in the same vein by Bokhorst-Heng and Caleon (2009) examined Chinese, Malay and Indian primary school children’s perceptions and use of MTLs and English, as well as code-switching between the two languages. They found that participants rated code-switching more favourably than English, and that in general, groups from lower SES classes possessed more positive attitudes towards the languages. Another study into the language shift and maintenance of MTLs was conducted by Vaish (2007) among the Indian community in Singapore, where there was evidence of both language shift and language
maintenance depending on the domain of language use. For instance, Tamil was found to be maintained very well in the domain of religion, but in the domain of school, media and public space shows clear signs of a language shift towards English. In addition, bilingualism without diglossia was evident across all domains. An earlier study by Ong (2005) investigated the extent to which Chinese-Singaporean youths regarded Mandarin as a link between themselves and Chinese culture versus it being a pragmatic tool for success and achievement. She found that participants viewed Mandarin favourably, and that Mandarin continued to be used in a variety of domains. Her findings contrast with more recent studies in Singapore that show a steady shift away from the ethnic languages to more and more use of English (for a review see Cavallaro and Ng 2014), as she found ‘little sign of decline’ (Ong 2005, 40) in terms of language shift away from Mandarin in Singapore, as well as postulating Mandarin to be both a pragmatic ‘tool’ and a cultural ‘tie’.

The current study surveys Singapore’s linguistic context that is the product of years of government intervention from the perspective of bilingual English–Chinese Singaporeans. This paper seeks to examine how participants stratified by gender, SES, current occupation (see below) as well as individual’s perceived language proficiency differ in their perception of the benefits (general, communicative, cognitive and pragmatic) and disadvantages associated with Mandarin–English bilingualism, and their identity as Chinese–English bilinguals.

These results contribute to our understanding of the impact that government policies and the education system have had on Chinese–English bilingual youths, to better understand the tensions at play within the new generation of bilingual Chinese youths, as well as how their perception of Mandarin is shaping their attitudes and their identity.

**Methodology**

An initial pilot survey was conducted, surveying 20 secondary school students, 20 polytechnic students and 22 junior college students for preliminary trends and refinement of the final questionnaire. The questionnaire is available upon request. An expanded and refined 38-question survey that recorded individuals’ ratings was then uploaded to Google Forms (https://docs.google.com/forms) and the link to the survey distributed widely among the researchers’ networks. In all, 166 participants distinct from those surveyed in the pilot study took part in the survey. Of these, 165 surveys (Male = 66, Female = 99) were used in the data computation, with one survey void due to errors in the form filling. Participants were sought by word of mouth through the researchers’ peers and contacts from the following groups: secondary school students (n = 37, M_age = 15.0), junior college/polytechnic students (n = 42, M_age = 17.6), university undergraduates (n = 52, M_age = 21.8), young working adults (n = 34, M_age = 24.9).

The questionnaire was divided into three sections: informed consent was sought in the first section, as were participants’ demographics, which were grouped into four main categories that would be subsequently used for stratification:

- Gender (Male, Female)
- SES (based on collective scores on type of dwelling and respective family incomes)
- Current occupation (secondary school, polytechnic/junior college/institutes of technical education, university, young working adults). These groups approximately correspond to different number of years of exposure to Mandarin Chinese by the time they took part in this study: the secondary school group accrued at least 6 years, mainly in primary school; the JC/polytechnic group accrued at least 10 years of exposure to Mandarin during their primary and secondary schooling; the university group completed up to 12 years of Mandarin education and the young working adults group refers to participants who have been in the workforce and, therefore, have been outside the education system, for up to 5 years.
- Self-rating in oral proficiency. Language proficiency in this study refers to their self-rated perception to be either better at speaking English or Mandarin, or equally proficient (EP).
The second section required respondents to answer the 38 questions divided into six sections (see below) and a 6-point Likert scale was used for all rating questions to prevent respondents from taking a middle ground (e.g. 4 on a 7-point scale), and aimed at eliciting a more genuine response as to whether they felt more positively or negatively about the various questions asked.

(1) General attitudes towards bilingualism as a Chinese–English bilingual

Sample question: 'Being bilingual has enriched my life experiences'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(2) Identity (the extent to which Chinese–English bilingualism shapes their identity)

Sample question: 'I consider myself Chinese because I speak Mandarin'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(3) Perceived general benefits of Chinese–English bilingualism

Sample question: 'Being bilingual increases my employability in Singapore'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(4) Perceived communicative benefits of Chinese–English bilingualism

Sample question: 'Being bilingual helps me to communicate with my friends'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(5) Perceived cognitive benefits of Chinese–English bilingualism

Sample question: 'I feel that bilinguals are more intelligent'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(6) Perceived pragmatic benefits of Chinese–English bilingualism

Sample question: 'Being bilingual allows me to learn new languages faster/more easily'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The third, optional section requested participants’ contact information should they be willing to contribute further comments.

Data were processed using IBM’s SPSS software to ascertain whether there was a correlation between questions within each category (e.g. benefits: communication [Q 18, 19, 21, 27, 28, 29]).
and representative of what we were testing for each category. The participants’ mean responses were then computed, and collated as a collective average rating for each category. SPSS was also used for all subsequent ANOVAs and Tukey’s HSD procedures in the post-hoc analyses.

**Results**

**General trends**

Across the board, participants seemed to perceive the positive benefits of bilingual Chinese–English in general, for communication and also pragmatic purposes. Ratings for their general attitudes towards Chinese–English bilingualism were also quite positive, as were the generally low ratings \((M = 2.45)\) towards participants’ perception of any negative impact resulting from studying both Chinese and English simultaneously (Figure 1).

However, two areas seemed to show middling results: questions about the awareness of cognitive benefits \((M = 3.53)\) associated with Chinese–English bilingualism, as well in identity \((M = 3.83)\).

**Ratings by gender**

As clearly depicted in the line graph in Figure 2, both males and females provided very similar ratings in every category measured, with no discernable difference. A statistical analysis revealed no statistically significant differences \((p = .205, df = 1)\) between either gender across the board.

![Figure 1. Overall means grouped according to the seven categories of questions surveyed.](image1)

![Figure 2. Mean ratings of questions surveyed grouped by gender.](image2)
Ratings by current occupation

Comparing across the various groups revealed similar peaks and troughs (Figure 3), regardless of the length of Mandarin instruction exposed to in schools, with rather close scores and patterns across the board. An interesting result is that university students surveyed consistently posted lower ratings than any other of the groups, and across all the various types of questions in the survey, with the greatest difference from their peers in the area of perceived communicative benefits.

Ratings of university students were significantly lower than their peers ($p < .05$, $df = 3$, $F = 2.674$) in the category of communicative benefits of bilingualism, and post-hoc Tukey tests revealed that the university students’ rating of 4.07 approaching significance ($p = .63$) compared to the JC/polytechnics/ITE mean of 4.56 on a scale of 6.

Ratings by socio-economic status (SES)

When stratified into different SES tiers, the mean scores were once again fairly close between the four different classes as seen in Figure 4. However, mean scores for two particular question types stood out (communicative benefits and identity), with the middle-upper and upper classes rating them comparatively lower than the middle-lower and working class SES tiered participants.

For perceived communicative benefits, participants from both the working ($M = 4.62$) and middle-lower ($M = 4.58$) SES tiers rated about 9.5% higher than their peers in the middle-upper ($M = 4.19$) and upper ($M = 4.18$) classes, with the difference between the different classes found to have approached significance ($p = .052$, $df = 3$, $F = 2.630$).

A similar trend was also observed for questions on participants’ identity, with both the working ($M = 3.95$) and middle-lower ($M = 4.04$) SES tiers rating about 8.4% higher than their peers in the middle-upper ($M = 4.19$) and upper ($M = 4.18$) classes. However, none of the pairwise differences were found to be significant ($p = .243$, $df = 3$, $F = 1.406$).

In spite of the large difference (0.8 points) between the middle-upper and middle-lower class participants for the perceived disadvantages of bilingualism, pairwise comparisons revealed that the difference was not significant ($p = .085$).

**Figure 3.** Mean ratings of questions surveyed grouped according to participants’ current occupation.
The use of self-assessment of language proficiency has had a checkered history in linguistic research (see Blanche and Merino 1989; Ross 1998). However, it is seen as an invaluable tool in assessing the language proficiency of participants in those situations where a testing is not possible (Thompson 2015). When stratified according to their self-rated (oral) language proficiencies, statistically significant results were found between participants for the following categories of questions: perceived communicative benefits, cognitive benefits, identity and the perceived negative impact of bilingualism (Figure 5). It is also observed that EP participants posted higher mean scores than their peers whose self-rated English proficiency was better than their Mandarin (E > C) as well as those who felt more proficient in Mandarin (C > E) than English for nearly all types of questions.

A significant main effect ($p < .05$, $df = 2$, $F = 6.00$) was observed between the perceived communicative benefits of those rated as EP and those whose English was better than their Mandarin

**Ratings by language proficiency**

![Figure 4](image1.png)

**Figure 4.** Mean ratings of questions surveyed stratified by socio-economic status (SES).

![Figure 5](image2.png)

**Figure 5.** Mean ratings of questions surveyed stratified by language proficiency.
Chinese (E > C), with EP participants posting significantly higher (p < .01) mean scores (M = 4.74) than E > C participants (M = 4.17).

Scores between EP, E > C and participants who felt more proficient in Mandarin Chinese than English (C > E) were significantly different for questions concerning their perception of cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism (p < .01, df = 2, F = 5.314). Post-hoc Tukey comparisons revealed that EP participants rated significantly higher than both E > C (p < .05) and C > E (p < .05) participants.

With regard to questions about identity, there were significant differences between the groups (p < .01, df = 2, F = 7.752). Post-hoc Tukey tests revealed that both EP and C > E participants rated significantly higher (p < .01) than their E > C counterparts for this question type.

Finally, while all three groups rated below 3 on average for questions pertaining to the perceived negative impact of bilingualism (i.e. indicating a general disagreement that bilingualism has negative impact), a significant difference was still found between groups (p < .05, df = 2, F = 3.973). Post-hoc Tukey tests revealed a significant difference between C > E and E > C participants (p < .01), with C > E participants posting significantly higher mean scores (M = 2.95) than the E > C participants (M = 2.29).

Discussion

Overall trends

In general, participants generally possessed positive attitudes and understood the benefits that Chinese–English bilingualism brought them, as seen from their consistently high ratings for the benefits of bilingualism (Figure 1). This is to be expected after years of the government’s emphasis on the pragmatic importance of bilingualism (Zulkifli 2009) that continues to remain an integral part of the school system.

However, while participants still posted positive ratings (above a mean rating of 3 on the scale of 6) when surveyed for their awareness of the cognitive benefits that Chinese–English bilingualism brought, the mean was approximately 0.8 of a point lower than all the other question types surveying the benefits of bilingualism – a trend that exists regardless of how the data were stratified (be it by gender, current occupation, SES or proficiency).

It is difficult to properly account for these comparatively lower scores on these questions. However, it is an often cited issue that the positive cognitive effects of bilingualism have not and are still not well disseminated to the general public (Cavallaro 2005). The Singapore government, mainly through its MOE, has constantly emphasised the importance of Mandarin as a communicative tool and as an asset providing bilingual speakers the opportunity to enter global markets (Lee 2000). However, the concept of transferrable cognitive benefits has not been publicised at all to the best of our knowledge.

The generally low rating of less than 2.5 on a scale of 6 for questions pertaining to the perceived negative impact of one language on the other indicates that youths have moved away from the notion that learning more than one language has negative consequences on the proficiency of one language.

Current occupation

The ratings of university students were significantly lower than their peers (p < .05, df = 3, F = 2.674) in the category of communicative benefits of bilingualism, scoring approximately half a point lower than the other groups. One possible explanation for such a trend may be the fact that all local universities and tertiary institutions utilise English as the medium of instruction and communication. All assignments, exams and courses are required to be written in English – further emphasising the importance of a good command of the English language if they are to succeed at the tertiary level.
Furthermore, when Singaporean youths reach university, they are no longer required to partake in any mandatory Mandarin classes (MOE 2011), nor does Mandarin have an impact on their grades, unlike in the primary, secondary and junior college systems (MOE 2011). This lower status of Mandarin in the university context may explain the reason for this group’s lower ratings as it serves no pragmatic purpose for communication for university students.

**Socio-economic status**

Despite the differences between the different SES tiers not reaching statistical significance, it was found that participants from the working and middle-lower tiers had consistently more positive ratings than their peers from the middle-upper and upper tiers in general. Our data agree with previous research into MTL attitudes by researchers Bokhorst-Heng and Caleon (2009), who also found a ‘relatively greater tendency of students from the lower SES groups to report more positive language attitudes than those from the middle and upper SES groups’ (247).

For example, working and middle-lower SES tiers rated about 9.5% higher than their peers in the middle-upper and upper classes with regard to communicative benefits, and this difference approached statistical significance (p = .052). This could be due to the desire for upward mobility of the individuals within the lower SES classes, to whom bilingual education is likely seen as an additional advantage in securing job offers and in expectation of future employment (Giddens 1997; Lim 1998). This may once again be an issue of pragmatic considerations, with the government’s constant emphasis on language learning for employment opportunities (Iswaran 2009). Thus, the comparatively less economically privileged tiers might value bilingualism more than those from higher economic tiers.

A similar trend was also observed for questions regarding identity. That is, participants from the lower SES groups showed more positive attitudes towards their Chinese-Singaporean ethnicity. This reflects the observations made by other researchers that English-speaking households usually belong to the higher SES tiers, while lower SES families usually have the another non-English languages as the main household language (Vaish, Jamaludeen, and Roslan 2009; Cavallaro and Serwe 2010; Cavallaro and Ng 2014). These trends are also seen in the 2006 Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore (Aman, Vaish, and Bokhorst-Heng 2006; Bokhorst-Heng et al. 2010), where households using English as the dominant home language were found to correlate with higher SES classes and family income, and, within the Chinese community, Mandarin Chinese is predominantly the home language of lower middle class and the Chinese vernaculars of families belonging to even lower SES tiers (see also Zhao and Liu 2008). Consequently, one may hypothesise that the language of the home has a significant impact on the individual’s construction of identity (Zhao and Liu 2008), which may be the reason for higher SES participants posting ratings about 8% lower than their peers from the lower SES bracket in the questions relating to their identity as Chinese Singaporeans. This is because they have been brought up in an English-dominant household during their formative years.

**Language proficiency**

The most significant results were found when participants were stratified by their corresponding language proficiencies.

EP participants posted higher mean scores than their peers whose self-rated English proficiency was better than their Mandarin (E > C) as well as those who felt more proficient in Mandarin (C > E) peers for nearly all types of questions. EP participants rated significantly higher than their peers for perceived communicative benefits (p < .01), cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism (p < .01), identity (p < .01).

On the other hand, C > E participants gave significantly lower ratings for questions pertaining to the perceived negative impact of bilingualism (p < .05) than their E > C peers.
In general, E > C participants likely reflect the majority of the population who has reaped the benefits that can be attained through a good knowledge of English. Conversely, participants claiming to be more dominant in Mandarin perhaps see themselves as disadvantaged in an increasingly ‘English-dominant’ society (Chong and Seilhamer 2014; Tan 2014).

Arguably, EP participants have reaped the benefits of bilingualism, as members of the Chinese-Singaporean community who perceive themselves as ‘truly’ bilingual. The EP participants enjoy the multifaceted benefits of bilingualism, see Chinese as part of their identity and have little perception that learning more than one language concurrently will negatively affect the other. This group represents the ideal bilingual Singaporean, with whom both languages are likely to thrive. However, only 38 out of the 165 participants (23.0%) surveyed across the current occupation groups rated themselves as EP in Mandarin and English – a minority when compared to participants rating themselves as E > C (97 participants, 58.8%).

Furthermore, post-hoc analyses of the differences between groups for the identity category revealed that both EP and C > E participants rated significantly higher (p < .01) than their E > C counterparts for this question type, with no significant differences between EP and C > E participants. When combined, the EP and C > E participants form a 41.2% conglomerate which may be presumed to see the importance of Mandarin Chinese both as pragmatic resource and part of their identity.

**Conclusion**

This study does address the proposed aims in offering an indication of the perceptions of Chinese-Singaporean youths towards the benefits (general, communicative, cognitive and pragmatic) and disadvantages associated with Mandarin–English bilingualism, and how they identify as Chinese–English bilinguals. This corresponds well with the work of Bokhorst-Heng et al. (2010) on language ownership in Singapore. They found an increase in the sense of ownership towards English among Singaporeans and how this contrasts directly with the government’s position that a ‘mother tongue’ is not tied to usage, but to an ideological construct, which does not reflect the reality of linguistic practices in Singapore.

The results show that amongst Chinese-Singaporean youths Mandarin is perceived as pragmatically beneficial and as part of their Chinese-Singaporean identity. One question this study does not answer is to what extent will youths continue to emphasise the importance of Mandarin Chinese to their children, as well as the perceived willingness to intervene if their children’s Mandarin Chinese is found to be poor. However, the sign is there that these youths do feel a sense of ownership towards all the languages in their repertoire, and this bodes well for the future of these languages. A follow-up study is planned to shed more light on the state of language shift amongst Chinese Singaporeans.

On a more positive note, participants in general did not view improvement in one language as being detrimental to their proficiency of the other language, signifying a departure from the stereotypical misconception (Lee 2011) that learning more than one language simultaneously affects individuals negatively. This reflects the positive outcomes of the current education system, but it is still important that parents and educators can continue their present efforts in advocating the benefits of bilingual education.

On the other hand, awareness of the cognitive benefits of bilingualism is still lacking among Chinese-Singaporean youths. Thus, schools and the MOE may consider strongly promoting and raising awareness of the cognitive benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism, which may in turn entice pragmatically motivated Singaporeans to see the additional benefits of Mandarin, consequently raising the status and importance of Mandarin in society’s consciousness.

Consequently, maintenance of Mandarin Chinese amongst Singaporeans should develop on three different levels corresponding to Mandarin’s prestige in Singapore, how it is acquired and how youths as key stakeholders may be motivated. This could begin by the government’s active intervention to increase the prestige and value of Mandarin for pragmatic reasons as China continues to be a
significant global player, which would in turn increase the ‘linguistic capital’ (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991) of Mandarin Chinese in Singapore. This should be done in conjunction with tailoring Chinese lessons and school examinations that are ‘context-sensitive and applicable to the local Chinese community’ (Ng 2014, 373) to underscore the relevance of Mandarin in the local community. Finally, since self-rated language proficiency has been shown as a key variable in youths’ attitude towards bilingualism, the awareness of what constitutes proficiency may be the key to interventions to promote a more stable Mandarin–English bilingualism.

Evidently, the convincing of individuals’ ‘hearts and minds’ (Ager 2005, 1039) is pivotal in the uphill battle for the maintenance of Mandarin Chinese amongst the younger generation given Singapore’s current linguistic situation (Curdt-Christian sen 2014). A possible intervention would be to help youths have a broader view of what language proficiency is. Youths can be encouraged to evaluate their own language proficiency more holistically if parents and educators are able to help them see that language proficiency is inadequately reflected in their language grades at important national examinations that are based on a single evaluation of oral and written proficiency (MOE 2014). Conversely, parents and educators may advocate a positive, holistic mind-set that helps building up a child’s confidence and positive attitudes towards Mandarin by helping them look at aspects of language proficiency (e.g. communicative competence) that the child may excel at. Such interventions could be the key to reversing the trends of youths ‘fearing’ to use Mandarin due to their own perceived incompetence (Oon and Kor 2009), as data from this survey indicate that self-perceived ‘language proficiency’ affects how participants value bilingualism more significantly than other factors such as gender, current occupation group or SES.

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