

Language Use and Identity Across Generations in Singapore

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1. Language policy in Singapore

Singaporean schools were using any one of Singapore's official languages, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil or English, as medium of instruction until the 1956 *All Party Report on Chinese Education* pushed for greater emphasis on English in addition to pupils' mother tongues. This led to a gradual decrease in enrollment in schools with Chinese, Malay and Tamil as languages of instruction and increased enrollment in English-medium schools. In 1987, English was made the medium of instruction in all schools, along with mandatory study of a second 'ethnic' language: Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. In addition, the Speak Mandarin campaign was launched in 1979 to discourage the use of non-Mandarin Chinese languages (or 'dialects' as they are known in Singapore) and promote the use of Mandarin among Chinese Singaporeans. The government contended that dialect use fragmented the Chinese community, whereas Mandarin would play a unifying role. Gopinathan (1994) suggests that the Speak Mandarin policy was also the result of the government's fear that if dialects were allowed to persist, English would eventually become the lingua franca among Chinese Singaporeans.

Kuo and Jernudd (1994) call Singapore's language policy one of 'pragmatic multilingualism' as it prescribes the use of four official languages, each of which enjoys equal de jure status with the others. Though it is spoken by a minority of Singaporeans, Malay has the sole designation as national language owing to Singapore's political history and geographical location. Mandarin Chinese, although not the

mother tongue of the majority of Chinese in Singapore, represents Singapore's largest ethnic group because of its association with Chinese culture and traditions and its value as a language of commerce. Tamil is the language which represents the Indian community, although only about 64 percent of those classified as Indian are of Tamil origin and only 54 percent use Tamil as a principal family language (p. 26). English, the only official language without an Asian origin, is referred to as a 'working language,' as opposed to the other three languages which are known as 'mother tongues.' This results in an official policy which promotes a Singapore 'kept open and progressive through the use of English in education, entertainment, industry and commerce, at the same time as it is kept 'culturally' on a course of communicating cherished Asian values, mainly through the use of ethnic languages.' (p. 30).

Chew (1980) reviewed Hassan's 1977 survey of oral-aural multilingualism and national identity, concluding that 'bilingualism is conducive to the fostering of a Singaporean national identity as group distinctiveness becomes increasingly eroded by various processes of structural and communicative integration.' (p. 252) His prediction at that time was that as a result of compulsory bilingualism, English would become the nation's lingua franca, giving rise to a Singaporean culture made up of both Asian and Western values and norms.

Beardsmore (1994) discusses some of the effects of the recent shift to English as the main language of inter-group communication in Singapore and the shift from Chinese 'dialects' to Mandarin among the Chinese population. He observes that intergenerational differences in language use and in cultural values have become apparent and concludes that 'the linguistic heterogeneity of intergenerational family units may bring in its wake a cultural mosaic . . . cultural perceptions as well as linguistic profiles may vary across generations.' (p. 49)

2. A study of language use and identity across generations in Singapore

In an effort to gather data on intergenerational differences in language use and identity among Singaporeans, 75 students at Nanyang Technological University were asked to complete questionnaires on language use and identity across generations within their families. (The survey questionnaire is provided in the Appendix.). Students were asked to list the languages they use in the order of their importance, indicating where and to whom they are used. In addition, the students were asked to choose three terms (such as 'Chinese', 'Hokkien', 'Singaporean', or 'Asian') that they would use to describe themselves, again in order of importance. The students then interviewed their parents and any living grandparents in order to complete the questionnaire for these generations.

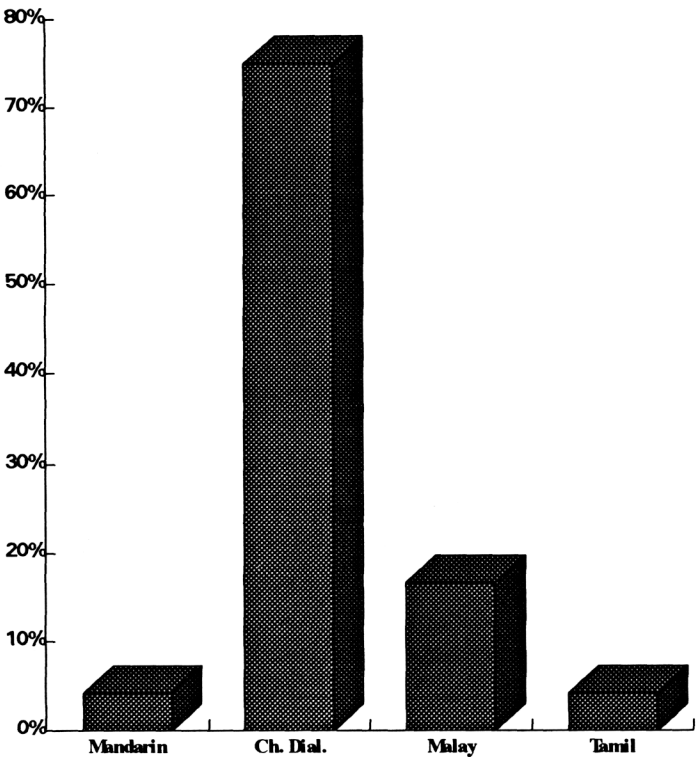
The data was entered using a spreadsheet program and imported into SPSS/RC+ for statistical analysis. Frequencies were computed for the respondents' main languages, reading languages and preferred identities. Main languages were then correlated with preferred identities. Cross-tabulation tables were generated for main language by preferred identity for all respondents.

3. Findings

Analysis of the data reveals that compulsory bilingual education and the accompanying shifts from 'ethnic' languages to English and from Chinese 'dialects' to Mandarin correlate with shifts in language use and identity across generations within Singaporean families.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 show generational shifts in what respondents consider to be their main languages:

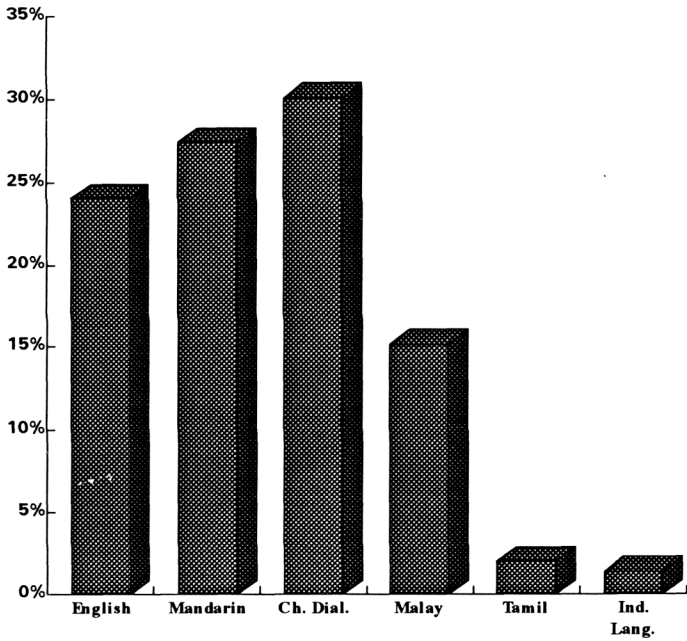
Table 1: Main Language of Grandparents



Note: 72 grandparents responded to this question. Actual numbers were:

Mandarin	3
Chinese dialect	54
Malay	12
Tamil	3

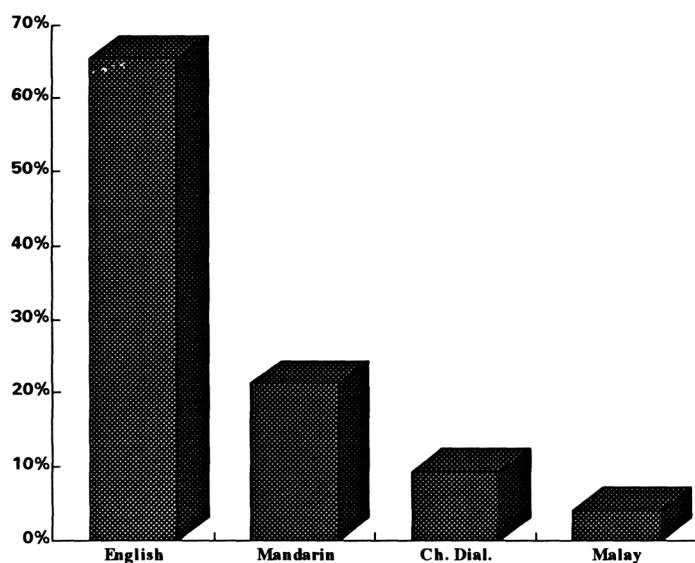
Table 2: Main Language of Parents



Note: 146 parents responded to this question. Actual numbers were:

English	35
Mandarin	40
Chinese dialect	44
Malay	22
Tamil	3
Other Indian lang.	2

Table 3: Main Language of Students

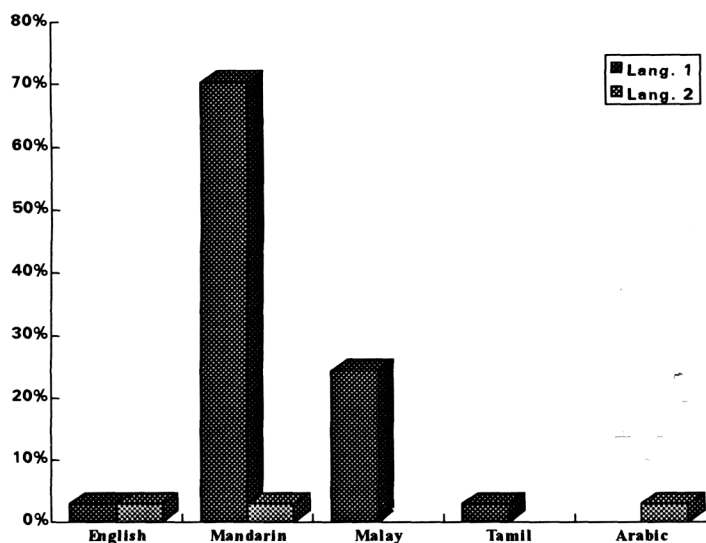


Note: 75 students responded to this question. Actual numbers were:

English	49
Mandarin	16
Chinese dialect	7
Malay	3

Tables 4, 5 and 6 show generational shifts in what respondents claim as languages in which they regularly read:

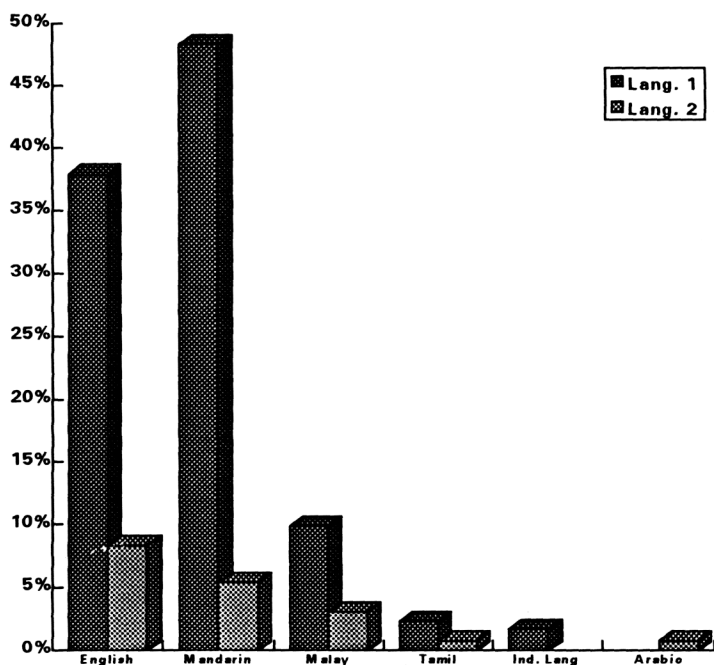
Table 4: Reading Languages of Grandparents



Note: Only 37 grandparents answered the question with appropriate answers. Actual numbers were as follows:

	<u>Language 1</u>	<u>Language 2</u>
English	1	1
Mandarin	26	1
Malay	9	--
Tamil	1	--
Arabic	--	1

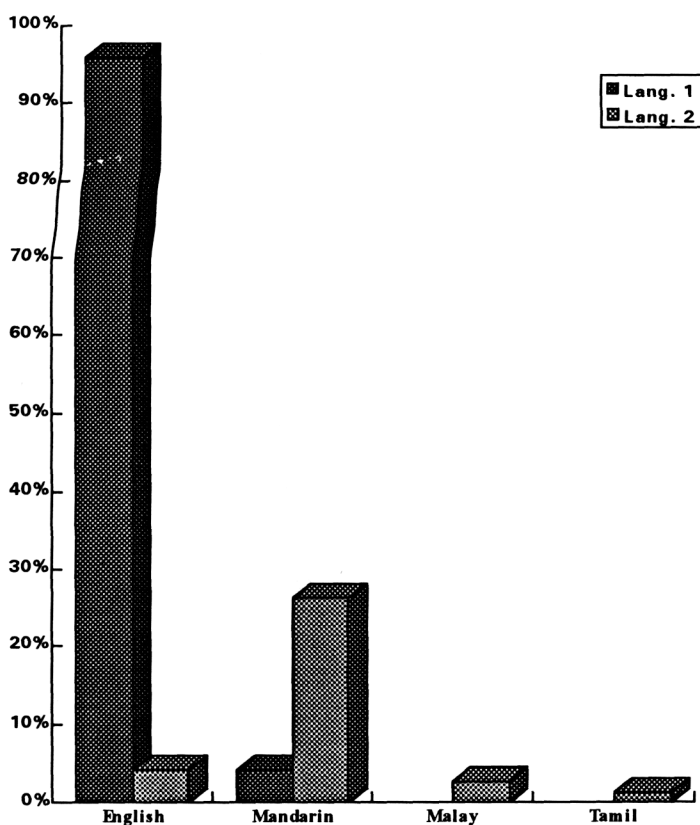
Table 5: Reading Languages of Parents



Note: 132 parents answered the question. Actual numbers were as follows:

	<u>Language 1</u>	<u>Language 2</u>
English	50	11
Mandarin	64	7
Malay	13	4
Tamil	3	1
Other Indian language	2	--
Arabic	--	1

Table 6: Reading Languages of Students

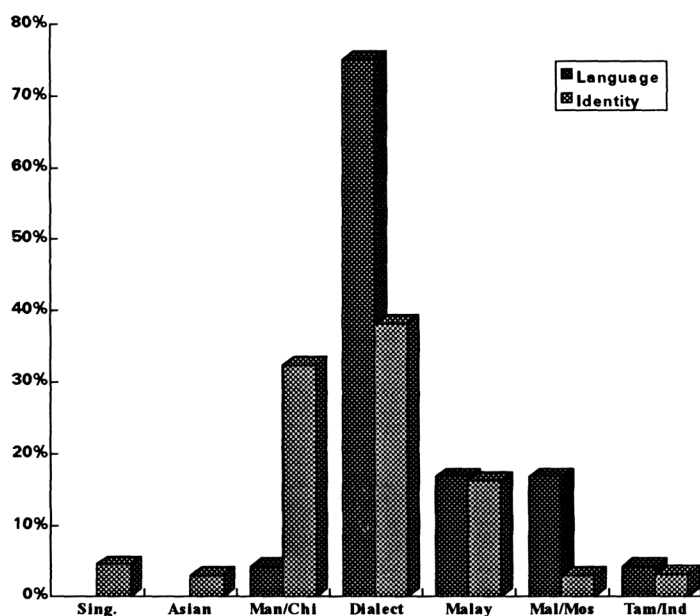


Note: 72 of the 75 students answered the question. Actual numbers were as follows:

	<u>Language 1</u>	<u>Language 2</u>
English	69	3
Mandarin	3	19
Malay	--	2
Tamil	--	1

Tables 7, 8, and 9 show generational shifts in respondents' preferred identities:

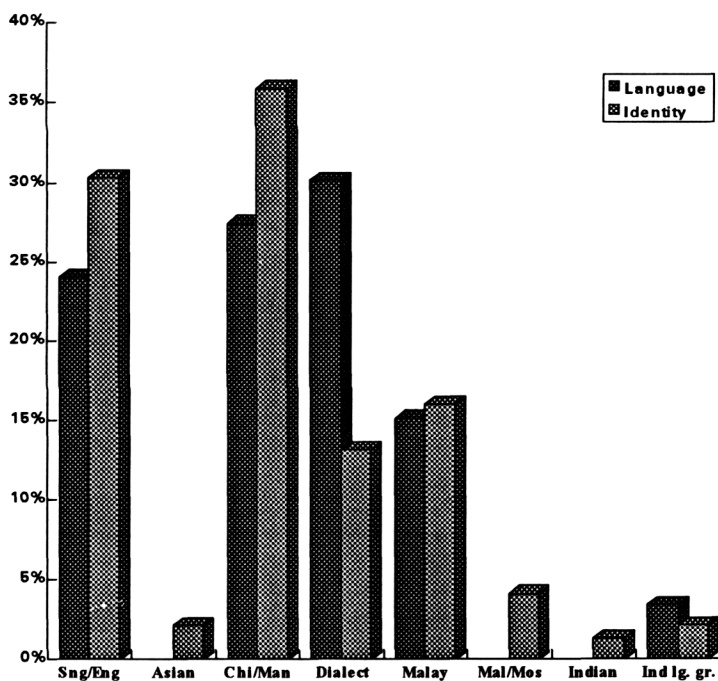
Table 7: Language and Identity Preferences of Grandparents



Note: 68 grandparents responded to the question on identity, 72 to the question on language. Actual identity figures are as follows:

Singaporean	3
Asian	2
Chinese	22
Chinese Dialect group	26
Malay or Malay ethnic group	11
Indian or Indian subgroup	2
Moslem	2

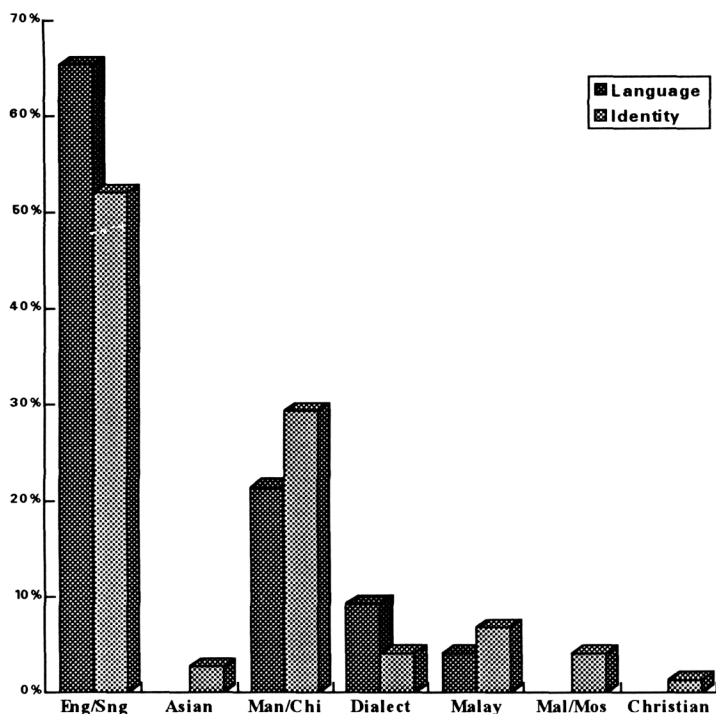
Table 8: Language and Identity Preferences of Parents



Note: 145 parents answered the question on identity, 146 the one on language. Actual figures for identity were as follows:

Singaporean	44
Asian	3
Chinese	52
Chinese dialect group	19
Malay or Malay ethnic group	16
Indian or Indian lang. group	5
Moslem	6

Table 9: Language and Identity Preferences of Students



Note: Actual figures for identity are as follows:

Singaporean	39
Asian	2
Chinese	22
Chinese dialect group	3
Malay	5
Moslem	3
Christian	1

Cross-tabulations for identity by language show that all grandparents whose main language was either a Chinese 'dialect' or Mandarin chose Chinese as their preferred identity. Out of eleven grandparents whose main language

was Malay, ten chose Malay as their preferred identity, while one chose Moslem.

Of the thirty-seven parents who chose Mandarin as their main language, twenty chose Chinese as their preferred identity, while seventeen chose Singaporean. Of the sixteen parents who chose Malay as their main language, thirteen chose Malay as their preferred identity, while three chose Moslem. Of the twenty-eight parents who chose English as their main language, seventeen chose Singaporean as their preferred identity while eleven chose Chinese.

Of the sixteen students who chose Mandarin as their main language, nine chose Singaporean as their preferred identity, while seven chose Chinese. Of the three students who chose Malay as their main language, two chose Malay as their preferred identity, while one chose Singaporean. Of the forty-four students who chose English as their main language, twenty-seven chose Singaporean as their preferred identity, eleven chose Chinese, three chose Malay and three chose Moslem.

4. Discussion

Generational shifts in main language, reading languages and preferred identity are clear, the most frequent choices among Chinese respondents (approximately 80% of the sample) as follows:

	<u>Language</u>	<u>Identity</u>
Students:	English	Singaporean
Parents:	Mandarin	Chinese
Grandparents:	Chinese 'dialects'	Dialect Group

There are clear implications here for the future of Chinese 'dialects' in Singapore, as Mandarin is the preferred Chinese language of all but the oldest generation. This shift to Mandarin, accompanied by a change in identity from Dialect Group to Chinese among the parents' generation, also suggests that the government's desire to forge a broader

Chinese identity, without the exclusiveness of the older generation's dialect groupings, has been realized. This in turn may be contributing to the younger generation's acceptance of an even less exclusive identity as Singaporeans.

There are also implications for non-Mandarin ethnic languages such as Malay and Tamil. If English is perceived as the main language of the younger generation for both speaking and reading, it may well displace ethnic languages in more and more domains. It is, in fact, increasingly common to hear Singaporean teenagers at home speaking to their parents in Malay or Tamil but to their siblings in English. Although a major justification for the policy of mother tongue education within an English-based bilingual program was that each community should maintain its mother tongue in order to retain its traditional cultural values, Saravanan (1994) contends that Tamil is increasingly only a classroom language for children who use English in all domains and Bibi Jan (1994) reports that the use of Malay is declining in quantity, quality, intensity and frequency as a result of the increasing use of English. If these non-Mandarin ethnic languages continue to give way to English in non-school domains, future generations may become less and less proficient in the languages considered to be their 'mother tongues'. It may also become more difficult for these groups to maintain the cultural traditions associated with these languages.

Within the Malay community, there appears to be a shift to English as the preferred language for both speaking and reading. However, regardless of language, identity across generations is either Malay or Moslem. In fact, there appears to be a shift within the younger generation towards Moslem as the first choice for identity. This supports a conclusion drawn by James T. Collins (personal communication) that the badge of identity for young Malays in Singapore and to a lesser extent in Malaysia is becoming less the Malay language and more the religion of Islam.

Unfortunately, there are few Indian respondents in this sample and their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are too diverse to allow us to draw any conclusions. However, Vanitha Saravanan of Nanyang Technological University is currently conducting a study among Indian secondary students which explores their language use, language preference and identity.

The shift to English among the younger generations of all ethnic groups also suggests that Vernacular Singaporean English, also known as Singapore Colloquial English or 'Singlish,' may well continue to spread, providing an informal, localized, nonstandard alternative to Standard Singaporean English that functions in much the same way as the ethnic languages and Chinese dialects of the older generation did in informal domains.

5. Conclusion

This study shows a shift in preferred language for both speaking and reading among Singaporeans of all ethnic groups over the past three generations. Within the Chinese community there has also been a shift in identity from Dialect Group to Chinese to Singaporean which parallels the shift in preferred language. Among the other ethnic groups changes in identity are less clear. Though the sample is admittedly small, Malays appear to either continue to regard themselves first as Malays or as Moslems. In order to substantiate this observation, a study involving a larger number of ethnic Malays should be conducted.

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Appendix: Survey on Language Use and Identity across Generations

Part 1: Language use and identity among students at NTU

1. What was your first language, the one spoken at home with your parents and siblings before you started school?
2. What was your 'second' language at school?
3. Please list all the languages (including Chinese 'dialects') that you speak, in the order of their importance to you.

language: spoken where/to whom?

language: spoken where/to whom?

language: spoken where/to whom?

4. In what language(s) do you regularly read?
5. From the following list, please choose three terms that you would use to describe yourself and list them in the order of their importance to you.

Malay	Indian
Chinese	Punjabi
Teochew	Singaporean
Tamil	Asian
Hokkien	Eurasian
other _____	

Part 2: Language use and identity among parents and grandparents of NTU students

Please interview your parents and, if possible, your grandparents to complete the following.

1. What languages (including Chinese 'dialects') does your mother / father / grandmother / grandfather speak?

language: spoken where/to whom?

language: spoken where/to whom?

language: spoken where/to whom?

2. In what language(s) does your mother/father/grandmother/grandfather regularly read?

3. From the following list, please choose three terms that your mother/father/grandmother/grandfather would use to describe herself/himself and list them in the order of their importance.

Malay	Indian
Chinese	Punjabi
Teochew	Singaporean
Tamil	Asian
Hokkien	Eurasian
other_____	