ABSTRACT. Singapore’s bilingual policy is widely regarded as having been successful. Mostly realized in the educational realm as “language-in-education planning” (Cooper, 1989), where English is legitimized as the medium of instruction and the mother tongues as subjects in the school system (Silver, 2005) the bilingual policy is connected explicitly to overall national goals of economic development and social harmony. In reporting detailed research data collected within the framework of a language in education planning program, this article addresses how language planning can respond to the Singapore context where the dominant spoken language, Mandarin, has been continually constituted as a “problem”. Singapore has undertaken frequent reforms of its Chinese language (CL) teaching system, seeking ever greater levels of achievement and more cohesion in the role of Mandarin as the “culturally” unifying form for the majority of its people. Official policy announcing the two most recent reforms in 2000 and 2004 (Silver, 2005; Tan, 2006) has shifted emphasis towards a newly emerging binary that seems to assume increasing importance in Singapore's language planning paradigm: the English-speaking family (ESF) versus the Chinese-speaking family (CSF). The present article reports on the language proficiency of preschoolers, particularly their oral competence in Mandarin, with the objective of both reflecting on the success, assumptions and strategies of the new policy moves as well as proposing new ways to look at language-in-education planning for Chinese acquisition in a society that is, ethnically-speaking, dominantly Chinese.

KEY WORDS: children, Chinese language, language background, Mandarin competence, Singapore, vocabulary

ABBREVIATIONS: CL – Chinese Language; CLCPRC – Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee; CSF – Chinese speaking family or families; ESF – English speaking family or families; HL – Home language; NTUC – National Trade Union Congress; PAP – People’s Action Party

INTRODUCTION

Singapore’s bilingual policy, initially formulated for the purpose of promoting equal treatment of the constituent mother tongues of
Singaporean society and of encouraging what is understood in Singapore as 'racial harmony', was also from quite early on in its implementation connected explicitly to economic development (Lo Bianco, 2007). In light of subsequent economic globalization, the policy is now widely perceived within Singapore, but also more broadly, as having been remarkably successful in serving both political and economic purposes (e.g. Goh, 2004; Gopinathan et al., 2003; Shepherd, 2005). Characterized as top-down interventionism, the bilingual policy has been played out most intensively in the education arena (Silver, 2005). In other words, the bilingual policy has been promoted as “language-in-education planning” (Cooper, 1989: 33), where English is legitimized as the medium of instruction and the mother tongues as subjects in the school system (Silver, 2005). “Language planning is called for wherever there are language problems. If a linguistic situation for any reason is felt to be unsatisfactory, there is room for a program of language planning” (Haugen, 1966: 52).

In the Singapore context, Mandarin has been continually constituted as a “problem” through government-sanctioned review reports that mark the trajectory of Chinese language development in the national education system. As a result, the country has undertaken frequent reforms of its CL teaching system. The official discourse announcing the two most recent reforms in 2000 and 2004 (Tan, 2006) has shifted emphasis towards a newly emerging binary that appears to be assuming an increasing importance in Singapore’s language planning paradigm: the English-speaking family versus the Chinese-speaking family.

In a 1999 government-sanctioned review report, the Chinese Language Review Committee (1999) formally acknowledged that the student population in Primary 1 from English-speaking families rose from 20% in 1988 to 43% in 1999, arguing that the less CL-able students from the ESF group should be taken care of within a designated CL curriculum with its own pedagogy. In the most recent review report, the Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee (CLCPRC, 2004) found that the number of Chinese students entering Primary 1 who speak predominantly English at home has risen to 50% in 2004 compared to 36% in 1994, subsequently predicting that this number will surpass those who speak Mandarin at home in the next few years in the Singapore Chinese community. With regard to the significant shift from a predominant use of Chinese in informal domains to that of