

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE MALAYSIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: ITS EXISTENCE AND IMPLICATIONS

Ramiza Darmi<sup>1,2</sup> and Peter Albion<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Business, Education, Law and Arts,  
University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Australia.  
Email: Ramiza.Darmi@usq.edu.au, Peter.Albion@usq.edu.au

<sup>2</sup>Center for the Advancement of Language Competence,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Malaysia.  
Email: ramiza@upm.edu.my

### ABSTRACT

This article sets out to give a historical account of English language education programs in Malaysia as a foundation for understanding the existence of English language in Malaysia and its importance to Malaysian learners. The language background of Malaysians is very much tied up with the historical and educational background of the country. English is taught as a compulsory subject in schools despite the evolution of the Malaysian education system toward *Bahasa Malaysia* as the language of instruction. Since 1974, communicative language teaching has been proposed for the English language syllabus and it is an approach to engage learners in interaction and meaningful communication. However, differences between the school and university classrooms differentiate the language learning process. Malaysian learners who still have to learn English in universities need to develop a positive attitude for meaningful learning to occur.

**Keywords:** English language; Malaysian education system; communicative language teaching; language anxiety; bilingual system.

### INTRODUCTION

English is an important second language (L2) and is widely spoken and used in the countries which were typically ex-colonies of the United Kingdom or the United States including Malaysia, India, Philippines and Nigeria (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012). For the past fifteen years, Malaysia is one of the Asian countries that has been adopting a bilingual system of education. In the case of Malaysia, the national language is *Bahasa Malaysia* and the government has agreed on English language as an additional language to be in the education system. The system aims at establishing a balance between national and international needs and challenges manifested through linguistic educational policies (Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013). With reference to the Malaysian education system, English is placed as the L2 (Gill, 2002) in line with the education policy. English language is made a compulsory subject at all levels of education implying its existence “side by side with strong indigenous languages, wide use in speaking, and intranational outstanding, sometimes official functions, as the language of politics, the media, jurisdiction, higher education, and other such domains” (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012, p. 2). Reflecting on the Malaysian pluralist society, the learners are commonly bilingual, trilingual or even multilingual. Therefore, despite being competent

in the first language (L1), Malaysian learners should be aware of the necessity to master English language for future benefits.

In the Malaysian education system, English language learning takes place in classrooms; and Jeon-Ellis, Debski and Wigglesworth (2005) define the L2 classroom as “a social context to which learners bring themselves and their past experiences in which they establish certain relationships and attempt to participate and engage in tasks in ways that best fit their social needs” (p. 123). Excluding preschool level, the minimum formal learning of English language for Malaysian learners is eleven years and they continue learning English language in the tertiary level. Nevertheless, the deficiency in English competence among Malaysian learners is still the major concern among educators, in particular those in the tertiary institutions.

## **REFORMATION OF MALAYSIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM**

### **Pre-independence**

Initially, the Malays, being the local population, formed religious schools. The *Bahasa Melayu* was also the lingua franca for business communication purposes until the British came to Malaya (the name for Malaysia before independence). When the British administered Malaya from the eighteenth century till its independence (Fei, Siang, Kim, & Azizah, 2010), they not only established both English medium primary and secondary schools but the English language became the lingua franca for business communication purposes. The growth in Malaysian industry around rubber and tin attracted immigrants from China and India into Malaya. The immigrants also realised the importance of education and they established their own schools where the mother tongue (MT) of each ethnic group was the medium of instruction.

In general, prior to independence, the education system that existed in Malaya was a fragmented education system. The majority of the learners who attended the English medium primary schools were the Chinese since many lived in urban areas. A few Malays who benefitted from the English medium of instruction were the sons of royalty and chiefs; whereas the Indians remained in the estates and did not get the opportunity to attend the British education system due to economic disparity. Among the advantages promised to those learners who received education from the British education system were opportunities for further education, employment in the civil service, and access to scholarships. They were also highly regarded in the society and were offered important posts in the government then. Before independence, the educational system in Malaya was in accordance with the Barnes Report of 1951. The proposal was to develop a national school system in British Malaya by providing primary education for six years in both Malay and English languages. Other communities totally disagreed with the suggestion and felt that Chinese and Tamil should have been recognised too to represent the new definition of Malaya's national identity. At the end, the Barnes Report proved to be a failure. Consequently, the British approved bilingualism in Malay schools and trilingualism in the Chinese and Tamil schools.

With the objective to reform the Malayan education system, another educational proposal, the Razak Report, was released in 1956. The Education Committee was led by the late Minister for Education in the Federation of Malaysia Interim Government, Abdul Razak bin Hussain. An enhancement was made to the Barnes Report, which consequently endorsed the *Bahasa Melayu* as the medium of instruction while retaining

the vernacular schools of Chinese and Tamil. Since the goal was to unite all the races, the *Bahasa Melayu* was the principal language for national integration. The primary schools were Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil medium schools, whilst the secondary schools were Malay and English schools only. The National Education Policy was designed and included common content syllabus as to ensure that pupils would undergo the same process of enculturation. The report's terms of reference were to establish "a national system of education acceptable to the people of the Federation as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic and political development, having regard to the intention to make Malay the national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of other communities living in the country" (Federation of Malaya, 1956, p. 1). In Malaysia an older generation (aged 50 and above) who had been English-educated prior to independence are now a minority. During their time, English was practically their first language or an important L2 where the British accent is still heard when they communicate in the English language.

### **Post-independence**

Malaysia achieved its independence in 1957 and *Bahasa Malaysia* was proclaimed as the national language. Nevertheless, English was declared the second most important language in Malaysia after the national language. Consequently, English was used as the official language in administration. In 1960, the Minister of Education, Abdul Rahman bin Talib, set up a committee to review the implementation of the National Education Policy as suggested in the *Razak* Report. The Committee was named after its chairman, Abdul Rahman Talib, the Minister of Education then. The report, known as the *Rahman Talib* Report, was tabled with recommendations:

- To uphold the recommendations of the *Razak* Report;
- To have a bilingual (*Bahasa Malaysia* and English) medium of education in the schools. It was hoped that this would help unite the different races in Malaysia;
- To set up 'remove' classes for students from vernacular schools, where students spent one extra year learning English or *Bahasa Malaysia*. This was to help in the transition from primary education in the vernacular languages (Foo & Richards, 2004, p. 231).

The Education Act 1961 was produced based on both the *Razak* Report and the *Rahman Talib* Report. The Act contained a principal law that regulates education in Malaysia at all levels. It also introduced the national schools for Malay-medium primary schools and national-type schools referring to the vernacular schools. Other provisions were:

- *Bahasa Malaysia*, the national language, as the medium of instruction in schools;
- Providing a common curriculum
- Administering a common public examination for schools (Ales, 2010).

The National Education Policy was implemented in 1970. Gradually, the English medium schools were converted to national schools while retaining the national-type

schools. The Malaysian government enforced the phasing out of English language as the medium of instruction. The switch to *Bahasa Malaysia* as the medium of instruction was to be facilitated by learning the language as a subject in the national-type primary schools and a one-year language transition class – the Remove Class, attached to the Malay medium secondary schools. Nevertheless, English would become an important L2 taught in schools; thus, common content syllabi for English for both the primary and secondary schools were enacted. However, the switch between the languages saw a decline in the amount of English language exposure for Malaysian learners at schools.

In 1979 the Minister of Education then, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, tabled the outcomes after a committee reviewed the implementation of the National Education Policy. The major reformation to the education system was the launching of the New Primary Schools Curriculum or *Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah* (KBSR) in 1983 and the Integrated Secondary Schools Curriculum or *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah* (KBSM) in 1989. Both curricula were fully implemented by the year 2000. The aim of the KBSR is:

“to equip learners with basic skills and knowledge of the English language so as to enable them to communicate both orally and in writing, in and out of school.” (“Sukatan Pelajaran Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah Bahasa Inggeris,” 200, p. 1)

Similarly, the aims of the KBSM are:

“to extend learners’ English language proficiency in order to meet their needs to use English in certain situations in everyday life, for knowledge acquisition, and for future workplace needs.” (“Sukatan Pelajaran Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah Bahasa Inggeris ”, 2000, p. 2)

The learning outcomes outlined in the KBSR encompass the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – reflecting the needs in the daily life of Malaysian society. The outcomes continue to the secondary school curriculum, KBSM, as an extension to give opportunities to learners to engage in wider reading for enjoyment and self-development, as well as to develop an understanding of other societies, cultures, values and traditions to contribute to emotional and spiritual growth. The KBSM English syllabus advocated the Communicative language teaching (CLT) syllabus integrating all four language skills to achieve a total development of all skills. To create enjoyment and for self-development, a literature component was introduced to the secondary school syllabus.

The change in the medium of instruction from English to *Bahasa Malaysia* has led to precipitous deterioration in the English language competence among Malaysian learners. One of the measures to arrest the decline in the English language competence was reintroducing of English as the medium of instruction for science and mathematics beginning Year 1 in primary school and Form 1 in secondary school by the Ministry of Education in 2003 (Stephen, 2013). The rationale of the move was to prepare learners at the tertiary level particularly on science and technology for most reference material is mainly in the English language. Furthermore, it was assumed necessary to prepare a technologically advanced workforce able to access the latest knowledge and research in English. However, the government aborted the policy in 2009 and announced the teaching of both subjects in the national language (Nor Hashimah, 2009).

In light of the economy, in the era of globalisation, Malaysia is requiring universal use of English for employment locally and in particular, for Malaysians to remain globally competitive. To reinforce the importance of both languages, under the Tenth Malaysia Plan for 2011 to 2015 (The Economic Planning Unit), the government has implemented the 'Upholding *Bahasa Melayu* and Strengthening English' program during the Plan period (p. 201). The objective of the program is to sustain *Bahasa Malaysia* as the official national language and retain the language as a medium of unity and solidarity, and simultaneously to enhance English proficiency among Malaysians to prepare them with a sense of competitiveness and capacity to explore new knowledge at national and international levels. The importance of English language is generally acknowledged and communicative language teaching (CLT) as an approach aims to prepare learners "to use the new language in speech and in writing for a variety of purposes and in a range of contexts" (Lewis, 2002, p. 40). Therefore, learning second and foreign languages requires the use of the target language (TL) meaningfully and authentically with the prescribed tasks for language learners to communicate meaningfully and actively to promote learning.

### COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Languages are different but learning English language and acquiring L1 are similar. Listening is another method to acquire L2. According to the acquisition-learning hypothesis of Krashen (1982), 'acquisition' is the product of a subconscious process very similar to the process when children acquire their L1. The acquired system requires meaningful interaction and natural communication in the L2 when interlocutors focus only on the communicative act. For L2 learners, they are much guided by the patterns from L1 that they have the tendency to use the patterns when interacting and communicating in L2 (Lado, 1957). In other words, Malaysian learners may be listening to English language to acquire the language; nevertheless, they use the patterns of L1 to communicate in the English language.

The Malaysian Curriculum Development Centre proposed CLT in 1974 for English language syllabus. CLT refers to both processes and goals in classroom learning with an attempt to operationalize the concept of communicative competence (Richards, 2002). CLT emphasises interactions as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. The teaching and learning of English language in university adopts CLT, aiming to get learners engaged in real-life communication in the English language. The classroom enrolment in university, which is around 30 learners per group should enable English language teachers to assist individual learners to participate in the learning process for between 60-120 minutes in each lesson. This differs from classes in Malaysian schools, which are still large classes, normally around 40 learners. English language teachers are not able to ensure active participation in school classes within 40 to 80 minutes available in class sessions. CLT approach aims for meaningful communication through activities designed for learning. Since teaching and learning is a reciprocal process, learners play a major role to learn the TL. A piece of evidence from observation conducted by the first author on language learners suggests that there are three main attitudes of learners towards English language learning. First, learners react towards the English language as the first, second or even a foreign language. The reaction depends on, among other things, the locality the learners live in. Specifically, learners who resided and attended schools outside major cities or in rural areas tend to

place English language as a foreign language (EFL). This can be associated to the limited exposure and usage of English in contrast to learners who attend schools in urban areas. Second, learners in urban areas cover more domains of communication including the four skills as well as grammar, in contrast to learners in rural areas. Thus, the former group of learners feel comfortable communicating in the language outside English classes and with family members. In contrast, learners in rural areas find that learning English has no purpose and functions when they leave the class. They do not find the need to speak in the English language and they feel more comfortable speaking in their own MT. Both of these reasons concur with the claim made by Thornton and Houser (2005) that the engagement in the English language seems impossible when L2 learners get limited opportunity to use English outside the classroom with opportunities to speak and hear the TL happening only in the classroom. Third, a L2 speaker demonstrates a higher fluency than an EFL speaker of the same language. The reasons discussed indicate no surprise when EFL learners reveal negative attitudes such as being unenthusiastic and having low interest towards learning the TL. The situation can get worse with a discouraging environment to use the TL. The mixed background of L2 learners in tertiary classrooms is a challenge among themselves for them to overcome to be active learners of English language and also a challenge to the English teachers to cater to the individual needs.

The decision to revert to *Bahasa Malaysia* as the medium of instruction in the education system has created linguistic challenges among learners in Malaysian universities and “competence in English among learners has been on the decline since a change in language policy was enforced from that of English to *Bahasa Malaysia* in 1970” (Chan & Wong, 2004, p. 1). The decline has led to a rise in the number of unemployed graduates who fail to secure jobs because of their lack of competence in the English language, evident particularly during interviews (Chan & Helen, 2006, p. 309). Nevertheless, the advent of Information Technology (IT) and globalization has made English language proficiency imperative for developing countries such as Malaysia.

In sum, Malaysian learners have long exposure to learning English language in schools. Similarly, CLT approach has been used in the English language curriculum in both primary and secondary levels. Besides the attitudes of the learners, studies also show the need of learners to overcome their affective factors, specifically language anxiety which they have accumulated throughout the eleven years to be able to participate in language learning in tertiary classrooms.

### **ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING ANXIETY**

In relation to language anxiety, Brown (1994) emphasises that learning L2 or FL is a complex task susceptible to human anxiety. The extent to which language learners participate actively in the language learning process is determined by their attitudes and anxiety level. Feeling positively towards the TL reveals the learner’s positive attitude and consequently correlates to achievement in English language as well as successful acquisition in the TL. On the other hand, learners who have negative attitudes towards learning the TL do not expend the effort of speaking to acquire L2 aspects. Negative attitudes are associated with feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, and apprehension resulting in undue stress on the learners particularly when they are expected to participate actively within the language learning classroom. These negative feelings will demotivate them in learning the TL. According to Yang (2003) among

other affective variables, anxiety may be an important one since it not only inhibits learning and using English but it has detrimental effects on the learning process.

Language anxiety is defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension experienced by learners in the FL classroom (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). However, language anxiety is “a distinctive complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning process” (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 128). From the first author’s perspective, this definition perfectly reflects the Malaysian English language learners because they are seen to have difficulty giving responses in the TL in language classrooms and they believe whatever responses they give must be correct responses. Other physical reactions from the learners include the feeling of discomfort in the English language class (Andrade & Williams, 2009). They may manifest nervousness, lack of confidence and physical changes. In a study conducted on a group of Malaysian tertiary learners, they claimed to experience nervousness and difficulty to speak in the English language and tended to be reticent and passive in classrooms (Noor Hashimah, 2007). In the same study, the group of learners were aware of their limited use of English language, which had been in the English language classroom only. Moreover, they felt some of their peers were more proficient than them. In relation to their English teachers, the learners worry if they would be negatively evaluated (Liu & Huang, 2011) and the instructors would point out their mistakes to the whole class, which can lead to personal embarrassment to individual learners. The factors of anxiety for Malaysian learners learning English language are personal, school instructional practices as well as social and cultural influences that made them linguistically and psychologically isolated from the English language use (Noor Hashimah, 2007; Rosemala, 2008).

The first author found that Malaysian English language learners in universities who achieved MUET between band 1 to 4 still experienced language anxiety. The situation worsened when they discovered that English courses are compulsory papers in university, in which they need to obtain a pass for every paper. Unless they change their preset minds towards English language learning, the learners will still experience anxiety “occurring at each stage of language learning namely acquisition (input), retention (processing) and production (output)” (Darmi & Albion, 2012, p. 171). This situation can further be supported with Krashen’s (1982) affective filter hypothesis which explains how a combination of low level of affective variables raises the affective filter causing a mental block preventing information from being used for acquisition and results in poor language learning. The language anxiety experience by the Malaysian learners hinders them from being active learners as they consistently experience uneasiness in learning and thinking in the TL

## CONCLUSION

Fundamentally, *Bahasa Malaysia* is accepted to unite the culturally multilingual society of the Malaysians; on the other hand, English language has a functional role because of its use as an international language of communication in the economy, thus, demonstrating its pervasive influence through its role in the education system. Language has to be communicated for learners to achieve competency; therefore, it is pertinent for Malaysian English language learners to overcome language anxiety so as to enable them to participate actively and meaningfully in language classes and be competent in the English language.

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