English in Malaysia: a case of the past that never really went away?

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English language learning in former British colonies – in this case, Malaysia – may still be influenced by the negative attitudes towards the stereotyped image English has in these countries

Introduction

The English language has been part of Malaysia for a long time, going back to the beginning of British colonial rule in the 18th century. The present attitudes towards English can be said to vary from conservative (e.g. referring to it as *bahasa penjajah*, literally 'language of the coloniser') to general acceptance (e.g. English is part of Malaysian history) and to a liberal/modern/Western outlook (e.g. calling for the return of English-medium schools). The conservative view stems from the history, or, for some, the memory, of the role English played in the colonial education system as the language of the elite which served to separate the urban and rural populations into the haves and the have-nots. Inevitably, the abolition of English-medium education became one of the key matters for debate during the campaign for independence from British rule in the 1950s. Malay nationalists considered English-medium education to be part of a British agenda to maintain control of the country after Independence. Replacing English with Malay as the medium of instruction as well as the national language in Malaya was, therefore, vital. In 1967, through the National Language Act, Malay became the sole official language in Malaysia a decade after Independence. Thus, from 1970 onwards, the phasing out of English as a medium of instruction from the Malaysian education system was carried out fervently, while at the same time Malay was zealously promoted, not only in education but in all spheres of public life.

It can be argued that the ties between the national language and patriotism have since, more or less, directed the national language education policies in Malaysia. As a result, the status of English in public education in Malaysia has, over the years, been affected by the social and political developments in the country. Even now, fifty-five years after Independence, despite its importance to Malaysia as the language of international communication, trade, and technology, some quarters still view English with distrust. In the primary and secondary public schools[1] (*The Star*, 14 September 2011), students can enter public tertiary institutions without being required to have a pass or distinction in English – except for certain programmes. There are also variations amongst the

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public tertiary institutions with regard to expected English language proficiency upon graduation. It would not be incorrect to assume that this situation has led to student apathy towards English as they could enter and graduate from public universities without a significant proficiency in English.

This has created a problem because the number of unemployed graduates from public universities continues to rise every year. Interestingly, the majority of public university students in the English proficiency classrooms are *bumiputera* (literally 'sons of the soil') students. Feedback from the private sector shows that limited proficiency in English plays a part. This has forced the government to make changes in the national language policy to give more emphasis to English in education. In 2003 the medium of instruction for mathematics and science subjects in schools was switched from Malay to English. However, the new policy upset many Malaysians, the majority being nationalists who opposed it right from when it was first announced. The groups held their strongest protest in 2009 with street demonstrations in the capital city. Finally, in July 2009, the six-year policy was dropped and the government admitted that rural students, especially Malays, had suffered from lower grades in Mathematics and Science since the policy was introduced (*New York Times*, 9 July 2009). The policy reversal received mixed responses which can be gauged from the different headlines in the papers at that time (*The Star*, 2009): 'Divided over decision' (*The Star*, 12 July 2009), 'Parents unhappy over decision to revert' (*The Star*, 9 July 2009), 'Is there a need to revert?' (*The Star*, 12 July 2009), and 'Why PPSMI reversal makes sense' (*New Straits Times*, 19 July 2009). Observers of English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Malaysian context are not incorrect in saying that the policy reversal is yet another example of the fact that English cannot seem to move away from its stereotyped portrayal as a threat to the national language.

In an effort to understand the challenging task teachers of English face when teaching English in contemporary Malaysia, I review the historical context of the English language in Malaysia.

The language situation and Malay/ *bumiputera* nationalism

Malaysia is a multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious country with a population of about 28 million[2] and its national language is Malay. The country is a federation of three entities: Peninsular Malaysia with its 11 states, and the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak. Other major languages are various Chinese and Indian dialects, English, Orang Asli languages, and about 96 indigenous languages spoken in the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak (Lewis, 2009). There are three main ethnic groups in Malaysia: *bumiputera* (Malay and non-Malay), Chinese, and Indian.[3] The term *bumiputera* is Sanskrit in origin, i.e. *bumi* ('soil' or 'earth') and *putera* ('prince'). It refers to the people *indigenous* to Malaya, Sabah, and Sarawak, as opposed to the Chinese and Indians (non-*bumiputera*s) who migrated from their respective home countries.[4] The term gained prominence following the introduction of the National Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, which had a focus on restructuring the society in terms of economic wealth. The NEP has also been called the *bumiputera* policy (Shamsul, 1986; Rappa & Wee, 2006: 26) because of its affirmative action provisions for the *bumiputera* community. It can be argued that the NEP – through its offshoots of the National Language Policy and National Education Policy – started the decline in the role, status, and most importantly, the proficiency of English in the Malaysia of today. Rappa and Wee explain,

> . . .the privileging of the Malay language means that the widespread use of English for official purposes is problematic; it is seen as a threat to the Malay language and thus to the bumiputera policy. The use of English in official domains in Malaysian society, unlike that in Singapore, is therefore extremely sensitive and contested (2006: 5).

In order to better understand the situation, it is important for us to review the background of the situation leading up to the NEP and the language policy applied in Malaysia today.

Malay is the national and official language of government and education while English is the second most important language in the country (Asmah Haji Omar, 1993: 46). During the colonial period, the British rulers introduced secular education through the Malay vernacular schools, and missionaries arrived to teach in mission schools which used English as the medium of instruction. English-medium schools became the main avenue to a higher socioeconomic status. Students who went to vernacular schools were not able to advance to secondary education as their qualification was deemed unsuitable.[5] Students from English-medium schools, though, could go to secondary-level education and at the end of their

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secondary education were able to sit for an external examination which could then allow them to go for university education at the University of Malaya in Singapore or universities in Great Britain (Asmah Haji Omar, 1996: 514).

Graduating from an English-medium school accorded one an elite standing in urban society and those who could afford such schooling for their children were mostly the Malay aristocrats, along with rich Chinese traders and Eurasians. By the late 1940s, English had become the lingua franca of the English-educated Malayans and the society in postcolonial Malaya was divided into the English-speaking versus the non-English speaking, which meant, in effect, the elite versus the non-elite. The division in the Malaysian social strata resulted in the English language becoming a symbol of high status and of intelligence, whereas the Malay language was relegated to being a language for the commoners (Ismail Hussein, 1992: 51). As a result of the differences in the status of the two languages, Malay-medium education came to be looked upon as the poor man's education (Heah, 1989: 70). English as the medium of instruction in English schools continued to flourish as the lingua franca of the educated while Bazaar Malay[6] became the inter-ethnic language for the less-educated members of the society.

The non-elite Malays developed what was almost a profound cultural and religious antipathy towards the English language (Wicks, 1980: 172). Doubts and wariness about British policies grew within the Malay community, who more and more felt that they were deliberately being excluded from the economic progress that was happening in *Tanah Melayu* (Land of the Malays):

> The Malays erected a religious-cultural barrier of suspicion, mistrust and resentment against both the explicit and implicit dimensions of change in British colonial policy. This barrier often reached xenophobic proportions, preventing many young Malays from taking advantage of Western schools in the new urban centres (Wicks, 1980: 172–3).

More modern Malay academics do admit that the suspicion and mistrust was a backward mentality. Asmah Haji Omar described the religious-cultural barrier in the language attitude of the Malays towards the English then as the actions of the 'non-enlightened' ones because, although many Malay parents could afford the fees of the English-medium schools, going to English schools was considered equivalent to learning the language of the colonialists (1992: 122). The heightened suspicion towards English was strong before Independence in 1957 and also in the years immediately following it. The movement pushing for Malay to become the national language was also at its peak in this period (Asmah Haji Omar, 1992: 122).

As a result, at the time of Independence, Malaya had a divided education system which separated the *bumiputera* Malays and the non-*bumiputera* Chinese and Indian communities. The schools were located based on ethnic group locations, i.e. in the *kampung*s, or rural villages (Malay-medium alongside religious education in Arabic), in towns (English-medium and Chinese-medium), and in the plantations (Tamil-medium). Education was available in the different languages and each type of school followed its own curriculum, which served different purposes from the curricula in the other schools.

The description thus far is a necessary background for understanding the rationale behind the prioritization of Malay and a rejection of any official role for English after Independence. The different education systems and their effect on the socio-economic standing of the people contributed to the rise of Malay nationalism eager to end the elite vs. non-elite division. The early nationalist movements were language and literary associations (Asmah Haji Omar, 2007: 344), which explains the strong focus of the nationalists on the English vs. Malay issue. From the perspective of the nationalists, it was important to remove the cause of elitism, i.e. English and English-medium education.

The development of Malay as the national language

The transitional language policy 1957–1970

Malay was set to become a tool for national unity following the landmark recommendations of two top-level education committees. In late 1955, a special committee under the then Minister of Education, Tun Abdul Razak, was set up as part of the preparation for nation-building in an effort to pull the different education streams into one. The results of the committee's work, well known in Malaysia as the 1956 Razak Report, for the first time laid down the goals, direction and basic thrust of a national education policy (Asiah Abu Samah, 1994: 53). It legitimized the status and role of Malay as the national language as well as the key element of national unity and integration. It was the Razak Report that stressed the need to realign all schools to a unified Malaysian outlook

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by the introduction of common content syllabuses and the use of Malay as the main medium of instruction (Asiah Abu Samah, 1994: 54). Its recommendations were confirmed by another education committee, in the 1960 Rahman Talib Report.

Despite its pursuit of a united Malaysian identity via the national language and common-content curricula, the national education policy that was adopted in the period immediately after Independence did not ignore the needs and aspirations of other ethnic groups. The Chinese and Indian communities were allowed to retain schools where their languages were used as media of instruction, although Malay was made a required subject in these vernacular schools. In the former English schools, English was also retained as the medium of instruction.

The Malaysian Constitution specified a ten-year transition period for the replacement of English with Malay, not only in education but in other public domains. By the late 1960s, several Chinese groups were agitating for a more liberal language policy, which would permit the use of Mandarin in some public affairs. The government at the time, under Tunku Abdul Rahman and other political leaders who belonged to the English-educated elite, were sympathetic to this view and were willing to allow the official use of English under certain circumstances and the use of non-Malay languages for non-official purposes. This, however, was met with total rejection by young Malay nationalists, who pushed hard for full implementation of the policy of adopting Malay as the sole official language in Malaysia. The 1969 general election saw politicians 'exploiting racial issues that heightened communal tensions' at pre-election campaigns (Ooi, 2009: 197). The 10 May election saw the mainly non-*bumiputera* Opposition parties denying the mainly *bumiputera* Alliance Party a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Consequently, the social and political tensions culminated in an unprecedented race riot between the Chinese and the Malays on 13 May 1969. As a result of the race riot, the government introduced the New Economic Policy to restructure the society and do away with the unequal divisions of economic wealth along racial lines. The policy, however, has subsequently accentuated the *bumiputera*/non-*bumiputera* distinction within Malaysian society.

The full implementation of the national language policy

In the aftermath of the riots, the principal policy response by the Malaysian Government, led by the then new Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, was the announcement of the New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP had two objectives, namely 'poverty eradication regardless of race' and 'restructuring society to eliminate the identification of race with economic function', but in practice it was seen as 'pro-bumiputera, or more specifically, pro-Malay' and the 'policies principally oriented to rural Malay peasants' (Jomo, 2004: iii). With the implementation of the NEP, the changes that were recommended for the Malaysian education system in the Razak Report effectively took place. Hence, within the NEP, the Education Bill 1970 was passed, which meant that from that year, primary school students in the government or government-assisted schools were given their education via the medium of the national language. The change in the medium of instruction from English to Malay eventually went into effect legally at all levels of the education system for the whole of Malaysia.[7] The phasing out of English as a medium of instruction in favour of Malay occurred in stages and took a total of 12 years. By 1982, all school subjects – except for English and other languages – were taught in Malay. With the policy change, English was relegated to being second to the Malay language. English ceased to be the medium of instruction but remained a school subject.

What followed was the aggressive promotion, expansion, and development of Malay. Malay needed a massive upgrade if it was to be used as an administrative and management tool of the government as well as the medium of instruction for education. The most obvious shortcoming of Malay was the lack of secondary and tertiary level textbooks with standardized terminology in the various academic subjects and professional fields (Asmah Haji Omar, 1992: 189). In 1956, a language planning agency, the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, had been formed for the purpose of planning, developing, and publishing in the national language. One of its earlier tasks was to spearhead and consolidate planning and research in enriching the Malay vocabulary for science and technology through the coining of technical terms. The bulk of these terms are loan words from English (Heah, 1989: 269).

As a government agency, the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka has played a patriotic role in the development of the Malay language. Noss (1967: 320) noted that the Dewan has campaigned relentlessly for the propagation and sole use of the national language with a militancy that it was difficult to believe stemmed from purely educational or linguistic motives. The Malay language nationalists were (and still are) unyielding in their position

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that Malay should replace English in all aspects of life in Malaya. Asmah Haji Omar (2000: 241) termed the process of Malay replacing English as '*mendaulatkan*' ('elevating') the Malay language. In essence, Asmah Haji Omar explains that the Malay language has *daulat* ('highest position') and it reigns supreme over all languages in Malaysia. The use of the term *daulat* perhaps clarifies the feeling of great honour that the nationalists bestow upon the national language. Elevating Malay as the sole national language in Malaysia is considered to be a national duty and hindering this goal is seen as unacceptable to the nationalists.

Conclusion

The complexity of the roles English and Malay play in education in Malaysia still persists because of the awkward positions of the two languages within the national ideology.[8] English is often stereotyped as the big, bad wolf which will pounce on the natives if given the chance. The hesitancy about making English a compulsory subject gives a hint of the difficulty in moving beyond this stereotype. It has to be said, though, that this stereotype is more prevalent amongst the older generation. As explained by Gill (2002: 102), in Malaysia there will always be a dynamic tension between Malay and English – one pulling in the direction of establishing itself as the language of the nation and the language of identity, while the other one pulls in the opposite direction towards being the language for instrumental purposes, as Malaysia undoubtedly needs English for trade and international communications. ■

Notes

1 English is a compulsory subject but it is not yet compulsory to obtain a pass mark in the examinations. Recently, however, the Education Minister was reported to have said that English may be made a must pass subject in the national examination for secondary students in as early as 2016.

2 Department of Statistics Malaysia, <http://www.statistics.gov.my>, updated 31 July 2009.

3 Compared to the Peninsula, interethnic marriages are more common in Sabah and Sarawak, hence the demarcation by ethnicity and religion is not as pronounced. The difference between a *bumiputera* from Sabah and Sarawak and a *bumiputera* from the Peninsula is his/her religion – a *bumiputera* Malay is constitutionally defined as Malay and Muslim. That definition does not apply to *bumiputera*s in Sabah and Sarawak. The current population estimates by ethnic group in Malaysia lists *bumiputera*s as the majority (17.7 million), followed by the Chinese (6.4 million), Indians (1.9 million), others (344,000), and non-Malaysian citizens (2 million). Source: Statistical Bulletin, Malaysia (January 2010) http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=570&Itemid=14&lang=en

4 Literature on the definition and explication of the term vary depending on who is doing the definition. Positive views towards *bumiputera* and the implications of the term tend to come from Malay authors, while critical views of it tend to come from non-*bumiputera* authors as well as non-Malaysians (see Nagata, 1974; Lee, 1992; Shamsul, 1986 for an in-depth discussion on the term).

5 The Chinese students, though, were able to proceed to Chinese secondary schools; but not to tertiary level as there was none at that time.

6 The less well-to-do Malays, Chinese, and Indians communicated with each other using Malay in the pidgin form, as the majority of the non-Malays had no incentive to acquire more than a rudimentary command of the language (Heah, 1989: 70).

7 Section 21(2) of the 1961 Education Act allowed vernacular Chinese and Tamil schools to use their preferred languages until 1983 when all these schools were fully converted into national schools (1961 Education Act). However, this was strongly protested against by the Dong Jiao Zong, the body that safeguards Chinese education in Malaysia (which comprised the United Chinese Schools Committees' Association and the United Chinese School Teachers' Association) and the 1996 Education Act repealed Section 21(2). Hence, Section 16 of the 1996 Act provides for three categories of educational institutions in the National Education System: fully government-funded, government-aided and private. This means that the 1996 Act recognizes the existence of an independent Chinese school system, whose existence was ignored in the 1961 Act (Segawa, 2007: 30).

8 The NEP has since ostensibly been replaced by the National Development Policy associated with the Second Outline Perspective Plan for 1991–2000, and then by the National Vision Policy linked to the Third Outline Perspective Plan for 2001–2010. Although the new policies have put far greater emphasis on achieving rapid growth, industrialization and structural change, there is a widespread perception that public policy is still dominated by the NEP's interethnic economic policies, especially wealth redistribution or 'restructuring' targets (Jomo, 2004: iii).

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