

The Current Situation and Issues of the Teaching of English in Malaysia

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Abstract

Malaysia has gone through vast changes in various fields since it attained its independence from Britain in 1957. Among these changes were implementations of policies related to educational syllabus and the medium of instruction where languages were used to impart knowledge. The country had inherited a divide-and-rule system from the colonial era where schools in the past were set up along ethnic lines and conducted in different languages. Hence, education in Malaysia has been multilingual. During pre-independence, primary schools were available in four medium of instruction, namely English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. During post-independence, Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) was declared the sole national language in 1967. However, severe race riots occurred in May 1969, which catalysed a change in the education system where all English medium schools were instructed to phase out. National Language and National Educational Policies were implemented gradually from 1970 until 1983 in primary and secondary level of education. The Third Malaysia plan states that Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) is the basis for national integration and English is taught as a second language. Schools adopted a few approaches in teaching English. However, certain problems were overlooked in the teaching of English during nationalisation of schools, for example students who came from non-English medium background were given little consideration, approaches used in teaching English, and the fact that English was taught as just another subject. The English medium of instruction was reintroduced in National schools in 2002 and a bilingual system was set up with English used for the teaching of Science and Mathematics. Very recently, it was announced that the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English will be phased out from 2012 since the government was convinced that it was not working well. Supporters and critics of the move voiced out their opinions. In the current scenario as far as the teaching of English is concerned, Malaysia faces a number of challenges. Firstly, it has to produce or make available enough competent teachers to teach English lessons in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) settings. Secondly, it has to find the best approach of teaching English to multilingual students, and thirdly, it has to train Mathematics and Science teachers to teach well in English.

1. Profile of Malaysia

Malaysia is located in South East Asia with 127,355 square miles of land and a population of 27,170,000. The density is 213.3 people per square mile. The capital city is Kuala Lumpur with a population of 1,448,000. The administrative capital is Putrajaya. The population consists of several groups: Malay (47.2%), Chinese (25.1%), Indian (7.1%), other indigenous groups (3.2%), and non-Malaysians (6.8%). 60 percent of the people of Malaysia are Muslims, 19 percent are Buddhists, 9 percent are Christians, 6 percent are Hindus, and 3 percent practice Chinese traditional religions. Malaysia attracts foreign tourist visitors with 20,972,822 visitors per year (data correct 22 April 2009; see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/country-profile/malaysia>).

2. Historical account of English in Malaysia

Malaysia attained its independence from Britain in 1957. Since then, it has undergone vast changes in various fields. The major changes were the implementation of policies related to educational syllabus and the medium of instruction or usually known as languages used in imparting the knowledge. Education in Malaysia has always been multilingual. According to Solomon (1988), as far as individual schools are concerned, Malaysia has continued to practice linguistic segregation, which is a divide-and-rule system inherited from the colonial era. Schools in the past were set up along ethnic lines and conducted in different languages (Santhiram, 1999). An interesting fact about education in Malaysia is that although education through different languages is widely accepted, each individual school is mainly seen as operating through a single medium of instruction i.e. monolingual.

3. Education in Malaysia during pre-independence

During pre-independence, primary schools were available in four mediums of instruction. Children of age 7 until 12 went to primary schools (Standard 1 until 6). Malay was used as the medium of instruction in National schools, while English, Mandarin or Tamil were used in National-type schools. The Malay, mandarin, and Tamil-medium schools catered almost exclusively to ethnic Malay, Chinese, and Indian children respectively. The ethnic groups were geographically distinct, and so were the schools. The Malays lived in 'kampongs' where most of them were padi planters. The Chinese lived in the urban areas or the cities and most of them were involved in business and trade, while the Indians lived in the rubber estates. As such, English-medium schools were mainly found in the urban areas, and the schoolchildren were mainly ethnic Chinese. However, there were Indians and Eurasians too. English-medium schools were not very popular with the Malays because of the schools' location. Secondary education was mainly through English or Malay at Form 1 until Form 5. These schools catered for students whose ages were 13 until 17.

The medium of instruction at tertiary education was English.

4. Education in Malaysia during post-independence

English was the established language of administration in 1957 and the language of education for urban schoolchildren. The changeover to Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) took 26 years (1957-1983) by the implementation of the National Language and National Educational Policies for the primary and secondary level of education. Malay language was declared as the sole national language in 1967. Those subjects taught at schools that could adopt the Malay language as a medium of instruction were the first affected by the conversion process. These subjects were Physical Education, Art and Craft, Local Studies and Music. These subjects were taught in Malay from January 1968. Later, more of the Arts subjects were taught in Malay before the shift in teaching in Malay occurred for the Science subjects. However, severe race riots occurred in May 1969, which catalysed a change in the education system where all English medium schools were instructed to phase out.

The Minister of Education at that time, Dato Haji Abdul Rahman Ya'akub, declared in July 1969 that beginning from January 1970, English-medium schools would be phased out in Malaysia and by 1985 all former English-medium (National-type) schools would become Malay-medium (National) schools. The Third Malaysia Plan (1976-1980) states that "Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) is the basis for national integration" but the plan also states that "measures will be taken to ensure that English is taught as a strong second language" (Government of Malaysia, 1976, p. 386). The reasons given for the maintenance of English was "to keep abreast of scientific and technological developments in the world and to participate meaningfully in international trade and commerce" (Government of Malaysia, 1976, p. 391).

The gradual implementation of the National Language Policy in the education system took place in 1970-1983. With this conversion, the Lower Certificate of Education (LCE) examination was terminated in 1978. LCE was a national examination for all Form 3 students whose ages were 15. The termination of the Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) took place in 1980. Form 5 students whose age were 17 need not take this national examination anymore.

5. Changes in the Malaysian education system

English was formally accorded the status of a second language when National Language Policy was implemented in 1970. Thus, there was an immediate concern to produce a common content syllabus to be used in the new system from Primary 1 until 5. All National primary schools adopted structural- situational syllabus by 1971. The post-1970 Primary English Syllabus was the first common content syllabus that employed a common content, methodology, and materials that led to a common examination. National type Tamil and Chinese primary schools adopted the same

syllabus too. The medium of instruction in these schools remained as Tamil and Chinese respectively, and English was introduced in Primary 3 as a subject only. With the implementation of the post-1970 Primary English Syllabus, the first batch of students entered Form 1 classes in 1976. In order to ensure continuity, the lower secondary syllabus was developed as an extension of the primary school syllabus. Structural-situational syllabus was also used in Form 1 until Form 3. In 1979, the English Language Syllabus was implemented in Form 4 and Form 5. However, the syllabus adopted was task-oriented situational approach. According to Asiah (1983), the syllabus was also known as the Malaysian Communicative Syllabus because it has a communicative slant.

There were three phases spanning three different approaches for English syllabus until 1983. These were structural-situational syllabus (primary schools), task-oriented situational approach (secondary schools), and communicative syllabus (upper secondary schools). The reason for some disparity in the implementation of these syllabi was due to different ad hoc committees who developed the primary and secondary school syllabus, while the Curriculum Development Center developed the upper secondary school syllabus in 1980.

The upper secondary school syllabus was developed based on the immediate needs of the nation which was to produce a united, disciplined and well-trained workforce. The rationale for implementing the Communicative Language Teaching methodology was as follows: (a) there was a vital need for communication, (b) the service sectors, for example, the tourism industry needed a workforce that was versatile in international communication, and (c) English gained importance in mid-1970s when 90 percent of Form 5 school leavers entered the job market.

The switching to Communicative Language Teaching methodology brought some problems. Learners who were familiar with the rote learning of the structural approach found it difficult to adjust to a communicative approach. Thus, teachers had to reduce as well as simplify grammar content in lessons. Teachers also spent a lot of their own time to create situations for communicative-based activities. It was also expected that the linguistic competence mastered in Primary 1 until 6 and Form 1 until Form 3 would facilitate learners' communicative competence through the task-oriented situational approach adopted in Communicative Language Teaching.

It was however, a misguided idea. Trampe (1994), quoting Itokonen (1976, 1978) points out that there are fundamental differences between the "rules of language" and "rules of grammar". Rules of language are social norms which determine which sentences are correct or grammatical in a specific language, or a communicative event. Therefore, learning the rules of grammar in isolation may not bring the desired effect in terms of communicative competence.

The implementation of the New Primary Schools Curriculum (Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah) in 1983 and the Integrated Secondary Schools Curriculum (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah) in 1989 was a step forward in implementing an education system with a common goal, direction and approach. The focus of the New Primary Schools Curriculum for English language teaching was the acquisition of the 3 R's namely basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. Moral and spiritual values were infused into the teaching of English in the

Integrated Secondary Schools Curriculum through listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. Teachers were required to promote learners' intellectual development by posing questions that call for higher order thinking skills. Active participation from learners was also expected. The Integrated Secondary Schools Curriculum for English was a skill-based syllabus advocating Communicative Language Teaching (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1989) and lessons integrated the four skills.

In the National primary schools where Malay was the medium of instruction, English was taught from Primary 1 until Primary 3 for 240 minutes per week. For Primary 4 until Primary 6, English was taught for 210 minutes per week. In the National type Chinese or Tamil schools where Mandarin and Tamil were the medium of instruction respectively, English was taught from Primary 3 with 60 minutes of exposure per week. In Primary 4 until Primary 6, the exposure to English was 90 minutes per week.

The New Primary Schools Curriculum for English lacked references to the use of electronic and digital media and left out learner autonomy, study skills and thinking skills. The Integrated Secondary Schools Curriculum for English adopted some computer software and audio-video recordings. The syllabus for English took into account learners' autonomy, study skills and thinking skills. Realising the weakness of the New Primary Schools Curriculum for English, an Integrated Primary Schools Curriculum was implemented in 1990.

6. Innovations in the teaching of English

In 1990, some schools adopted Self-Access Learning. Among some of the objectives of Self-Access Learning were as follows: (a) to provide opportunities for students to learn how to learn, (b) to cater for the student's individual needs and learning styles, (c) to allow students to evaluate and assess their own learning, and (d) to complement classroom teaching and learning. It was hoped that this supplementary English language teaching programme would inculcate in students a sense of responsibility for their own learning. The programme was developed by the Curriculum Development Centre.

Organised learning materials and equipment were made available and accessible to students. Worksheets, cassette tapes, videotapes, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programmes and games were also used in English lessons. Normally a particular section of the classroom or library was used to house these facilities.

English language Reader Programme was introduced to schools in 1979. Supplementary Readers were used to inculcate the habit of reading and it started at Form 1 in 1990 as part of the Integrated Secondary Schools Curriculum for English. The supplementary Readers consisted of simplified literary text for elementary, intermediate and advanced level. The Ministry of Education provided books under the textbook loan scheme.

Apart from English language Reader Programme, literature programme was introduced in

March 2000 for Form 1 and Form 4. In 2001, it was implemented for Form 2 and Form 5. The programme was implemented in 2002 for Form 3. The national examination incorporated a literature component at Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Form 5) and Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (Form 3).

In January 1997, the Ministry of Education conceptualized the vision of the Malaysian Smart School. Creative and thinking skills which were part of the package of the Integrated Secondary Schools Curriculum for English actually gained recognition with the inception of the Smart Schools programme. The teaching of these skills involved the use of different types of media spanning from the traditional to the latest in Information Technology (IT).

On 6th May 2002, Tun Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (Prime Minister then) announced that the government was willing to reintroduce English medium of instruction “if the people [wanted] it.” This was followed by the announcement from Tan Sri Musa Mohamad (Education Minister then) that a bilingual system would be set up with English to be used for teaching Science and Mathematics. He went on to declare that beginning January 2003, Malay-English mixed-medium education would be implemented in National schools in Malaysia. According to Educational Statistics (2007), more than 2 million Malaysians attended 9,364 National primary schools. Slightly more than 0.5 million attended 3,324 Chinese primary schools and more than 130,000 attended 945 Tamil primary schools.

English is a compulsory second language taught in schools beginning at Primary 1 and age 7. Malaysian students from different background in life have different levels of knowledge and proficiency in English. Many urban children who use English as their first language or dominant language at home were able to master English well compared to the majority of children, especially those from rural areas who were predominantly ethnic Malay. David and Naji (2000) and David and Nambiar (2001) are in agreement that rural students who come from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings started school with hardly any knowledge of English. However, many believe that English as a medium of instruction promise future economic gains. Parents, particularly in urban areas are enthusiastic for their children to acquire better English.

7. Teaching of Science and Mathematics in English

Months before Tun Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad stood down from office as the Prime Minister, a policy of teaching of Science and Mathematics in English was introduced. National examinations for Primary 6, Form 3 and Form 5 for Science and Mathematics would be in English by 2008. A few questions were put forward regarding this policy. Firstly, was it meant to raise students' proficiency in English. Secondly, was it meant to raise the understanding of Science and Mathematics among Malaysian student. A critic of the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English contended that “...[it] was not the answer to the challenges of either raising English standards or uplifting Mathematics and Science proficiency among Malaysian students” (see his blog at <http://blog.limkitsiang.com>).

Recently, the Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yasin announced on Wednesday 8 July 2009 that the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English will be phased out from 2012. On 9 August 2009, he further announced that students who have started using English in Science and Mathematics can continue to do so until Form 5 which means that the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English will end in 2014. The government was convinced that the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English was not working well based on 1-year assessment and public consultation. In order to solve this problem, up to 14,000 English language teachers as well as specialist teaching assistants would be recruited by 2012. This effort involves more than 10,000 schools in Malaysia.

Asked whether the government was making a wrong step by reversing the policy, Tun Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad said,

“It is not about trying to learn English. It is not about trying to learn Malay. It is simply an acknowledgement of the fact that today’s knowledge comes to us in the English Language... Today, the knowledge is with the people who write in English. And for that reason we want to learn English to acquire knowledge, not to learn English, but Science has got a special English language for itself. It is important that we use English to study the Science and Maths (Tun Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad’s blog, see <http://chedet.co.cc/chedetblog/2009/07/the-teaching-of-maths-and-scie.html>).

Supporters, opponents and critics of the move voiced out their opinions. The supporters viewed that Malaysians will lose the opportunity to emulate the economic success of English-speaking Singapore, Malaysia’s nearest neighbor. Additionally, the change would be unfair on many parents because they should have the right to choose their children’s education.

The opponents of the move have the opinion that teaching of Science and Mathematics in English will undermine the Malay culture, while the critics of the move are skeptical that qualified teaching staff can be found. On 9th July 2009, Khoo Kay Kim (Emeritus Professor at History Department, University of Malaya) said that “What has not occurred to the authorities is that education system requires very competent teachers” (see <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/07/09/78259.html>).

8. Challenges and considerations for the country

Malaysia faces a number of challenges as far as the teaching of English is concerned. The first concern is, are we producing enough competent teachers to teach English. Secondly, what is the best approach to teach English to multilingual students. Thirdly, do we have enough competent teachers to teach Science and Mathematics in English. And fourthly, going to the extreme, do we need to train competent Science and Mathematics teachers to teach in English. In my opinion,

these issues need to be given serious attention because whatever policies the government hold for the teaching of English in Malaysia, its success will be determined by the teachers in the classrooms. Therefore, they need to be equipped to perform these tasks.

We also need to be flexible in dealing with the problems of the different medium of instruction in schools. For example, in teaching English to Chinese students from vernacular schools in Malaysia, teachers need to emphasize on how certain concepts are handled in English, Malay, and Chinese (Darus and Ching, 2009).

Next, make English a compulsory subject to pass at Form 5 (age 17). In doing so, the attitude of students and parents will change. They will give their focused attention to learn English at schools.

Parents should also be given a choice in educating their children. In the urban areas, students are more exposed to English. They speak more English and English is more a second language. In the rural areas, many students lack the exposure of English language. There is a limited communicative use of English. Once they leave the school, English serves no function at all. The only exposure that they have is 200 minutes a week of English at schools and this is clearly a situation of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

In a TESL environment that focuses on the four skills, Communicative Language Teaching might work where students learn to speak in English from informal to formal context. In a TEFL environment, audio-lingual or grammar translation method should be employed and notional functional approach may be used. However, the situation in Malaysia is that it is neither TESL nor TEFL. It is somewhere in between.

In this context, it is interesting to note what Kachru (1994, p. 241) says. He believes that "approaches to the teaching of English developed in the western contexts cannot be accepted without question for the non-western context". The main reasons for his assumption are as follows: (a) data for analysis are restricted to classroom assignments etc. on the basis of which broad variety-specific generalizations are made, (b) the sociolinguistic context is not taken into consideration, and (c) approaches ignore nativisation and acculturation in the institutionalized varieties.

Acknowledgment

The presentation of this paper at the International Symposium of the Graduate School of Language Education and Information Sciences, Kinugasa Campus, Ritsumeikan University on the 7th November 2009 was made possible by funding from Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, in which the author is very thankful.

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The Current Situation and Issues of the Teaching of English in Malaysia (DARUS)

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