



A Conceptual Exploration of Early Ability Grouping and Its Potential Impact on Generation Alpha Mother-Tongue Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

As a small nation spanning just 750 km² and lacking natural resources, Singapore relies heavily on human capital development to sustain its economic resilience and prosperity. Its linguistically diverse population where Malay is the national language and English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil are the official languages, has produced a unique polyglossic sociolinguistic environment. Since independence, Singapore has implemented a bilingual education policy aimed at ensuring proficiency in English as the primary working language while maintaining competence in designated mother tongue languages. However, the growing dominance of English in daily life has raised concerns about the sustained use, mastery, and transmission of mother tongue languages, particularly among younger generations. This conceptual paper explores the potential role of ability-based grouping in the teaching and learning of mother tongue languages among Generation Alpha students in Singapore. Drawing on existing literature on differentiated instruction, language learning, and bilingual education, the paper argues that ability-based grouping may enable instruction to be better aligned with learners' varying language proficiency levels, thereby supporting comprehension, engagement, and confidence in mother tongue learning. The paper also critically discusses the pedagogical and policy challenges associated with implementing differentiated instruction within a bilingual school context and considers how ability-based grouping could contribute to strengthening mother tongue language teaching at the primary school level. Finally, directions for future empirical research are proposed.

Keywords: Ability-Based Grouping; Bilingual Education; Generation Alpha; Mother Tongue Languages; Teaching and Learning

1. Introduction

Singapore, originally inhabited by the indigenous Malay population, has undergone significant sociolinguistic shifts because of increasing ethnic diversity brought about by rapid economic development. In the early period, mother tongues were largely maintained, particularly Malay, which was selected as the lingua franca to facilitate communication among communities from diverse ethnic backgrounds. However, sustained economic growth and the large influx of migrants seeking employment and economic opportunities in Singapore have had profound effects on all mother tongues, reshaping patterns of language use, intergenerational transmission, and linguistic identity as economic instrumentalism and demographic change privilege English and other economically valued languages (Kwan-Terry, 2000; Wee, 2003; Mathew et al., 2020).

Beyond its role as a lingua franca, Malay was also formally introduced into the education system during the colonial period, following concerted efforts by local communities as well as foreign scholars. As the principal native language of the Malay Peninsula, Malay was viewed as a central driving force in the formation of an independent nation to be led by the local population. Through a series of language-related developments and struggles involving organisations, political parties, and individuals, Malay underwent a unique historical trajectory before its status was elevated across the Malay Archipelago. A similarly significant linguistic

transformation occurred in Singapore, where the status of Malay underwent more radical change following the People's Action Party's (PAP)¹ assumption of political leadership in 1959.

Since the PAP administration, Singapore's language policy has been characterised as one of multilingualism or language pluralism. Singapore recognises four official languages: English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. Three of these, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil are the ethnic languages of the population, while English, a colonial legacy, functions as the language of administration, wider communication, and work.

Consequently, Singapore's sociolinguistic landscape is highly complex, shaped by the coexistence of four official languages alongside more than ten so-called "minor" languages. These minor languages are spoken by relatively small segments of the population and hold no official status, including Javanese, Bawean, Banjar, Bugis, Arabic, and others. In addition, a wide range of Chinese dialects, such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hainanese, continue to be used within specific communities. Together, these features illustrate patterns of multilingualism and polyglossia in Singapore. Regarding the selection of a national language, Malay was designated shortly after the PAP came to power in 1959. This language policy is formally articulated in the Singapore Independence Act of 1965, as follows:

- (1) Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English shall be the four official languages in Singapore.
- (2) The national language shall be Malay language and shall be in Roman script, provided that:
 - a) no persons shall be prohibited or prevented from using or from learning any other language.
 - b) nothing in this section shall prejudice the right of the government to preserve and sustain the use and study of the language of any other community in Singapore. (Constitution of the Republic of Singapore 1965, s 153A(1)-(2))

As can be observed in the Act, in addition to recognising four official languages, Malay was also designated as the national language, written in the Roman (Rumi) script. The Act stipulates that no individual shall be prohibited or prevented from using, teaching, or learning any other language, and that nothing in the Act shall prejudice the Government's right to preserve the use and study of the languages of other communities in Singapore. The Government's commitment to a bilingual or multilingual policy, rather than a monolingual one, has been widely regarded as a key unifying catalyst in the transformation of a plural society into a shared national identity.

Nevertheless, following Singapore's separation from Malaysia, the population became increasingly aware that Malay did not enjoy a particularly promising future. The role of the national language has often been described as "more ceremonial than functional." In contrast, English emerged as the most important official language, as noted by De Souza: "The de facto dominant working language is beyond doubt, English." (De Souza, 1980, p. 116).

Language policy in the Republic of Singapore is closely intertwined with language-in-education policy, both of which are strongly shaped by the country's political development. It is evident that shifts in Singapore's political landscape resulted in changes to language education policy. By the late 1960s, efforts were made to teach Science and Mathematics in English in Malay-medium schools. Language policy within the education domain thus further elevated the status of English as the dominant and widely used language, particularly in the fields of science and technology.

The rising status of English in Singapore's education system led to a decline in enrolment in non-English medium schools (Malay, Chinese, and Tamil medium schools). English-medium schools, by contrast, became increasingly popular among the population. Beyond the intrinsic value of English itself, employment prospects emerged as a key factor influencing parental school choice. Greater access to knowledge in science and technology required a strong command of English, while the economic value of mother tongues continued to diminish in the labour market. During this period, the level of difficulty of Malay taught in schools was also reduced, and from year 1969 onwards, Malay was assessed at a level two years below that of the first-language examination.

Following the eventual closure of Malay-, Tamil-, and Chinese-medium schools due to declining enrolments, Singapore's education system has, since 1984, been centred almost exclusively on English-medium instruction, apart from Mandarin education. Mandarin received explicit state support through the establishment of the Special Assistance Plan (SAP), which allows selected schools to offer both English and Mandarin as first languages. As noted by Sim (2023):

The Ministry of Education (MOE) announced the SAP on 30 November 1978. Implemented in 1979, the long-term plan aimed to develop nine Chinese-medium secondary schools into effectively bilingual institutions with

standards of English comparable to those of English-stream schools. The scheme entailed a heavier curriculum that emphasised the learning of both English and Chinese for pupils in the selected schools.

With the introduction of the National School System in 1987, all children were required to learn English as their first language in school, except for SAP schools. Since 1966, the Government has consistently emphasised bilingualism as the cornerstone of Singapore's education policy. The justifications for this bilingual policy include:

- (1) promoting national integration through inter-ethnic communication.
- (2) enabling political continuity across diverse cultures.
- (3) fostering a sense of identity and belonging among individuals and ethnic communities; and
- (4) expanding employment opportunities.

In the Singapore context, bilingualism refers to proficiency in English as the first language alongside one of the other official languages (Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil), as a second language. The English-medium education system entails a longer duration of English instruction in schools compared to mother tongues, with subjects such as Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies taught in English. The second language (Malay, Mandarin (in non-SAP schools), or Tamil), is taught as a single subject within the curriculum.

It is therefore evident that the bilingual education system implemented since Singapore's early independence places significantly greater emphasis on English than on the other local languages. Roksana A. (1990), in a study of Malay language use among the Malay community in Geylang, Singapore, found that Malay was used more frequently in interactions with the older generation, whereas English was more dominant among younger speakers when communicating with peers of the same or younger age groups.

Other scholars, such as Gupta (1994) and Pakir (1991), through their studies on language maintenance and shift, have argued that education policy has led to a significant decline in both the use of and proficiency in mother tongues, particularly among younger generations. Gupta (1994) found that children in Singapore now demonstrate stronger proficiency in English than in their respective mother tongues. This is attributed to the habitual and frequent use of English across a wide range of daily activities, which consequently restricts opportunities for mother-tongue use. Pakir (1991) similarly observed that sociocultural identities have been reshaped by the dominance of English, thereby posing challenges to the sustainability of Singapore's mother tongues.

Population census data from 2020 further corroborate these findings. According to the Singapore Department of Statistics, English has become the most frequently used language at home, increasing to 48.3% in 2020 from 32.3% in 2010. In contrast, the use of mother tongues (Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil) as home languages has continued to decline (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2021).

Parental Influence and Domain Shift in Malay Language Use

The linguistic environment, particularly regarding Malay, was examined in greater depth by Kamsiah Abdullah (2000), who investigated the attitudes of the Singapore Malay community towards the Malay language. Her study highlighted the role of parents in maintaining the use of Malay at home and in supporting high levels of language proficiency in their children's education. The findings indicate that parents with higher educational attainment tend to prioritise the use of English in the home, thereby increasing the likelihood of language shift among their children. Consistent with these findings, Li Wei et al. (1997) similarly examined language shift within the Singapore Malay community, focusing on parental influence. Their study revealed that parental attitudes towards Malay and English significantly shape children's language choices, particularly in educational settings and everyday communication.

The habitual use of English has also extended beyond the domain of secular education. Rohan Nizam Basheer (2008) reported that only 36% of 108 respondents aged 12–17 who attended Islamic religious education programmes preferred instruction in Malay, while the majority (64%) preferred English-medium instruction. This finding suggests that the religious domain, traditionally regarded as one of the most resilient spaces for Malay language use has also been increasingly challenged by the dominance of English.

Noor Aisha (2011) further concluded that Malay identity among Singaporean youth is complex and shaped not only by language, but also by religion and national identity. She argues that many Malay youths face challenges in balancing modern lifestyles and the need to communicate across ethnically and linguistically diverse environments with the preservation of Malay linguistic heritage.

Beyond Malay, Chinese and Tamil have experienced similar trajectories, with declining use as home languages and as dominant means of intra-community communication. Findings from a recent report by the Institute of Policy Studies (2024) highlight language-use patterns among younger parents. Survey and census data indicate that English is increasingly becoming the *de facto* home language in Singapore, particularly among younger

parents. The study reports that 61% of parents aged between 26 and 35 use English when communicating with their children, compared to lower proportions among older parental cohorts. This language shift is driven by pragmatic motivations, as parents perceive English to offer greater advantages in education, social mobility, and inter-ethnic communication.

At the same time, a widening gap has emerged between linguistic identity and actual language use in Singapore. Survey and sociolinguistic research indicate that an increasing number of Singaporeans, while continuing to identify ethnically as Chinese, Malay, or Indian, report English as their dominant or primary language of use and, in some cases, as their perceived mother tongue (Mathews et al., 2020; Tan, 2014). Scholars have characterised this trend as a shift towards English-dominant or quasi-monolingual linguistic practices, raising concerns about its implications for cultural continuity, linguistic diversity, and the intergenerational transmission of ethnic languages (Kwan-Terry, 2000; Wee, 2003). These developments underscore the need for renewed and sustained efforts in mother tongue language maintenance, extending beyond formal schooling to include families, communities, and wider social domains.

It can therefore be argued that, in addition to educational factors and the broader social environment, parental attitudes and language choices play a crucial role in shaping children's language selection and proficiency. Wee (2011) further critiques the limited linguistic rights afforded to speakers of vernacular languages. He argues that although national policy ostensibly supports multilingualism, English is frequently prioritised in practice. This position aligns with Rubdy's (2008) observation of ideological contradictions within Singapore's language policy, which have indirectly contributed to the marginalisation of mother-tongue languages.

Erosion Of Mandarin as A Home Language in Singapore

Botha (2025) identifies social networks among Singaporeans as a key factor accelerating language shift towards English, driven by patterns of language use in both formal domains (education, administration, and commerce) and informal domains (home and social interactions). Botha (2025) further argues that English has overtaken Mandarin as the dominant home language within the Chinese community in Singapore. English is no longer merely a second or "additional" language, but functions as the *de facto* first language in everyday practice. According to Botha, this shift reflects broader changes in the linguistic ecology of a post-colonial society, in which mother tongues or heritage languages are increasingly weakened or relegated to largely symbolic functions. Nevertheless, this shift is not uniform, as it varies according to age, social class, and network structures. Botha concludes that the shift towards English in Singapore is neither incidental nor accidental, but rather reinforced by network dynamics that have significant sociolinguistic implications for the maintenance of mother-tongue languages.

Declining Use of Tamil in The Family Domain

Tamil, which is designated as one of Singapore's official languages, has experienced similar developments. Indians constitute approximately 9% of Singapore's population according to the 2020 census and represent a linguistically diverse community, with mother tongues including Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati, Urdu, and Malayalam. Census data from the Singapore Department of Statistics indicate that English is the most widely used language among the Indian community, with 59.2% reporting English as the primary home language in 2020. Only 2.5% of Indians aged five and above reported using Tamil frequently at home.

This trend is also discussed by Shanmugam Kadakara (2015) in his study *Status of the Tamil Language in Singapore: An Analysis of the Family Domain*, which argues that a language shift has occurred within Tamil-speaking communities. He reports that the proportion of Tamil speakers using the language at home declined from approximately 42.9% in 2000 to about 36.7% in 2010. This shift is attributed to parental perceptions of Tamil as having limited economic value, despite expressed loyalty to the language and culture. Such tensions have adverse effects on younger generations, constraining their linguistic competence and development.

These concerns were articulated earlier by A. Mani and S. Gopinathan (1983), who examined the acquisition and use of Tamil in Singapore and concluded that "subtractive bilingualism" was occurring among Tamil speakers. In this context, children acquired English as the dominant language at the expense of their mother tongue, Tamil.

Shared Trends in Mother-Tongue Language Shift in Singapore

Taken together, it is evident that all three major mother-tongue language groups in Singapore face similar challenges. Figure 1 clearly shows a strong and consistent shift towards English as the most frequently spoken

home language in Singapore from 2000 to 2020. Over this 20-year period, the proportion of residents aged five years and above who speak English most frequently at home more than doubled, increasing from 23.0% in 2000 to 48.3% in 2020. By 2020, English had overtaken all other languages to become the dominant home language in Singapore.

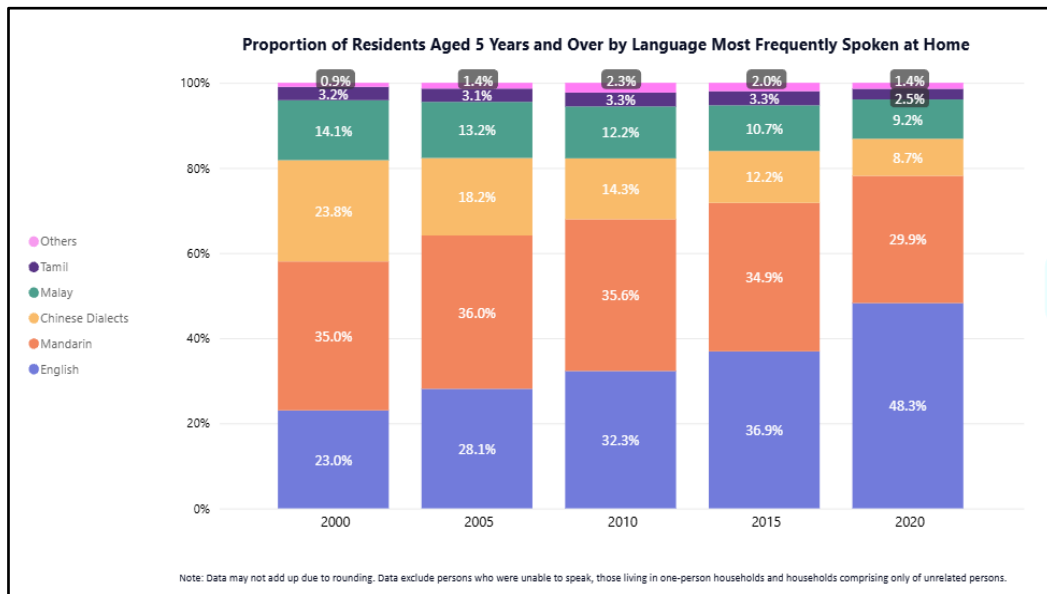


Figure 1. Singapore Department of Statistics. (2021). Home language spoken at home. Census of Population 2020.

In contrast, the use of mother tongue languages at home has declined steadily over the same period. Mandarin, while remaining the most spoken mother tongue, shows a gradual decrease from 35.0% in 2000 to 29.9% in 2020. The decline is even more pronounced for Chinese dialects, which fell sharply from 23.8% to 8.7%, reflecting a long-term language shift within Chinese households. Similarly, Malay usage decreased from 14.1% to 9.2%, and Tamil remained consistently low, fluctuating around 2–3% before settling at 2.5% in 2020.

Overall, the graph highlights a clear language transition towards English-dominant homes, likely driven by factors such as English-medium education, its role as the working language, and its perceived importance for social mobility. At the same time, it signals a gradual erosion of mother tongue use within the home, particularly among younger generations. This trend raises important implications for early mother tongue learning, suggesting that stronger and earlier educational interventions may be necessary to support sustained mother tongue proficiency in an increasingly English-dominant home environment. Issues related to language teaching and learning warrant serious consideration. A critical question that emerges is whether existing pedagogical approaches remain appropriate for contemporary learners, particularly those belonging to Generation Alpha.

It is therefore open to question whether mother-tongue teaching strategies developed for earlier generations (whose mother tongue functioned as their dominant language), remain relevant for younger cohorts, particularly Generation Alpha, the majority of whom use English as their dominant language and possess only limited proficiency in their respective mother tongues. This raises the critical issue of whether it is pedagogically appropriate for mother-tongue teachers to rely exclusively on the mother tongue for classroom instruction in contexts where students' language abilities are highly heterogeneous. Within a single classroom, learners may vary considerably in their linguistic profiles, including those whose proficiency is stronger in the mother tongue, those who are more proficient in English, and those who demonstrate relatively balanced bilingual competence across both languages. Students with diverse linguistic backgrounds and varying levels of mother-tongue proficiency are grouped together within the same classroom for mother-tongue language instruction as illustrated in figure 2 below:

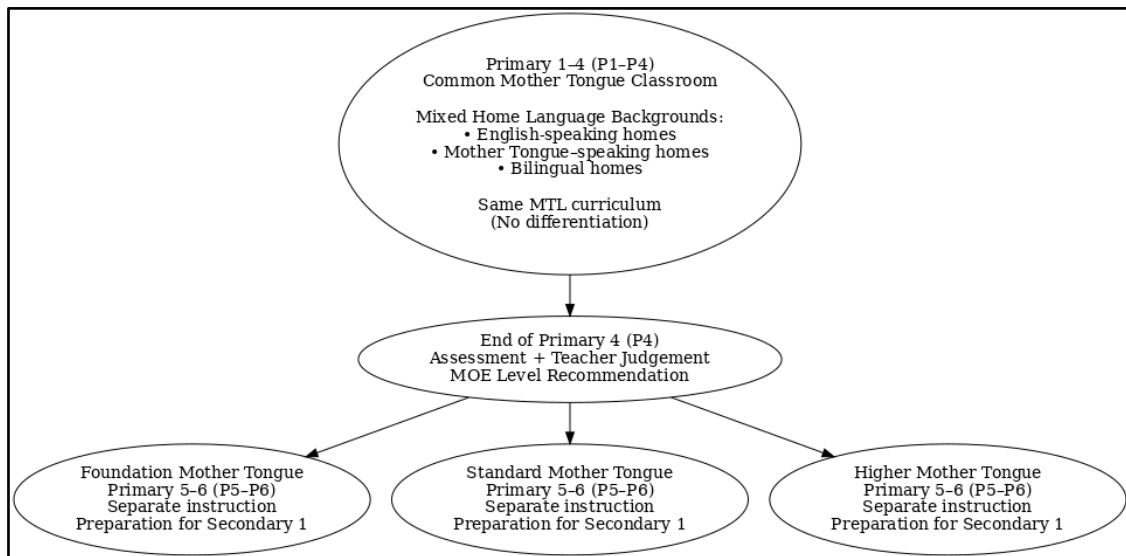


Figure 2. Mother Tongue Language Learning in Primary Schools. (Current policy of the Singapore Ministry of Education, 2025)

Primary 1 To Primary 4 (P1–P4)

All pupils follow a common Mother Tongue Language (MTL) curriculum—Malay, Chinese, or Tamil. The primary focus during this stage is the development of foundational literacy skills, oral communication, and cultural understanding. There is no streaming or differentiation by proficiency level for Mother Tongue Languages during this period.

End of Primary 4 (P4)

At the end of Primary 4, pupils are assessed based on their performance in the Mother Tongue Language. Drawing on assessment outcomes and teachers' professional judgment, the Ministry of Education (MOE) recommends an appropriate learning level for Primary 5 and Primary 6. These levels include:

- **Foundation Mother Tongue**, for pupils who require additional language support.
- **Standard Mother Tongue**, for most pupils; and
- **Higher Mother Tongue**, for pupils who demonstrate higher levels of proficiency and strong interest in the language.

Primary 5 To Primary 6 (P5–P6)

Pupils continue their learning according to the recommended level (Foundation, Standard, or Higher). This differentiated approach allows the pace and depth of instruction to be better aligned with individual learners' abilities and learning needs, thereby preparing pupils more effectively for the transition to secondary education.

2. Method

As this is a conceptual paper, no primary empirical data have been collected at this stage. To examine the feasibility and effectiveness of the proposed model, a future study could employ a mixed-methods approach involving Primary 1 pupils and Mother Tongue Language (MTL) teachers.

At the point of entry into Primary 1, pupils could undergo a language-readiness assessment covering key areas such as listening comprehension, oral communication, vocabulary and emergent literacy. Background data on pupils' prior exposure to and use of their Mother Tongue at home could also be collected through a short parent questionnaire. These data would help establish the extent of variation in MTL readiness among pupils at school entry.

The quantitative data could be complemented by teacher interviews or surveys to examine teachers' experiences of managing differing levels of MTL proficiency within mixed-readiness classrooms and their views on the potential benefits and challenges of earlier differentiation.

A subsequent longitudinal study could compare pupils receiving readiness-based differentiated instruction from Primary 1 with those learning under the existing model. Pupils' language development could be monitored

over time to determine whether earlier differentiation provides more appropriate instructional support and helps reduce initial proficiency gaps.

The proposed methodology would therefore provide empirical evidence to evaluate the feasibility of the conceptual model presented in this paper, rather than assuming the effectiveness of early readiness-based grouping in advance.

3. Results and Discussion

Theoretical Foundations of The Proposed Model

The conceptual basis for this paper is informed by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) and Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis (2000). Vygotsky emphasised that learning occurs through social interaction and that learners progress most effectively when appropriate support or scaffolding is provided within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This suggests that instructional approaches should be responsive to learners' existing knowledge and language abilities. Learners with similar levels of Mother tongue language proficiency may benefit from instruction that is more closely matched to their current developmental needs, allowing teachers to provide targeted scaffolding within each group's ZPD.

Similarly, Cummins argued that proficiency in one language can support the development of another, highlighting the importance of recognising learners' linguistic backgrounds and prior language experiences. Together, these theories provide a foundation for differentiated instruction and support the view that learners with varying levels of Mother Tongue proficiency may benefit from targeted pedagogical approaches that address their specific learning needs.

Drawing on existing theoretical perspectives on language development and bilingual education, this paper argues that differentiated instructional approaches and proficiency-based grouping in Mother Tongue education may be more pedagogically effective if introduced earlier in primary schooling, specifically from Primary 1 rather than at the end of Primary 4. Rather than presenting empirical findings, this argument is grounded in established theories of language learning that emphasise the importance of early, well-aligned instructional support for learners with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

From this perspective, the language in which a child demonstrates greater proficiency functions as a powerful cognitive resource, enabling higher-order thinking, problem-solving, and conceptual understanding. This suggests that instructional environments which take learners' linguistic readiness into account from the early years may be more effective in supporting sustained language development. When children with strong English proficiency are provided with structured and supportive opportunities to learn their Mother Tongue from the outset of formal schooling, beginning at Primary 1, they are more likely to develop learner confidence and engagement, which are important conditions for long-term language learning.

Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis (2000) further complements this argument by proposing that the development of a second language is partly dependent on the level of proficiency attained in the first language. Underlying cognitive and academic skills, such as comprehension strategies, metalinguistic awareness, and academic language functions are transferable across languages when a sufficiently developed linguistic foundation is present. Together, Sociocultural Theory and the Interdependence Hypothesis underscore the foundational role of early language development and highlight the importance of instructional support that is responsive to learners' linguistic starting points.

Within the Singapore context, students enter Primary 1 with varying levels of Mother Tongue exposure due to increasingly English-dominant home environments. In such circumstances, delaying structured grouping until the end of Primary 4 may limit the timeliness of support for learners who require targeted assistance in developing foundational literacy skills. By the time differentiation is formally introduced, gaps in language proficiency may have already widened, shifting instructional efforts from early support to later remediation.

While differentiated instruction within mixed-ability classrooms is intended to address learner diversity, its effectiveness is contingent upon teachers' capacity to diagnose learner needs accurately and to design multiple responsive learning pathways simultaneously. Research suggests that implementing differentiated instruction can be challenging in classrooms with wide ability ranges and constrained instructional time (Yuen et al., 2023). In Mother Tongue classrooms, these challenges are further compounded by increasing linguistic heterogeneity. In this light, early ability-based grouping can be understood not as a replacement for differentiated instruction, but as a complementary structural mechanism that reduces within-class variability and enables more effective scaffolding within learners' ZPD.

Importantly, the proposed approach conceptualises learner ability as dynamic rather than fixed. Early grouping is not intended to be rigid or exclusionary; instead, it allows for instructional alignment during a critical period of language development. With appropriate support, learners' language competencies are expected to evolve at different rates, creating opportunities for regrouping or reintegration at later stages, particularly at the end of Primary 4. This flexible and developmental perspective forms the conceptual basis for the proposed instructional model discussed in the following section.

Dynamic Early Ability-Based Grouping Model

The proposed model below (Figure 3), reconsiders the timing of ability-based grouping in Mother Tongue language learning by shifting structured support to the point of school entry. Under the current model, students with diverse Mother Tongue language abilities receive the same curriculum and instructional approach from Primary 1 to Primary 4, with differentiation largely occurring within mixed-ability classrooms. Formal ability-based grouping is introduced only at the end of Primary 4, by which time language gaps may have widened, resulting in placement into Higher, Standard, or Foundation Mother Tongue streams. Although differentiated instruction is intended to address learner variability, its effectiveness is constrained when teachers must manage wide ability ranges within a single classroom.

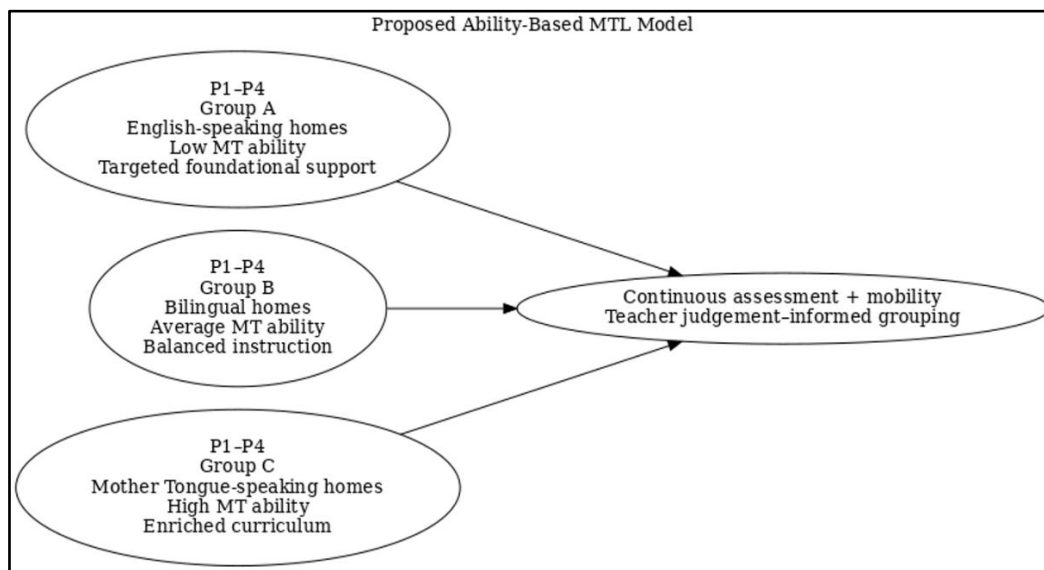


Figure 3. Mother Tongue Language Learning in Primary Schools. (*Current policy of the Singapore Ministry of Education, 2025*)

Drawing on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis, the proposed model introduces early, flexible grouping based on learners' language readiness and home language dominance at Primary 1. English-dominant learners receive targeted scaffolding through strategies such as translanguaging and gradual increases in Mother Tongue input, while Mother Tongue dominant learners follow the standard curriculum with enrichment.

Crucially, grouping is conceived as developmental rather than fixed. Continuous formative assessment informs ongoing instructional adjustment, with periodic reassessment by Primary 3 or 4 facilitating increased convergence in language proficiency. As a result of early and appropriately targeted support, a larger proportion of learners are expected to regroup into a common instructional pathway in the upper primary years, reflecting reduced proficiency gaps and more equitable language outcomes.

Taken together, the preceding discussion advances a theoretically grounded case for reconsidering the timing and structure of ability-based grouping in Mother Tongue education. Drawing on Sociocultural Theory and the Interdependence Hypothesis, the argument emphasises the importance of early, developmentally responsive instructional support that aligns with learners' linguistic readiness and evolving capacities. While the proposed model highlights the potential pedagogical advantages of introducing flexible, ability-based grouping from the early primary years, it remains a conceptual and theoretically informed proposition. As such, its educational value and practical implications cannot be fully established without systematic empirical investigation. This underscores the need for future research that moves beyond theoretical plausibility to

examine how early grouping operates in practice, for whom it is most beneficial, and under what conditions it contributes to more equitable and sustained Mother Tongue language development.

Directions For Future Empirical Research

Test The Impact of Ability-Based Grouping On Mother Tongue Proficiency Over Time

Future studies could use **longitudinal designs** (e.g., Primary 1 to Primary 3) to examine whether ability-based grouping is associated with measurable gains in reading, writing, listening, and speaking in Malay/Mandarin/Tamil, and whether these gains are sustained after regrouping or transitions between levels.

Compare Ability-Based Grouping With Alternative Models Of Differentiation

Quasi-experimental studies could compare outcomes across classrooms using:

a. ability-based grouping, b. mixed-ability grouping with differentiated tasks, and c. whole-class instruction. This would clarify whether improvements (if any) come from grouping itself or from the quality of differentiated instruction.

Identify Which Learners Benefit Most And Under What Conditions

Research should examine differential effects by learner profile, such as baseline proficiency, home language use, English dominance, motivation, and learning support needs. This can reveal whether grouping reduces learning gaps or unintentionally widens them for lower-proficiency learners.

INVESTIGATE CLASSROOM MECHANISMS THAT EXPLAIN “WHY” GROUPING WORKS OR FAILS

Mixed-method studies could link outcomes to classroom processes such as teacher talk, time-on-task, amount of mother tongue exposure, type of feedback, pace of instruction, and peer interaction patterns. Classroom observation protocols and audio-recordings could be used to trace how grouping changes actual language opportunities.

EXAMINE AFFECTIVE AND IDENTITY OUTCOMES ALONGSIDE ACHIEVEMENT

Because mother tongue learning in Singapore is closely tied to identity and attitudes, future research should measure confidence, language anxiety, interest, and ethnic-linguistic identification. This can determine whether grouping supports not only test performance but also language ownership and willingness to use the language beyond the classroom.

COMPARE EFFECTS ACROSS MOTHER TONGUE SUBJECTS AND SCHOOL CONTEXTS

Because Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil face different sociolinguistic pressures and resourcing realities, future studies should compare grouping across different mother tongues, different school profiles (neighbourhood vs higher-demand schools), and different community language environments. This would clarify how context mediates effectiveness.

Collectively, the research directions outlined above point to the need for the development and validation of robust assessment measures aligned with Singapore’s mother tongue learning goals. Future studies should move beyond examination-based indicators to validate tools that capture communicative competence, vocabulary depth, functional literacy, and real-life language use, thereby reducing “teaching to the test” interpretations of success.

4. Conclusion

This article has examined the effectiveness of introducing ability-based grouping at the early primary level in Mother Tongue language learning among Generation Alpha students in Singapore. Drawing on sociolinguistic trends that point to increasing English dominance in home language use, as well as theoretical insights from Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory and Cummins’ Interdependence Hypothesis, the study highlights the limitations of relying solely on differentiated instruction within highly mixed-ability classrooms during the foundational years of language development. The proposed early, flexible grouping model reframes ability as dynamic and developmental, positioning early grouping as a form of targeted support rather than fixed tracking. By aligning instructional strategies with learners’ language readiness and dominance from Primary 1, the model aims to reduce early proficiency gaps and enable greater convergence in language ability by the end of Primary 3 or 4. While further empirical research is needed to examine long-term outcomes, this paper suggests that timely and responsive instructional structuring in the early primary years may offer a more equitable pathway for strengthening Mother Tongue proficiency in an increasingly English-dominant context.

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