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## THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE MALAYSIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to provide a historical account of the English language in Malaysia. Malaysians' linguistic and educational backgrounds are intricately linked to the country's historical and educational traditions. Despite the evolution of the Malaysian educational system, the English language continues to be taught as a compulsory language in schools. It is a method of engaging students in interaction and meaningful communication that is known as communicative language teaching. Language learners who are still required to learn English in universities must cultivate a positive attitude in order to engage in meaningful learning activities.

### Keywords:

English Language, Malaysia, Educational System, Language Learning, Language Learners

## Introduction

English is spoken and used as a second language (L2) 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). Malaysia is one of the Asian countries that is adopting a bilingual system of education. The aim is to establish 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) and, in line with the education policy, English language is made a compulsory subject at all levels of education

## The Status of English Language in Malaysia

The British colonization has left the legacy of the English language in Malaysia which has influenced the education system of the country. Not only has the British established English as the medium for both primary and secondary schools but the English language has also become the main language for business communication purposes (Fei, Siong, Kim & Azizah, 2010). The evolution of the English language status in Malaysia can be seen in two phases which are during the pre- and post-independence.

### *Pre-independence*

During pre-independence, primary schools were available in four mediums of instructions namely Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English. The Malay, Mandarin and Tamil medium schools catered exclusively for Malay, Chinese and Indian children respectively. However, majority of the learners who attended the English medium primary schools were the Chinese because they live in urban areas or the cities. As for the Malays, only those who have the privilege of being the children of the royals and chiefs have the opportunity to attend English medium primary schools while the Indians who remained in the estates did not have the opportunity to attend the British education system due to economic disparity.

At this time, the educational system in Malaya was in accordance to the Barnes Report of 1951. The Barnes Report proposed to develop a national school system in British Malaya by providing 6 years of primary education in both Malay and English languages. However, this proposal was opposed by the Chinese and Indian communities because they felt that Chinese and Tamil should also be recognized in the formation of the Malaya's national identity. Hence resulting to the failure of the Barnes report of 1951.

Following the failure of the Barnes Report of 1951, another educational proposal was released in 1956 which was the Razak Report. In this report, the Malay language was endorsed as the medium of instruction while retaining vernacular schools of Chinese and Tamil. The primary schools were the Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil medium schools, while secondary schools were the Malay and English schools medium only. The purpose of the Razak Report of 1956 was to establish a national system of education acceptable to the entire population of the Federation, one that would meet their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic, and political development, while also preserving and promoting the language and culture of other communities living in the country (Ministry of Education, 1956)

### ***Post-independence***

When Malaysia achieved its independence in 1957, the Malay language was proclaimed the national language of the country. Pertaining to that, English was used as the official language in administration.

In 1960, Rahman Talib report (named after the chairman which was the Ministry of Education at that time, was established with amendments from the Razak report in 1958. These amendments that were made were to uphold the recommendations of the Razak Report, to have a bilingual medium education schools with the hopes to unite the races in Malaysia and to set up a bridge class for students from vernacular schools. This is to help the students in the transition from primary education in the vernacular languages where they spent one extra year learning English or Malay Language (adapted from Foo & Richards, 2004, p.231).

Succeeding from both the Razak and Rahman Talib report the Education Act 1961 was produced. The education act applied to all levels of education where Malay language is used as the medium of instructions in schools, all schools have a common curriculum and a public examination will be administered for all schools (Puteh, 2010)

The National Education was implemented in 1970 where English medium schools were gradually converted to national schools where Malay language was not only used as the medium of instruction but learnt as a subject in both primary and secondary schools. English language at this stage was gradually phased out but retained as an important L2 subject taught in schools.

The National Education Policy was again reviewed in 1979. The major reformation of the education system was the implementation of the New Primary Schools Curriculum or Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah (KBSR) a in 1983 and the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum or Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM) in 1989. Both these curricula were fully implemented by 2020.

The aim of KBSR was to “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) whilst the aim fo KBSM were to ““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 aims of both the curricula was focused on the development of the English language encompassing the four skills which are listening, speaking, reading and writing. This is because, the change in the medium of instruction from English to Malay has led to the deterioration of the English language.

### **English Language Teaching and Learning in Malaysia**

In line with Malaysian education system the English language has been placed as the second language in Malaysia as stated in Article 152 (Nor Hashimah, 2008, Gill, 2002) after Bahasa Melayu, which is the national language of the country. It has been taught as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools where it is taught formally in the classroom. Students are required to pass the English language subject in order to further their studies. In Malaysia, the education system places English as a second language (Gill, 2005) which is in line with the education policy.

Malaysian English language teaching and learning has undergone three significant changes in the last 30 years (Azman, 2016). The first change occurred in 1982, when the Ministry of Education and the Malaysian government established the Integrated English Language Syllabus for Primary School (KBSR) by utilising communicative language education that is student-centered and uses English in context (Abdul Hakim, et. al, 2018). However, due to less than satisfactory results in the pedagogical aspects of teaching English communicatively, this approach was phased out (Musa et. al, 2012). This was also influenced by the fact that Malaysia's education system was more exam-oriented, with a greater emphasis on writing and reading rather than listening and speaking, which were the core elements in the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach.

The next change was done in 2002 where KBSR was changed to Standard English Language Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR). The curriculum tried to revive CLT by having an on-going School Based Assessment but received the same fate as the previous curriculum (Aziz et. al, 2012). English for Teaching Mathematics and Science (ETeMS) was also introduced in 2002 but was later abolished due to the negative feedback by the teachers upon its implementation (Isa et. al, 2011)

The most recent reform in English language education in Malaysia is the release of the English Education Roadmap 2015-2025, which is part of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. Azman (2016) describes a new systematic guide for the development of English language teachers, benchmarked syllabus items, teaching materials, and international standardise assessment for all educational levels.

### **The Impact of CEFR**

The decline of the standard of English can be seen through the unemployment of undergraduate students due to their lack of proficiency in the language (Pemandu, 2016). Thus, in order to address the issue of the declining standards of English, the Malaysian government has decided to form a body that is known as the English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC).

The director of the English Language Teaching Center (ELTC) together with other experts have been appointed by the Ministry of Education to manage the new formed body. One of the aims of the body is to advise the government on the appropriate of language policy and help elevate the standard of English in Malaysia. The council is assisted by the English Language Teaching Center (ELTC) which is the leading agency to elevate and improve English proficiency among Malaysian students (Mohamad Uri & Abdul Aziz, 2017).

The language council eventually put forward the idea of adopting Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for the country. Although CEFR is originated in Europe, it is recognized in more than 40 countries and is being used in countries like Mexico, Canada, Japan, China, Vietnam. (Mohd. Don & Abdullah, 2019). These countries have adopted this framework years ago. This is evidently seen by the alignment of high- stakes test like IELTS, TOEFL and TOEIC to CEFR (Mohd. Don & Abdullah, 2019).

The influence of CEFR can be seen in South East Asia with Vietnam as the first South East Asian country to adopt CEFR in their education system (Mohamad Uri & Abd. Aziz, 2018). Thailand also adopted CEFR into the teaching and learning of English in order to improve the English proficiency among the Thai (Maxwell, 2015)

Following the introduction of CEFR in other Southeast Asian countries, the ELSQC was established in Malaysia in 2013. (Nawai & Mohd Said, 2020). The proposed use of the CEFR in the development of Malaysia's English education system is intended to satisfy international standards (Ministry of Education Malaysia Blueprint, 2015(b), p. 62). Recent government documents and plans, such as the English Language Roadmap 2015-2025, which is part of the Malaysian Education Plan, show that the Malaysian government is moving quickly to apply the framework into the current educational system.

CEFR is considered relatively new the education system in Malaysia compared to Standard Based Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR) and Standard Based Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KSSM) standard (Muhammad Saufi, 2021), The difference between CEFR and the curriculum used in the education system in Malaysia is that the standards are internally set based on the needs of learning a second language in Malaysia, national goals and expectations. (Sani, 2018). This is further supported by Dr Zuwati Hasim (Chin, 2018) that the CEFR asct as a guide that could be adapted in Malaysia where it is aligned to the existing curriculum towards the communicative needs of the students.

One of the ultimate aspirations of the education system is the development of a bilingual proficiency mainly the dual language policy i.e. the policy to uphold “Bahasa Malaysia and to strengthen the English language”. Therefore, one of the main aims of the policy is to ensure that every student in Malaysia has at least an operational proficiency with two other languages (which includes English) by the time they have completed their 11 years of education. Thus, one of the ways to raise the standard of English in the country is the alignment of Malaysia’s English language curriculum and assessments with (CEFR).

### **English Speaking Skills in Non-Speaking English Countries**

Speaking is considered one of the most important skills to develop and cultivate because it is a medium for effective communication (Aydogan, 2014, Rao, 2018). Many researchers consider speaking as the most desired skill to learn. This is confirmed by Richards and Renandya (2002) stated that a large percentage of language learners worldwide learn English to develop speaking skills.

However, many ESL and EFL learners, especially in non-English speaking countries such as Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, China, Hong Kong (Gan, 2012) to name a few, have difficulty expressing themselves orally in the target language.

It is for this reason that a large number of studies have been carried out on students' English language proficiency all over the world. For example, a quantitative study by Park and Lee (2005) investigated the relationship between second language learners' anxiety, confidence, and speaking performance of 132 Korean college students where a questionnaire consisting of 30 items about anxiety and confidence were distributed to them. The results of this study showed that students with high anxiety have low oral performance. Apart from that, the findings showed that students with high self-confidence have high oral performance.

Another similar study was conducted in Jordan (Al-Eiade, & Al-Sobh, 2016) focusing on English speaking skills of 20 Aljoun National University (ANU) undergraduate students. In this qualitative study, it was found that feeling ashamed and not learning the speaking lessons properly, which leads to difficulties in pronouncing some English words, are among the factors that students face in learning English. This shows that anxiety and self-confidence play an important role in whether students are able to speak confidently in English.

Both the studies (Park & Lee, 2005, Al-Eiade, & Al-Sobh, 2016) had similar findings that self-confidence and anxiety does effect students' performance in learning English.

### **English Speaking Skills in Malaysia**

As English becomes the means of communication in all fields both locally and globally, there is a need for speakers who are proficient in the language in every country (Gani, 2015), including Malaysia.

In language learning, there are four language skills that need to be mastered which are reading, writing, listening and speaking. Writing and speaking are productive skills while reading and listening are receptive skills. Among the four skills, speaking is considered the most important skill to be mastered in learning a new language. (Nunan, 1991). Patel and Jain (2008) support this view that the main function of language is communication. Therefore, learners must be able to speak the language in order to master it well.

Thus, speaking is an important skill to master because it is the best way to communicate with other people to express opinions and ideas. Speaking consists of five components: Grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency and pronunciation (Brown, 2004). Therefore, students need to be aware of these components so that they can speak the language fluently.

In reality, students are still not able to speak the language fluently. This is evident in Malaysia where the unemployment rate of graduates is relatively high due to poor English proficiency (HR in Asia, 2018). One of the reasons for this is probably that students in Malaysia have certain problems with speaking. This is confirmed by Spawa & Fauziah Hassan (2013) who point out that the lack of English proficiency among Malaysian students is a national problem that needs to be addressed by the government in order to achieve the country's goal of becoming a fully developed nation. Indonesia, our neighbouring country, also faces the same dilemma. Gani et. al. (2015) found that the proficiency level of high school students in their country in English is very alarming. Hence, it could be seen that both countries, i.e Malaysia and Indonesia face the same dilemma where the students lack proficiency in the English language.

The low communication skills of students in Malaysia could be caused by a variety of factors. Urrutia and Vega (2010) proved that the learners' oral performance was affected by their lack of vocabulary, distrust and fear of being scorned. However, the study also indicated that learners' cooperation, confidence, vocabulary knowledge and classroom environment can encourage them to improve their speaking skills. Prieto (2007) conducted a study on cooperative learning tasks which revealed that one way to improve speaking fluency is to interact with others, learn from others and choose topics according to learners' interests to encourage them to speak in English.

Another study conducted by Boonkit (2010) investigated the factors that can promote learners' speaking skill development. The results showed that using appropriate speaking skill activities can be a good strategy to reduce speakers' anxiety. It was also found that the free choice of topics made the participants feel comfortable, made them want to speak English, and increased confidence in speaking in EFL learners. It is interesting to note that when learners feel comfortable and confident, this is likely to lead to their willingness to communicate in English at their own will.

These research studies (Urrutia & Vega, 2010; Preito, 2007; Bonkit 2010) showed that in order to improve students' proficiency in the English language, students need to be in an environment that reduces their anxiety to speak the language and builds up their self-confidence. The choice of topics is also crucial in order to spark their interest and WTC in English.

### **Conclusion**

Significant effort has been made to improve English language proficiency in Malaysia in order to keep pace with globalisation's rapid advancement. From the Barnes report in 1951 to the alignment of language curriculum and assessment with the CEFR in order to improve the country's English standard. However, if everyone, from the Ministry of Education to the teachers and students, does not play their part, the standard of English language will continue to deteriorate.

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