



Proceedings of the 1st English Education International Conference (EEIC) in conjunction with the 2nd Reciprocal Graduate Research Symposium (RGRS) of the Consortium of Asia-Pacific Education Universities (CAPEU) between Sultan Idris Education University and Syiah Kuala University

November 12-13, 2016, Banda Aceh, Indonesia



Keynote Speaker

BILINGUALISM AND EDUCATION: THE MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Malaysia is a multilingual and multiracial country. As a result, it has to face many sensitive language issues within the politics of the country. Bilingualism is initially planned in Malaysia. The types of bilingual education and educational policies are influenced by the effects that the government is trying to achieve. However, bilingual education itself is not explicitly advocated but implicitly sanctioned by the government. Bilingual education in Malaysia is mainly based on the types of schools and the medium of instructions in these schools. Bilingual education will continue to be implemented and given strong support by the government, in terms of policy formulation, financial allocation, materials and infrastructures support and teacher training. The main challenges for its success will be public support, changing of mind-sets and involvement of the media.

Keywords: *Bilingualism, multilingualism, bilingual education.*

INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism means having two languages, and is often used in the literature to mean the same as multilingualism, and is mainly about language use. According to Macnamara (1969), a bilingual is a person who could speak, write, understand or read a second language, even to a minimal degree. However, bilinguals can be ranged along a continuum from the rare equilingual (having an exactly equal command of two languages) who is indistinguishable from a native speaker in both languages at one end to the person who has just begun to acquire a second language at the other end (Saunders, 1988). A more current definition by Grosjean (2010) refers to a bilingual as someone who is able to use two or more languages in his or her everyday life. This also applies to someone who uses a dialect or who is a multilingual. Bilinguals also tend to be dominant in one of their languages in some or all of their language abilities, which may vary with context and change over time with social or geographical mobility (Baker, 2011).

With the advent of increased globalization, the Malaysian government has been consistently emphasizing the importance of acquiring the English language for the Malays, the indigenous people, to participate effectively in the development of the country and the economies of the world. When asked to explain his repeated reminders on the need for Malays to master English, the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad said that it was mainly because most research as well as new technologies and discoveries were recorded in English. He pointed out that " ...We cannot translate into our language because there is far too much for us to translate. ... The

easier thing to do is to understand English so that we can read directly without waiting for someone to translate it" (New Straits Times, February 2001, p. 2).

In 2012, the Prime Minister of Malaysia Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak unveiled the National Education Blueprint (NEB) that laid the foundation for transforming the Malaysian education system. A major issue addressed was the upholding of Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language) as the national language while strengthening the teaching and learning of English as a second language through strong emphasis on bilingualism in education.

Bilingualism and Education

Bilingualism in education concerns teachers, parents, and policy makers, as well as scientists, scholars and researchers in the field of education. A UNESCO report in 2016 emphasizes that education policies should recognize the importance of mother tongue learning and that at least six years of mother tongue instruction is needed to reduce learning gaps for minority language learners (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016). The issue of bilingual education is closely related to the reasons why children become bilingual and the societal circumstances that influenced them. Skutnabb-Kangas (1984), cited in Mostafa (2004) divides these social circumstances into four groups: elite bilinguals (who become bilingual by choice, travel or live abroad, choose to study in another language), children from linguistic majorities, children from bilingual families, and children from linguistic minorities.

Both children from linguistic majorities and children from linguistic minorities may sometimes be obliged to follow a school program in another language. Speakers of minority languages need to become bilingual if they want to become integrated into society, and usually this is supported by government educational policies. In Malaysia, under colonial rule, English (minority language) was once the medium of instruction in schools before being replaced by the Malay Language (majority language), and relegated to the status of a second language. Even though English plays a significant role in the Malaysian education system, provisions were made for the use of mother tongues (Shah & Ahmad, 2007).

The types of bilingual education and educational policies are also influenced by the effects that the government is trying to achieve. Baker (2011) mentions a transitional bilingual education type where the purpose is to shift the child from home, minority language to the dominant, majority language with the underlying purpose for social and cultural assimilation. The implementation of the transitional bilingual education program is intended to utilize a student's primary (minority) language in instruction. The program maintains and develops skills in the primary language and culture while introducing, maintaining, and developing skills in the secondary (majority) language.

Malaysian Perspective

Malaysia is a multilingual and multiracial country. As a result, it has to face many sensitive language issues within the politics of the country. In this respect, language becomes one of the critical issues in its endeavor to establish its national identity. During British rule in the country, the colonial language (English) was widely used in all social and political affairs. After Independence in 1957, the indigenous language, the Malay Language or Bahasa Malaysia, became the choice as the country's national language. It was then assigned a new status and role, and acquired new economic and political status compared to other languages. The national language continued to be developed by the government to function efficiently in administration and education. However, the government continued to encourage the learning of the other languages (i.e. English, Chinese, Tamil, Iban, etc.) as well. These languages are grouped together as vernacular languages while English is widely recognized as a second language.

Since its independence in 1957, Malaysia has vigorously taken the efforts to develop and cultivate the Malay Language as its national language, so as to enable the language to successfully carry out its various functions. In the field of education, there has been a long tradition of English-medium teaching in Malayan primary schools, in which many children of Malay, Chinese and Tamil origin learned English through intensive exposure to the language. However, changes in policy through the implementation of the Education Ordinance of 1957 and the Education Act of 1961 had brought the establishment of many Malay-medium primary and secondary schools throughout the country. Thus, there was need for development of materials to teach Malay in primary schools, as

well as to teach English in the secondary schools, when it was no longer used as a medium of instruction. This was recognized by the government, and involved the development of the Malay language itself as a vehicle to convey educational and technical concepts, for which it had never been employed previously.

The scope of the teaching and learning of English in Malaysian schools also saw significant changes. The English teaching syllabuses during the days when English was the main medium of instructions in Malaysian schools were more structural and grammar based in nature. The scope and context of the syllabus was very wide, befitting the role of English as the main medium of intellectual pursuits and official communication. But, with the change in status of English to that of a second language in the country, the scope had to be narrowed down to structures and functions required in a second language situation, and the context was more Malaysian-based.

An important issue faced by students learning English in Malaysia is motivation to learn or acquire the language. During colonial times, when the language had a higher prestige and economic value in the country, and when learning English was confined to the elitist few, motivation was not a problem. When English became more restricted in function and had lost some of its earlier prestige and economic value, but had become more accessible to everyone in the school system irrespective of what kind of school they attended, there developed a serious problem of motivation especially among rural students who just did not see the need to learn the language when they got by so easily in the national language in their daily learning and communication needs (Parilah Mohd Shah & Fauziah Ahmad, 2007).

The Federal Constitution of Malaysia provides for the right to learn other languages, besides Bahasa Melayu so long as this is not for official purposes. This is clearly stated in Article 152 (Federal Constitution 1982, pp. 137-138) as follows:

- (1) *The national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in such script as Parliament may by law provide, provided that:*
- (a) *no person shall be prohibited or prevented from using (otherwise than for official purposes), or from teaching or learning, any other language; and*
 - (b) *nothing in this Clause shall prejudice the right of the Federal Government or of any State Government to preserve and sustain the use and study of the language of any other community in the Federation.*

Thus, there is no restriction for the non-native speakers of Bahasa Melayu to learn their mother tongues, as long as the use of these languages does not hinder the development and use of the national language.

Bilingual Education

According to Gaudart (1992), bilingualism is initially planned in Malaysia. In this respect, Solomon (1988) states that one factor that was common in the recommendations of all the educational committees set by the government to reorganize the country's education system was bilingualism or bilingual education. Asmah (1982), as cited in Parilah Mohd Shah and Fauziah Ahmad (2007), states that even though bilingualism is being practiced in the Malaysian education system, bilingual education itself is not openly advocated but implicitly sanctioned by the government. Major emphasis is given to the acquisition and learning of Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language) and English as medium of instructions with the acquisition of other languages mainly for the maintenance of mother tongues and cultural heritage.

A main characteristic of bilingual education in Malaysia is that it is based on the types of language instructions that are used in schools (Parilah Mohd Shah & Fauziah Ahmad, 2007). Gaudart (1992) and Solomon (1988) provide elaborate descriptions on the implementation of bilingual education in Malaysia. After the Second World War, in the then British Malaya, the Cheeseman Committee Report (1946) proposed balanced or full bilateral bilingualism in the Malay, Chinese and Tamil language primary schools. In this system, the second medium of instruction in all the three schools was to be English. In the secondary schools the students were required to learn two languages. They either studied in English medium schools and learnt their native language on their

own or studied in a school which used the vernacular as the medium of instruction and studied English as the second language.

The Barnes Committee of 1951 further proposed a bilingual model for national unity. Solomon (1988) notes that the committee also proposed full bilateral or balanced bilingualism. In primary schools, both English and Malay were to be used as mediums of instruction. In secondary schools, the medium of instruction was to be English. However, except for Malay, no provision was made for the study of Chinese or Tamil languages. However, the Fenn-Wu Report of 1951 recommended transitional bilingualism as an alternative to the recommendations of the Barnes Committee Report 1951 (Solomon, 1988). For those interested in Chinese education, primary education in Chinese medium was recommended. These students would learn English as a second language and Malay as the third language. After six years of primary education, these students would study English intensively for one year in a Special Chinese class and then have their secondary education in English.

The Central Advisory Committee later modified the proposals of the Barnes Committee and recommended that all the students learn a minimum of two languages (English and Malay) and the maximum of three (including mother tongue) in the primary schools. The existing Tamil and Chinese schools would also teach English and Malay as additional languages. The special committee also recommended the teaching of English and Malay as compulsory languages as both were official languages.

Elements of transitional bilingual education could also be found in the recommendations made in the Razak Report of 1956 and the Rahman Talib Report 1960 (Solomon, 1988). In this respect, English and Malay were made compulsory subjects in all schools. The medium of instruction in secondary schools was to be either Malay or English, and both the languages were also compulsory subjects. However, students could learn their own language (Chinese or Tamil) if they desired. In the states of Sabah and Sarawak, the Woodhead Report of 1955 also recommended transitional bilingual programs (Solomon, 1988). In both states, students in Chinese or Malay primary schools could join English medium secondary schools after spending a year in a Bridge or Transition Class, learning English.

After Malaysia gained its independence, the Education Ordinance of 1957 provided for transitional bilingual education in the system of education, though ultimately Malay, the National Language was to be the sole medium of instruction (Solomon, 1988). In this respect, English, Malay, Chinese or Tamil (for national-type) were used as instructional languages in primary schools while English, Malay and Chinese (for national-type) were used in the secondary schools. The following Education Act of 1961 reaffirmed the eventual use of the National Language (Malay) as the sole medium of instruction in schools. Consequently, the conversion of the English medium schools to Malay medium began in 1968.

By 1984, all English medium schools in Malaysia were converted to Malay medium schools. Currently, Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language) is now the sole medium of instruction in all National Primary and National Secondary schools. Elements of bilingual education programs are not clearly evident in these schools. However, at the National-Type Primary Schools (Chinese), or NTPS(C) and the National-Type Primary Schools (Tamil), or NTPS(T), transitional bilingual education programs are still being practiced. The medium of instructions in these schools are Chinese and Tamil respectively, and pupils have to undergo a one year Transition Class (using a language other than the national language as the medium of instruction) in a National Secondary school prior to the commencement of their lower secondary education.

Thus, a distinct difference between the present system of education in Malaysia and the education system of the early 1960's with respect to language development, is the absence of English medium schools. Furthermore, the National Language (Bahasa Malaysia) has been given its due respect and it stands unchallenged as the main medium of instruction in all schools except the NTPS(C) and NTPS(T), and it is a compulsory subject in all schools, without exception. However, more importantly, the position of English has been relegated to that of a compulsory second language.

The KBSR (New Primary School Curriculum) and KBSM (Integrated Secondary School Curriculum) was introduced in 1987. They were common content curriculums, attempting to ensure that students were learning the same skills progressively, and acquiring knowledge on similar levels. Language played an important part in the overall design and language was also seen as the means to acquire knowledge. Thus, the acquisition of language was heavily emphasized in both curriculums.

For the vast majority of school children in Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia was the medium of instruction while English was a compulsory second language. Languages such as Mandarin, Tamil, Arabic, Iban, Kadazan and others which parents demand to be taught, were optional. This structure basically remains until today.

A new curriculum for primary schools, the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR) to replace the KBSR was introduced in 2011. The curriculum was introduced to restructure and improve the previous curriculum and to ensure that students have the relevant knowledge, skills and values to face the challenges of the 21st century. The curriculum design is based on the following 6 key areas: communication, spiritual, attitude and values, humanitarian, physical and aesthetical development, and science and technology. A major effort is the increased amount of time allocated for the learning of languages, especially English in the classrooms. The Language Arts module was also introduced which stresses on language appreciation through interesting teaching and learning techniques such as through music, singing, choral speaking, jazz chants, drama and sketches (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2016). Students undergoing the KSSR curriculum will continue to progress with the implementation of the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah* (KSSM) secondary schools curriculum in 2017, where emphasis on bilingualism will continue to be maintained.

The Malaysian government also implemented the policy of teaching Science and Mathematics subjects in the English language in schools throughout the whole country in 2003 with the aim of enhancing the command of English among students at primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. However, after much debates among politicians, academicians, educationists and the general public, the policy was reversed in 2012.

Challenges to Bilingual Education in Malaysia

A major challenge to bilingual education in Malaysia is to gain the support of the general public, especially parents and teachers who have reservations of an educational system that have not met their expectations. A study conducted by Chan and Ain Nadzimah Abdullah (2015) indicates that being a bilingual is seen by teachers as not being a significant factor in forging a positive attitude towards students. They emphasize the need for the government to take more efforts to motivate teachers and to provide more bilingual opportunities and development. However, various efforts are now being undertaken by the Malaysian government to gain public support and to ensure the successful implementation of bilingual education in the country. Getting the support of the media is crucial. Successes in various aspects of education are now being highlighted widely and frequently by major newspapers. More language teachers are being trained and the quality of teacher training and development are being upgraded constantly. A major undertaken by the government is the formulation and implementation of the Malaysia Education Blueprint in 2013 that put a strong emphasis on language teaching and learning where bilingualism or multilingualism is very much prominent.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint, which encompasses a period from 2013 until 2025, evaluates the performance of current Malaysia's education system with considerations of historical starting points against international benchmarks. It offers a vision of the national education system and student aspirations that Malaysia aims for. In the course of its implementation, the Blueprint is guided by 11 strategic and operational shifts to achieve that vision. A major shift is to ensure that every child is proficient in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language) and English Language and is encouraged to learn an additional language (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013).

Another challenge is the belief that bilingualism is detrimental to society and would further polarize the people of the country and divide the nation, and that a united nation should be based on one common language. There are proponents of the Malay language who believe that bilingualism and bilingual education would threaten the survival of the Malay language. There would be a risk of lack of respect and use of the Malay language among the citizens with the use of other languages, such as English for instance. They are against allowing immigrant's native languages being taught in schools as this would pose a threat to the development of the Malay language itself and may give the immigrants an advantage over indigenous citizens or "bumiputeras" in the future.

However, even though the government supports the bilingual policy in education by allowing the teaching and learning of other languages (i.e. English, Arabic, Mandarin, Tamil, Iban, Kadazan, etc.) in the classrooms, strong efforts were also taken to ensure that the Malay language or Bahasa

Melayu is assured as the language of utmost importance in the country. After Independence, the Malay language was given the honour of being chosen as the national language of the new nation and gradual efforts were made to change the medium of instructions in schools from English to Malay beginning from 1968. Currently, active efforts to promote the national language (while still maintaining bilingualism) are being undertaken through the government initiated policy of “Memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu Memperkasa Bahasa Inggeris” (Upholding the Malay Language Strengthening the English Language). Those who support this effort argue that in practicality, all immigrant parents would want their children to learn and master the Malay language for advancement in the country and that mastering more than one language is important to the individual and the country. An early study by Abidin Shaffie in 1983, cited in Nor Azmi Mostafa (2004) on bilingualism in education in West Malaysia, further emphasized that bilingual education would help to foster national unity among the people of different races in Malaysia.

In fact, by developing the L2 might even spur the development of the L1 among the learners. The Developmental-Interdependence hypothesis proposed by Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa (1979) cited in Nor Azmi Mostafa (2004) predicted that a growth in the skills on one language would be reflected by a corresponding development of the same abilities in the other language. They stated that students who have achieved a high level of proficiency in both their languages (i.e. additive bilinguals) experience positive cognitive effects compared to the students who have attained native-like proficiency in one language only. On the contrary, students who experience less achievement in the second language (i.e. dominant bilinguals) show neither positive nor negative effects on cognition. An early study in the Malaysian context by Nor Azmi Mostafa in 2004 found significant correlations between bilingualism and intelligence and between bilingualism and academic achievement. Bilingual learners in selected Malaysian schools tended to score higher marks in nonverbal intelligence and language tests.

Bilingualism may lead to the development of individual empowerment. Cummins (1981), cited in Nor Azmi Mostafa (2004) mentions studies that reported positive effects of bilingualism among children whose proficiency in both languages (L1 and L2) has continued to develop in areas such as the ability to analyze and become aware of language, overall academic language skills, general conceptual development, creative thinking, and sensitivity to communicative needs of the listener. He further stresses that in gaining control over two language systems, the bilingual child has had to decipher much more language input than the unilingual or monolingual child, who has been exposed to only one language system. Thus, the bilingual child has had more practice in analyzing meanings than the unilingual child, and in the process, underwent more mental stimuli to make him/her better empowered. Studies have also proven that language skills are readily transferred between languages, in general, no matter which language it is and that literacy developed in the native language does transfer to the second language.

The introduction of bilingual education also addressed the issue of equal opportunity for all children in the country. On the basis of basic human rights, all children, irrespective of race and citizenship status, must be entitled to basic education in the country. Children should be taught in a language they understand and speaking a language that is not spoken in the classroom is disadvantageous to a child's learning, especially for those living in poverty (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016). Being bilingual has many advantages and by not providing children with the language resources necessary for success in education, non-native speaking children will be at a greater disadvantage and this may lead to future social problems in the country. Acquiring an international language, such as English, will expose the Malaysian learners to wider fields of knowledge and inculcate a more globalized world view that is associated with the use of English. This, however, is not intended to downplay the role and importance of the Malay language in the development of Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Bilingualism or multilingualism does not pose any threat to the learning and acquisition of other languages, instead, it might even spur the development of the L1. Bilingual education provides language learners with additional exposures, skills and expertise - through the interdependent nature of cognitive processing ability associated with proficiency in L2 together with the L1- to better

utilize the powers of their own minds in developing themselves within the realm of the world. In the process, it empowers them to function more effectively as global citizens.

Multilingualism is an important characteristic of the Malaysian society and thus, bilingual education will continue to be implemented and given strong support by the government, in terms of policy formulation, financial allocation, materials and infrastructures support and teacher training. The main challenge for its success will still be public support and changing of mind-sets. It is imperative that concrete efforts are taken by the Malaysian government to educate the public on the various advantages of bilingualism. Garnering the help of the media is important. Providing quality teaching materials, new methodologies and better infrastructures is crucial. Efforts to train and re-train language teachers should also be increased and given priority. It is hoped that through an education system that emphasizes multilingualism, the country will produce students who possess key attributes to be globally competitive, and bilingual proficiency is one of them.

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