

Revisiting the past to understand the present: The impact of linguistic colonialism on the Singapore Deaf Community and the evolution of Singapore Sign Language (SgSL)



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Background

Singapore has a history of colonialism, in both Singapore society and the Singapore Deaf Community. This has influenced language ideologies and evolution of both spoken and sign languages. This research examines the impact of linguistic colonialism on the Singapore Deaf Community and how language ideologies of Singapore society influence those of the Deaf community. The factors contributing to historical change of sign language in Singapore will be explored. According to Fontana, et al. (2017, 363), "changes in language attitude have influenced new linguistic practices." This is evident in changes in Deaf education and daily communication practices. Kusters and Sahasrabudhe (2018, 44) share their findings on "academic and everyday perspectives on the differences between gesture and sign." There seems to be a nexus between the researchers' findings on language ideologies concerning sign and gesture, and the beliefs of what constitutes a language, sign and gesture (evident in primary historical sources from Peng, Lim, and Parsons).

Linguistic Landscape and Ecology

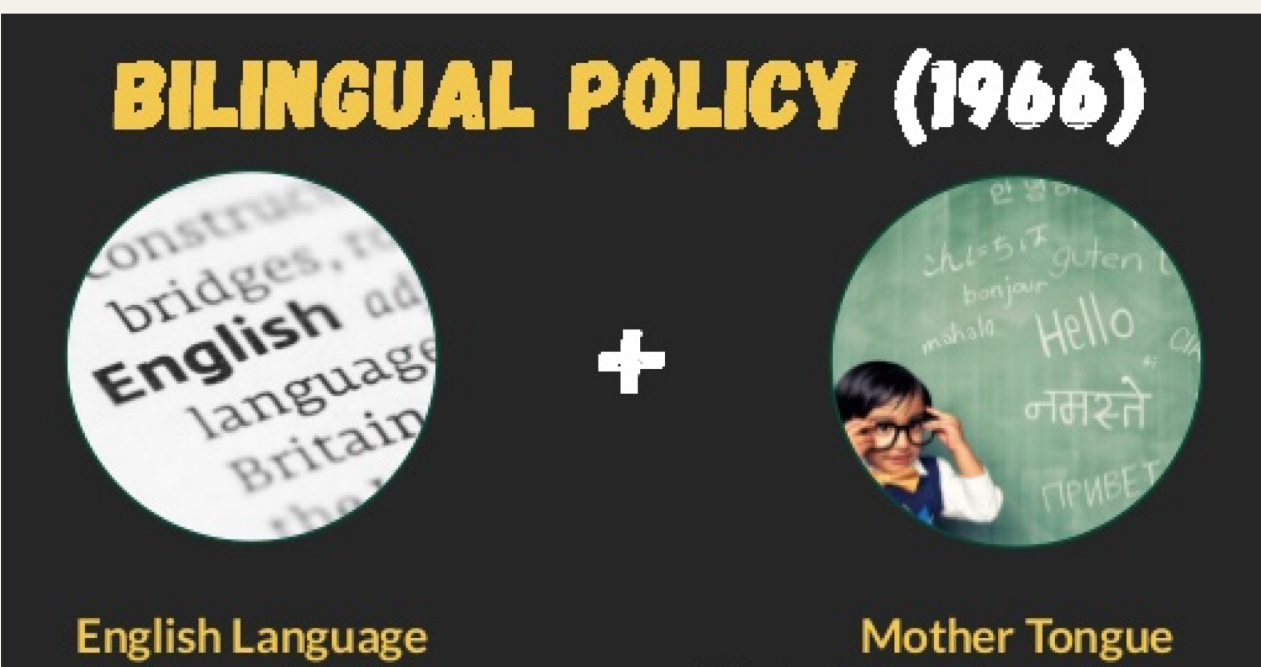
1965



Source: Amazon. (2019).



Source: Chor, T. (2010).



Source: Goh, B. R.. (2017).

1979



Source: Ong, T. (2017).

2000



Source: Wardell, A. (2014).

Deaf History



Mr Peng Tsu Ying
Source: Zheng, Z. (2018).



Source: Mr Lim Chin Heng

- **1950** - Peng Tsu Ying, a Chinese deaf immigrant from Shanghai moved to Singapore with his family. He could not find any school for the deaf or any deaf people. He advertised in the local Chinese newspaper that he could teach deaf children. Parents contacted him about giving their children private tuition (Argila 1975).
- **1954** - He established the first school for the deaf in Singapore, the Singapore Chinese Sign School for the Deaf in 1954 (Argila 1976).

- Peng introduced Shanghaiese Sign Language (SSL) and written Chinese as the language of instruction in the school (Singapore School for the Deaf 50th Anniversary Celebration 1963-2013 2013).
- The Red Cross Society also provided an education for deaf children using oral communication modes around the same time.
- **1963** - the Singapore Chinese Sign School merged with the oral school for the deaf. This became the Singapore School for the Deaf (SSD). The school had a Chinese sign section and an oral section. Peng became its first deaf principal.
- Since SSD's inception, there have been changes in deaf education programming, influenced by trends in Deaf education in the USA.



Mr Lim Chin Heng



Frances Parsons
Source: Getty Images. (2019.)

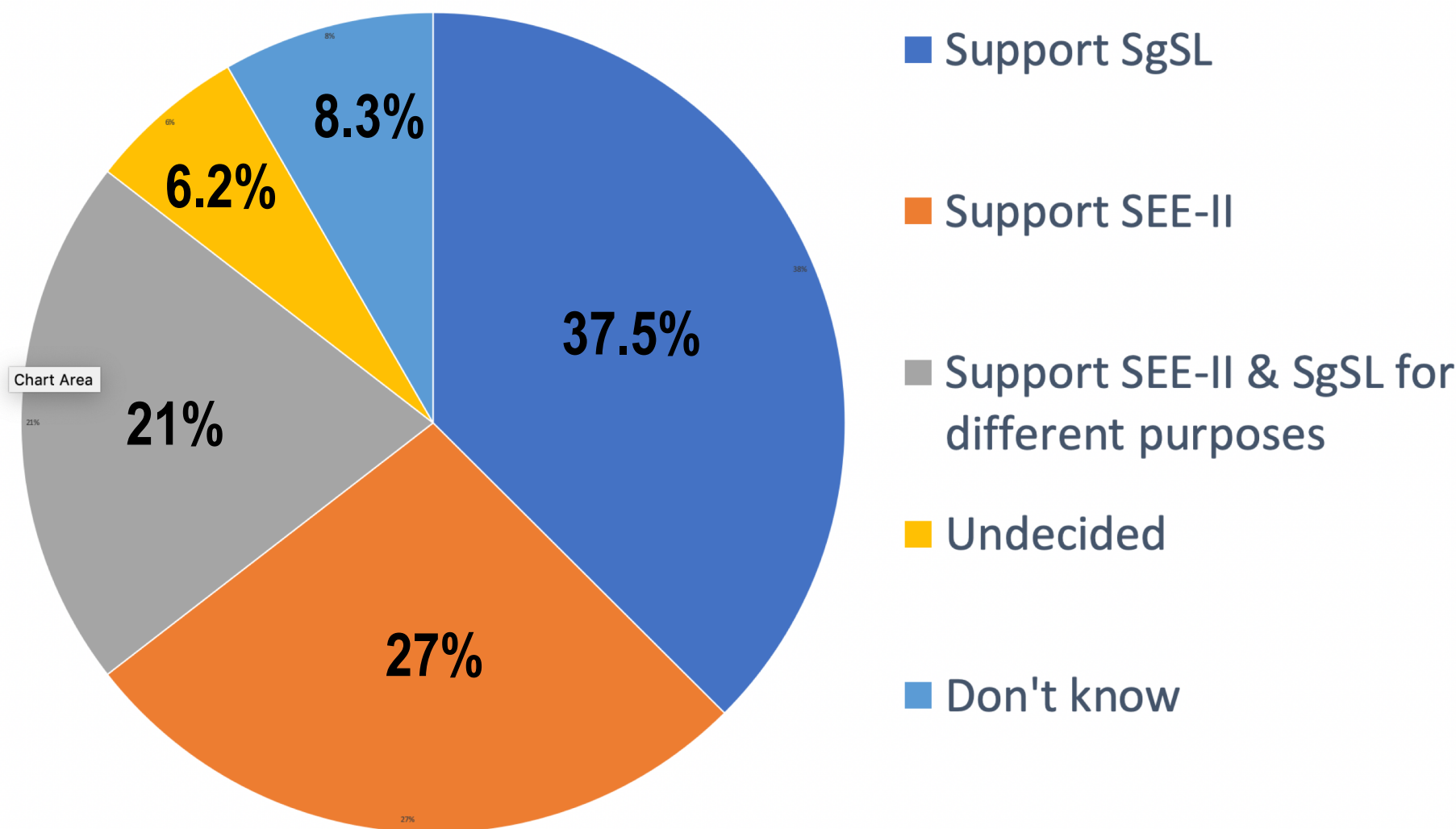
- **1975** – Changes in Deaf education began when Lim, a former pupil of Peng, introduced Signing Exact English II (SEE-II) and American Sign Language (ASL) to the SSD after graduating from Gallaudet College (DPA's Treasurer Named "Outstanding Deaf Citizen" for the Year 1995; Parsons 2005).
- **1976** – Frances Parsons, known as the global ambassador of total communication (TC) from Gallaudet College, came to Singapore. She trained educators of the Deaf in Singapore how to use TC by demonstrating the combined method where sign and speech were used simultaneously (Parsons 2005).
- During the teachers' meeting, Parsons compared "unstructured signs" (natural gestures) from SSL used at SSD with SEE-II, perceived as structured signs that represented English grammar, tense and syntax (Parsons 1976; Parsons 2005).
- Since English was Singapore's official written language, Peng decided to do away with SSL and implemented the use of SEE-II. This decision came about from observations that the students were using unstructured signing constantly but had a limited few hours of classes involving reading and writing in Chinese at school. Therefore, SSD began to incorporate SEE-II signs with spoken English in 1977, and they phased out the Chinese Sign Section by 1978 (Gertz and Boudreault 2015).

Methodology

- Qualitative Research
 - Participant observation
 - Autoethnography
 - Interviews - 48 deaf and hard of hearing people
 - 45 Chinese, 2 Malay, 1 Indian descent
 - 22 women / 26 men (self-identified)
- Archival research (Gallaudet Archives, SAdDeaf's Signal newsletters, Singapore School for the Deaf yearbook, academic literature, newspaper clippings, Youtube videos, etc..)

General Research Findings

Language attitudes among Deaf and hard-of-hearing (48 interviews)



- Differing language attitudes and beliefs about what does and does not constitute a (sign) language.
- When asked which language deaf people should use, 18 reported SgSL; 13 "SEE"; 10 both SgSL & SEE; 3 undecided; and 4 "don't know."
- Overall, 23 (48%) support the use of SEE-II.
- Range of Identity descriptors: D/deaf, hard-of-hearing, hearing impaired, deaf-mute, persons with hearing loss (PWHL), non-signing hearing impaired (NSHI)
- In-fighting among individuals in the community- SgSL versus SEE-II debate (Tay 2018).
- People talk about which language *should* be used, but often the actual language practices are different.

Commentary on Language Debate

Name: Ned (Pseudonym)
Gender: Male
Age: 37
Ethnicity: Chinese
Background: deaf family, native SSL user

Q: Do you think SEE-II benefits Deaf children?

A: Yes, SEE is a must! Sure, it benefits deaf children. As it enforces the sentence to be gestured out word by word in a proper flow. I see most of deafs normally writing in broken English so I believe SEE would help develop good writing skills.

Q: What about SSL or SgSL?

A: I used SSL to communicate with my family. I had no choice. For SgSL, I am not familiar with it, hence can't comment on it.

Q: Do you value SSL?

A: Not really, SSL is similar to Native Sign Language (NSL) (gesturing only important words), i.e. if you want to say you want to go to toilet, you just gesture "go toilet".

Participant Observation

"SEE is good for learning English because it includes all the grammatical aspects of English such as past tense. SgSL is broken English just like Singlish!"

"No! SEE is not a language but a system/code. SgSL is a true language!" (Tay, 2018).

(*Field notes from participant observation during the SgSL versus SEE-II debate session at the Singapore National Deaf Youth Camp (May 20 to 22 2016).

Analysis

- Data shows very active debate on which language should be used in the Deaf community and Singapore society
- Interviewees do not share a common view of SgSL as the natural language of Deaf people in Singapore, or even what constitutes SgSL or SEE-II, e.g. some view SgSL as an indication of "broken English," "incomplete", and/or view SEE as good for teaching English.
- Data indicate that language, power, and identity are linked in some expected and surprising ways.
- Some individuals appear to be conflicted about their dual / multicultural identities as Singaporeans and deaf individuals.
- English is perceived as superior to sign language and other spoken languages
- Language attitudes appear to influence actual language use in varying degrees depending on the context.

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