

SINGAPORE'S EXPERIENCE IN DEVELOPING ENGLISH AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR PROMOTING ENGLISH IN UNIVERSITIES IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: Singapore, a small Southeast Asian nation, has achieved remarkable economic development in the 20th and 21st centuries. A crucial element contributing to this success is its robust economy and enduring political stability, both of which are highly regarded, similar to the situation in Britain. This article will analyze general education and the evolving role of English in Singapore's economic growth. It will also offer policy recommendations for English language provision in Vietnamese universities, aiming to equip Vietnam's youth with strong English skills, enabling them to confidently enter the global economic arena, as Singapore has achieved successfully.

Keywords: Singaporean English, Singlish, multilingual policy, bilingual policy, universities in Vietnam

1. Introduction

Singapore, originally just a small fishing village and town, has undergone significant development since Thomas Stamford Raffles discovered this beautiful island nation in 1819. In 1826, Singapore became a British settlement, beginning a colonial period that lasted until 1963. During this period, Singapore attracted a large number of immigrants from all over places, especially from China, India and the Malay Archipelago, creating a unique ethnic diversity. The population here includes ethnic Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Eurasians, along with many expatriate communities from many different countries.

Throughout the 19th century, during the period of British colonial rule, the incorporation of English into Singapore's educational landscape took shape. Consequently, English assumed a pivotal role in the daily lives and educational pursuits of the populace. Nonetheless, Singapore's rich tapestry of ethnicities also gave rise to an intricate mosaic of linguistic expressions, encompassing Chinese, Tamil, and Malay languages. This linguistic diversity, in turn, fostered the emergence of a multilingual and multicultural framework within Singaporean society. Further exploration of this phenomenon will be undertaken in the subsequent section, which delves into the progressive evolution of English policy in Singapore.

Following World War II, English assumed a pivotal role in Singapore's economic progress, championed by leader Lee Kuan Yew, who advocated its adoption as the official language. English has now emerged as the primary language in vital domains like science, technology, politics, and law. Proficiency in English has facilitated Singapore's integration into the global marketplace and enabled effective communication with international partners. This

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serves as an exemplary model for other nations, including Vietnam, as they formulate their economic development strategies with language policies that prioritize English in trade, politics, and mainstream culture.

2. Reality

Singapore's territorial expanse spans 710 square kilometers, hosting a population of roughly 5.4 million individuals, with approximately 3.3 million holding citizenship. The populace boasts a rich tapestry of ethnicities, with Chinese constituting the majority at 74.2%, followed by Malays at 13.3%, Indians at 9.1%, and other ethnic groups at 3.3% (2015 Census). Each of these diverse ethnic cohorts has an officially recognized government language assigned to them - namely Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil (Lee, 2000, p. 170), for the purpose of representing their unique linguistic and cultural heritage (Tan, 1998). However, this intricate linguistic milieu poses a significant challenge to Singapore's socio-economic progress, as individuals hailing from distinct linguistic backgrounds encounter a myriad of difficulties and obstacles across various domains due to their limited comprehension of one another's national languages.

2.1. English Before 1959

In 1900, only a small portion of the population could use English effectively for work and communication (Okumura et al., 2006). Similarly, the 1957 census indicated that just 1.8% of the population spoke English. During the colonial-era education system, a notable division existed between English-speaking schools and local-language schools, including those teaching in Chinese. Chew (2013, p. 154-155) provided documentary evidence of a Singaporean teacher who attended both a Chinese-medium Primary School and an English-medium Secondary School in the 1940s and 1950s. He described the situation in colonial Chinese schools as one where English usage was discouraged, and individuals speaking even a bit of English were subject to strong reprimands and criticism from their colleagues.

Social and policy changes, driven by the increasing number of Singaporeans, particularly the upper class, viewed English proficiency as a means to attain social status and enhance their prospects for a better future. Singaporean society recognizes that proficiency in English, alongside their mother tongue, is crucial for gaining privileges, especially as the state prioritizes the policies which aimed at advancing economic and global trade engagement.

2.2. English Since 1959

In 1959, the Singapore government officially recognized four languages: Chinese (Mandarin) for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays, Tamil for the Indians, and English as the primary language, designating English as one of the country's official languages. After gaining independence in 1965, the government introduced English education in ethnic Chinese, Malay, and Indian schools, despite initial resistance from some communities. The advantages of using English were eventually acknowledged. During the 1960s and 1970s, English was essentially a foreign language for most children, as around 85% did not speak English at home (Lee, 2012). In 1979, research revealed that many students struggled with their mother tongue in school subjects, likely because they still used dialects at home. Consequently, the government discouraged the use of local languages, particularly Chinese dialects, arguing that mastering multiple languages could be challenging. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's future head of state, once advised, "If I were you, I would focus on Mandarin and English; English - because you need to connect with the world" (Plate, 2010, p. 132).

2.3. Singaporean English (Singlish)

In the course of its socio-economic development, Singapore, being a diverse nation, has forged a distinct variant of English that differs from standard British English. This informal variety is commonly referred to as "Singlish" (Gupta, 1994) and bears the imprint of various languages and dialects, including Mandarin, Hokkien, Malay, and Tamil. In practice, the prevalence of Singlish often corresponds to individuals holding average occupations and occupying lower rungs of society. Even authoritative figures have characterized Singlish as a form of English "deteriorated by Singaporeans," potentially placing the less educated half of the population at a disadvantage (Rubdy, 2005). Consequently, the Singapore government has advocated for the reduction of Singlish in everyday discourse, asserting that its usage reflects negatively on Singaporean society and could tarnish the nation's global reputation.

3. Singapore's Policies in Developing English

The policies of spreading English in Singapore have their roots in the country's pre-colonial history and the British colonial population management strategies. English has evolved into a common language in a linguistically diverse society because the British did not prioritize a specific ethnic language. Instead, they created conditions for individuals to make their own choices regarding education. Subsequently, Singapore successfully promoted English as an international language and utilized it as a vital tool in economic development and social communication. The Singaporean government has focused on comprehensive English improvement, spanning from family and societal education to school-based education, and from school-based education to English language reform in government and businesses. As a result, this has enhanced the nation's outstanding global image and brought significant economic benefits to this beautiful island nation.

3.1. Policy of Prioritizing English in Families and Society

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew believed that the path to success in English language education involved using English more frequently within the family. In one of his speeches, he affirmed if parents wanted their children to excel in subjects taught in English, in addition to Malay, they must also speak English at home (Platt, 1980).

At the societal education level, the policy promoting the "Speaking Good English Movement" (SGEM) serves as a testament to the government's special interest in encouraging the use of standard English. The objective of these policies is to enhance Singapore's position in regional economic and industrial activities. SGEM was first launched in 2000 and garnered predominantly positive responses right from the outset. The movement was initiated with an official speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who regarded Singlish as "a corrupted form of English," a "deficiency" not to be supported (Tan, 2007). He expressed concerns that if Singaporeans continued to use Singlish, others would not understand them, thus compromising a crucial competitive advantage on the international stage (Leimgruber, 2014). As mentioned earlier, many believe that Singlish is an "unreliable dialect associated with low social status" and poses a barrier to the nation's continuous economic growth, weakening Singapore's global market position (Rubdy, 2007). This is why Singapore implemented the SGEM with determination.

At the societal level, Singapore implements a multilingual policy to accommodate and align with its diverse multicultural nature. The Singaporean government perceives the downside of linguistic diversity as potentially weakening integration and, in general, implying

inefficiency in managing economic and political affairs, impeding the nation's socio-economic and political development (Kuo & Jernudd, 1994, p. 87). Consequently, Singapore has formulated and implemented language policies to address this issue and meet the practical needs of the nation. This led to the passage of the Republic of Singapore Independence Act in 1965, stipulating that Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English would be the four official languages of Singapore, with English considered the official language due to its association with technology and economic development. For an individual, this means that regardless of the language used during childhood, the child's paternal ethnicity must determine which language is formally designated as their "mother tongue." Gopinathan (1998) explains that the multilingual strategy involves the application of policies promoting equal treatment, wherein the languages of various ethnic groups must be officially recognized on an equivalent basis.

3.2. Bilingual Policy in Education System

The bilingual education policy began in 1966, designating English as the first language of Singapore and the mother tongue—Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil—as the second language.

Why was English designated as the first language? There are four reasons for this. Firstly, English was the administrative language during the colonial period, and members of the newly formed government were familiar with it. Secondly, as a predominantly Chinese-populated state surrounded by the Malay community, they did not want to declare Chinese as the national language. Thirdly, in this multicultural and multiracial society, people needed a neutral language to unite various groups. Lastly, and importantly, English has become the global language of politics and the global economy. Policy makers concluded that if the nation were proficient in English, Singapore could compete in numerous global activities and attract foreign investment.

From another perspective, Chiew (1980) wrote that the implementation of this policy is based on two political objectives. Firstly, the English component in bilingualism is seen as a means to facilitate interaction among different ethnic groups to break down community exclusivity and promote Singapore's identity. Secondly, bilingualism is expected to reduce inequality in career achievements between English learners and those learning their native languages who may face challenging circumstances.

This policy is succinctly explained by former Minister of Education, Dr. Tony Tan Keng Yam that every child should learn English and his mother tongue. This is seen as a fundamental feature of Singapore's educational system. Children have to learn English to have access to the knowledge, technology, and expertise of the modern world. They have to know their mother tongue to understand what makes us what we are today (Lee, 1983). Therefore, Singapore actively promotes English language learning starting from primary school. This includes making English a compulsory subject and training teachers for effective English instruction. Simultaneously, the education system undergoes continuous reforms, beginning with the mandate for secondary schools to provide English as a second language in 1966 and universities to conduct instruction in English from 1980.

3.3. Policy of Reforming English in Government and Business

Singapore is the only country in the region that uses standard English as the official working language in government and businesses. This bold and distinctive move is seen as a crucial factor in driving Singapore's continuous economic development and creating a competitive advantage.

Standard English is employed as the primary language in state administrative

management, law, banking, and accounting, ensuring consistency and efficiency in these fields. It is promoted for use in international business and transactions, ensuring that Singaporean citizens have the capability to engage in the global economy. Standard English enables the nation to access international resources and information while bridging the gap with international partners. It is not only the language of global technology and knowledge but also an important tool for individual career advancement.

4. Evaluation

Despite changing the official language in a culturally and historically diverse society, Singapore initially faced resistance and societal challenges in implementing these policies. However, these policies have indeed had a significant economic impact, transforming Singapore from a third-world nation into a first-world global powerhouse in just a few short decades.

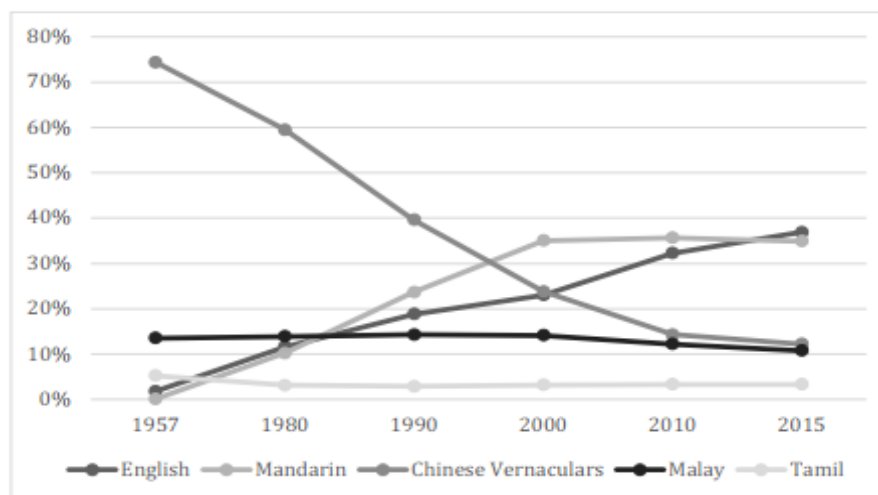
4.1. Evaluation of the Standard English Speaking Movement (SGEM) Policy

This policy reflects the Singaporean government's special interest in promoting the use of standard English, with the aim of improving Singapore's position in regional economic and industrial activities.

In fact, the literacy rate in English has increased from 70.9% to 79.9%, and continued to rise to 83.1%. Concurrently, the bilingual-speaking population increased by 17.2% from 2000 to 2015 (Wong, 2016). This policy has also led to a significant surge in the use of English as the household language (see Figure 1). However, the initial goal of SGEM – the eradication of Singlish – has not been achieved. Leimgruber (2013a) predicts that Singlish is unlikely to disappear in the near future.

Figure 1

Changes in Home Language Use Over Time in Per Cent (Based on Wong, 2010, 2016; Cavallaro, 2011; Leimgruber, 2013; Department of Statistics Singapore)



The policy of addressing Singlish has actually caused tense confrontations with those who defend this language as part of Singapore's cultural identity. To this day, Singlish is still widely used, and therefore, Singapore needs a cautious approach to preserve native languages while ensuring that the promotion of standard English does not erode linguistic and cultural

diversity, as it is an essential aspect of sustainable development.

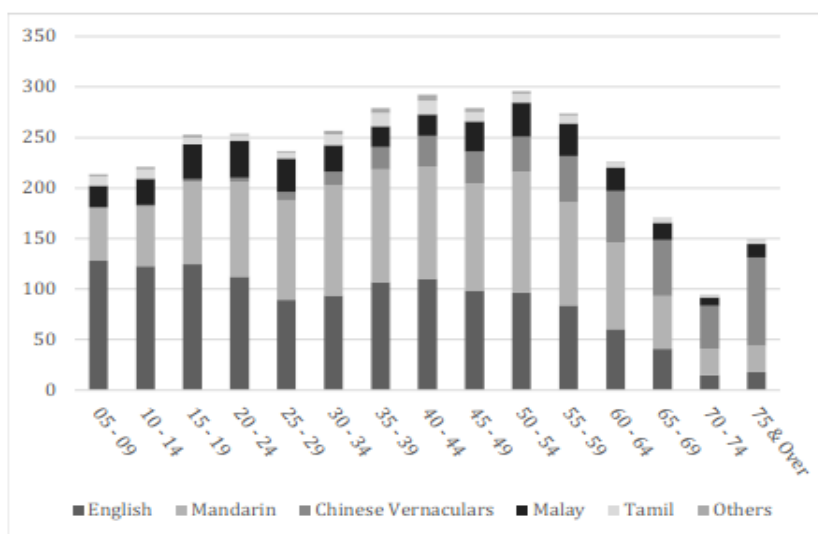
4.2. Evaluation of the Multilingual Policy

The multilingual policy requires the redefinition of heterogeneous communities, where each community can be identified by a single language, coupled with a related culture (Ho & Alsagoff, 1998). Thus, intra-group differences among the Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities have been significantly minimized by implementing a common language for all ethnic groups (Clammer, 1985).

Overall, Singapore's multilingual policy has its own advantages and challenges. On the positive side, it helps preserve and respect linguistic and cultural diversity in society. Designating Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English as the country's four official languages ensures that each ethnic group maintains its language and identity. This policy also demonstrates equal treatment of different languages and ethnic groups, ensuring no discrimination or language disadvantage for any ethnic group. Having multiple official languages encourages people to learn additional languages, especially English, a vital global language. Consequently, the rate of English usage at home has significantly increased (Figure 2). This has proven to be highly beneficial for Singaporeans in participating in the global economy.

Figure 2

Differences in Home Language Use According to Age in Thousand (Department of Statistics Singapore, General Household Survey, 2015)



On the challenge side, the multilingual policy leads to categorizing citizens based on language and ethnic origins, which can create divisions in society. Singapore also has to ensure that the officially designated languages are promoted carefully so as not to weaken English, the language of the economy and industry. Managing and promoting multiple languages can also pose challenges for the education system and other industries.

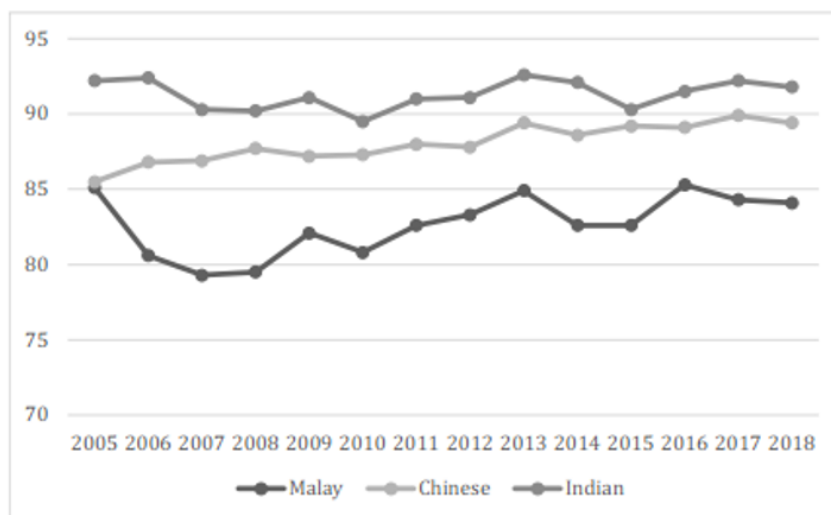
4.3. Evaluation of the Bilingual Policy

Pendley (1983) observed that the bilingual policy has clearly defined the roles of languages in Singaporean society. As a result, English has become the official working language in Singapore, while Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil are the official mother tongues of

the Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities, respectively. Overall, Singapore's bilingual education policy has many commendable aspects and positive evaluations. This policy has genuinely contributed to improving the English proficiency of students and, by extension, the general population of Singapore, enabling them to use English proficiently. Figure 3, provided by the Singapore Ministry of Education below, partly illustrates this positive change in the student population:

Figure 3

Percentage of Students Who Passed the O-Level English Language Exam (MOE, 2015, 2018)



This bilingual policy has also helped Singapore create a diverse and culturally rich learning environment, beneficial for personal development, providing favorable conditions for future career advancement, and contributing to economic development and foreign investment attraction.

However, the uncontested dominance of English as the official and administrative language has been a cause for concern nationwide. Chua (1995) reported that by the late 1970s, some cultural consequences of English dominance had surfaced, posing various issues for the country. This was exemplified by the words of former President Wee Kim Wee that Singapore became more open to external influences... thanks to the widespread use of the English language in education... Singapore became an international nation, in close contact with new ideas and technologies from abroad, while also encountering unfamiliar lifestyles and values (Ho & Alsagoff, 1998).

4.4. Evaluation of the English Language Reform Policy in Government and Business

The policy promoting English in government and business has enabled Singapore to access the global economy. Thanks to English, since the early days of implementing this policy, Singapore has attracted leading multinational companies to operate on the island, providing employment opportunities for its citizens. From humble beginnings, Singapore has now become a financial hub in Asia. Despite its small size, Singapore ranks as the 14th largest trading nation globally, with its trade volume of goods increasing manyfold. Singaporean workers are in demand in high-skilled industries worldwide, as many of them are proficient in two languages: English and another language, such as Chinese and Indian languages. These languages are well-suited to the two largest emerging economies, China and India, respectively. This has

strengthened Singapore's role in facilitating English-speaking businesses' connections with these Asian economies.

5. Policy Implications of the English Promotion in Vietnamese Universities

To develop English proficiency and enhance the quality of education in Vietnamese universities, we can draw inspiration from the experiences of developed countries like Singapore. Singapore's policies for widespread English development have created a successful model, leading to their economic prosperity and impressive international standing. From faculty training and capacity building to the implementation of bilingual teaching models and close collaboration with businesses and communities, the key implications of this policy below have potential to elevate English and the education system in Vietnam to new heights. Here, we will delve into the details of these measures and their implementation to improve learning opportunities and competitiveness for Vietnamese students in the global context.

5.1. Faculty Training and Capacity Building

First and foremost, there is a need to invest in the faculty, ensuring that they are proficient in English and possess deep knowledge in their respective fields. To achieve this, universities should establish mechanisms that promote mutual learning and collaboration among faculty members. They should work together to create internal and inter-university training programs focusing on improving English communication, teaching, and assessment skills. Additionally, universities should provide funding to encourage faculty participation in international English proficiency exams such as IELTS, TOEFL, or English teaching certifications like CELTA. These certifications can serve as evidence of faculty members' English proficiency and help enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

Furthermore, faculty members should be provided with favorable conditions to practice English in academic settings where the language is used, such as at English-language seminars and conferences. Moreover, if universities can establish collaborative relationships with institutions in Singapore or reputable English-teaching universities, they can organize joint training programs, send faculty members to Singapore for courses and knowledge exchange. In parallel, universities must fully support faculty involvement in research projects related to English teaching and learning, enabling them to develop effective teaching methods and apply new research findings in the classroom.

5.2. Bilingual Teaching Model

In today's interconnected world, it is time for universities in Vietnam to proactively adopt a bilingual teaching model where students can study any subject in either English or Vietnamese. This creates favorable conditions for learners to develop multilingual skills and promotes international integration.

To achieve this, educational institutions need to formulate curriculum plans for the bilingual teaching model, identifying suitable courses and stages for instruction in both English and the native language. This requires close coordination among departments and faculties within the university. Accordingly, bilingual teaching materials for each course should be developed early on to ensure that students have access to study materials in both English and Vietnamese, allowing them to choose their preferred language of instruction. Before implementing these instructional materials, faculty members need to undergo training on bilingual teaching methods and quality assurance techniques in knowledge transmission through both languages. Additionally, educational institutions should create a conducive

learning environment for bilingual instruction, including modern classrooms, teaching materials, and supporting technologies. Lastly, once implemented, universities should conduct regular assessments to ensure that the bilingual teaching model aligns with its objectives and maintains the highest quality in developing multilingual skills for students.

5.3. Supporting Individualized English Supplementary Activities

Universities should provide opportunities for students to develop personally through participation in English supplementary activities, such as joining clubs or extracurricular educational events related to English. This can be easily facilitated through English clubs where students can interact with each other in English. These clubs can focus on themes like culture, music, sports, or communication skills. Additionally, the university's student affairs and management department should organize extracurricular educational activities such as workshops, English-speaking competitions, or presentations on culture and art in English, creating opportunities for students to practice and improve their English skills outside of regular classes.

Furthermore, universities should allocate a budget to encourage students to use English in projects, research, or articles. This helps them apply their English knowledge in practical contexts and enhances their language proficiency. In addition, universities should establish mechanisms to promote the use of English not only in the academic environment but also in daily life, including using English during meals, daily communication, or in dormitories where students live together.

5.4. Connecting with Businesses and the Community

Universities need to collaborate closely with businesses and organizations to develop English training programs that meet the needs of the international labor market, making it easier for students to enter the international working environment after graduation. To achieve this, universities need to establish cooperative relationships with businesses operating in the international market, especially in industries that require the use of English in daily work. This can be achieved through organizing seminars, meetings, or creating internship opportunities for students in these businesses.

When collaborating with businesses, universities can gain a clear understanding of the specific English requirements in various industries. Based on this information, universities can develop English training programs with practical content tailored to the needs of the international labor market. With established relationships with businesses, universities can create opportunities for students to practice and communicate in a business environment, supporting students' participation in projects, internships, or work programs in international businesses or English-speaking work environments. Moreover, by excelling in these aspects, universities can build cooperative programs with international organizations, such as universities in Singapore, including student and faculty exchanges, organizing international events, or participating in global research projects.

6. Conclusion

Singapore's experience in enhancing the role of English in the education system serves as a valuable lesson for Vietnam. By implementing multilingual and bilingual policies to establish strong connections with businesses and the community, Singapore has succeeded in creating a global learning and working environment, leading to significant achievements. Vietnamese universities can also apply these principles and measures to improve the quality of

English education and provide global learning and working opportunities for their students. By implementing appropriate policies and fostering a conducive environment, Vietnam can confidently step into the international arena and promote sustainable development for the country in this era of globalization.

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KINH NGHIỆM CỦA SINGAPORE TRONG PHÁT TRIỂN TIẾNG ANH VÀ NHỮNG ĐỀ XUẤT CHÍNH SÁCH ĐỐI VỚI CÁC TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt: Singapore, một quốc gia nhỏ tại khu vực Đông Nam Á, đã chứng kiến sự phát triển kinh tế đáng kể trong hai thế kỷ 20 và 21. Yếu tố then chốt góp phần vào thành công này là nền kinh tế vững mạnh và sự ổn định chính trị bền vững, những đặc điểm được đánh giá cao, có sự tương đồng với tình hình ở Anh. Bài viết này đi sâu vào phân tích về hệ thống giáo dục tổng quát và vai trò đặc biệt của tiếng Anh trong quá trình phát triển kinh tế của Singapore. Ngoài ra, bài viết cũng đưa ra những đề xuất chính sách về việc giáo dục tiếng Anh tại các trường đại học ở Việt Nam, nhằm trang bị cho sinh viên Việt Nam kỹ năng tiếng Anh mạnh mẽ, từ đó giúp các em tự tin bước chân vào thị trường kinh tế toàn cầu, theo cách mà Singapore đã làm thành công.

Từ khoá: Tiếng Anh Singapore, Singlish, chính sách đa ngôn ngữ, chính sách song ngữ, trường đại học tại Việt Nam