

## Malay Language As A Foreign Language And The Singapore's Education System

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### Abstract

The paper highlights the impact of the Singapore's bilingual education policy on the Malay language and how the language has been regarded a *foreign* language in the Singapore context given the interest of policy makers in the implementation of a new third language policy. The growth can be hampered, however, to some concerns arising from the bilingual policy namely inadequate manpower, teaching materials, lack of resources and opportunities for using the language.

**Keywords:** teaching of other languages, Malay language, Singapore, Southeast Asia

### Malay Language and the Singapore Education System

The Malay language which has evolved to be the national language in Malaysia and Indonesia is the mother tongue for Malays who are minorities (about 15% of the total population) in Singapore. The Malays in Singapore have used it as an ethnic expression where some cultural traits are maintained. After about forty years of bilingual education, there are indications that the Malay language is becoming a formal language for the Malays in Singapore limiting its usage mainly as a language of instruction in the mother tongue classes in schools, in some subjects within the few existing religious schools, in a local newspaper, in local Malay television channel and radio programmes. From the General Household Survey (2005), more Malays are using English at home; although compared with the other ethnic groups, Malay is still the language predominantly spoken by the Malays at home.

On the other hand, there is a trend towards making the Malay language available to non-Malay students as a third language. One such initiative by the Singapore government is to offer a third language to any interested secondary student. Also from 2007, Secondary 1 students will be allowed to learn another language in addition to their native mother tongue, as long as they have the interest and inclination. This serves to encourage more students to learn Malay, Mandarin or Tamil as a third language (Ministry of Education, 2004). The ability to speak a third language is seen by the Ministry of Education to be useful, and can help young Singaporeans of all races be able to operate effectively in this region and beyond. Proficiency in a non-native mother tongue will also help increase interaction among the various ethnic communities and facilitate inter-racial understanding. Thus, the existing eligibility criteria to learn a non-native mother tongue as a third language was lifted. Prior to this announcement, a third language was allowed only for the top ten percent of the primary school leavers. It reflects the government's effort to relax the bilingual policy which they had maintained so far within the education system. Thus far, the Malays can learn Malay as their mother tongue, the Chinese learn Mandarin and majority Indians who are Tamil learn Tamil.

Understanding this background will provide a general overview of the impact of the bilingual policy has on the development of Malay language in the current education system. The paper is a discussion of the development of Malay language in Singapore within the education system of Singapore. It seeks to describe how its status has grown as a 'foreign' language within the framework of the Singapore bilingual education system.

## Historical Background

With the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965, many education and language policies were changed addressing to the needs of the two different nations, consequently affecting the position of Malay language in Singapore. Prior to independence of Singapore in 1965, *Bahasa Melayu* which is the mother tongue of Malays in Singapore as well was the *lingua franca* of this region i.e. the Malay States. Under the British, the Malay States including Singapore had used Malay as a language of communication in commerce, administration and also education (Stevenson, 1975). Although formal educational institutions like schools were introduced by the British administration, Malay language became a medium of instruction in Malay schools and remained to be the main medium of instruction in religious schools. Malay language continued to be taught in schools prior to independence until separation from Malaysia. The English medium school was introduced but it was intended for the few privileged local Malay elites. In Singapore, the first school proposed by Raffles was meant to educate the children of the Malay royal families (Abdullah, 1960) who did not have any formal education thus far. Though English was to be taught, it was exclusively for the children of the royal family. The English language functioned as a tool of the colonial power to maintain control over its colonies. Within the context of a colonial ideology, Malay language was taught in schools only to the masses and education was meant for them to be able to operate within their own social life. Hence, the traditional feudal social structures were greatly strengthened. As Shaharuddin Maaruf puts it:

“As far as education of the masses were concerned, there was a common front between feudal and colonial ideology in maintaining traditional and rural outlook of the masses and obstructing their democratic and political education. This meant the continuing power of the elite, which in turn, meant the preservation of British imperialism” (1988:57).

The position of Malay language slowly evolved within the changes instituted by the political elite of Singapore. The bilingual policy made compulsory through the centralized education system which promoted the wider use of English had an indirect impact on the status of Malay language in Singapore. English was chosen by political leaders after independence to be the main language of communication and education. This policy highlighted that

“the role of language ... in Singapore in relation to nation-building (which is) ... to cultivate **instrumental attachment** by maintaining a high level of economic development, presumably through the use of English. At the same time, traditional values are retained through the continuous use of ethnic language.” (Kuo, 1983:4)

The policy was intended to reduce inter-ethnic divisions and promote national identity and economic growth (Gopinathan, Ho & Vanithamani, 2004).

Over the period of four decades after independence, the bilingual education system has evolved, strengthening the position of English language as the medium of instruction in educational institutions and language of trade and commerce. In Singapore schools, all subjects are taught in English except for an average of six hours a week for the instruction of the mother tongue languages. Mandarin, Tamil and Malay are the official languages of Singapore. These languages became known as mother tongue language in Singapore schools. The mother tongue is also studied by students of these respective ethnic groups. Mother tongue languages here are also defined as Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay for the Malay community and Tamil for the Indians.

The term 'mother tongue' refers to the first language acquired as a child. The origin of the term was based on the assumption that this first language would be the one spoken by the primary caregiver and this was assumed to be the mother. However, with changes and cultural differences in child-rearing practices, it cannot be assumed that the primary care giver will always be the mother (Byram, 2000) and these concerns are already voiced in the Singapore context.

Bilingualism existed before independence due to the presence of Malays as the indigenous linguistic majority, English from the colonial rulers and other local and regional dialects. Chinese and Indian immigrants also learned bazaar Malay plus contextualized usage of their dialect languages. While the older generation of Singapore was exposed to bazaar Malay, younger Singaporeans are bilinguals because they speak two languages; English and their mother tongue. Younger Singaporeans are products of the bilingual system. Bilingualism in Singapore means students in school are proficient in two languages; English Language and their mother tongue.

The 1959 All-Party Report on Chinese Education was the backbone of Singapore's language policy which according to Gopinathan, Ho and Vanithamani (2004) was to enhance the economic and symbolic power of language, to remove it as a bone of contention and contestation, and to use it for economic and social cohesion purposes. This document saw the application of equality of treatment for all languages with differing roles to play. It departs from Malay as a national language and led to Malay being recognized as one of the four official languages.

The bilingual education system which was introduced since then is Singapore's way of remaining **cosmopolitan**, yet not **rootless**; to have an open mind and be forward and outward looking but still keep a clear sense of identity and self-confidence. As Lee Hsien Loong, then Deputy Prime Minister puts it in his speech in Parliament,

“The Government's long-standing policy on bilingualism and learning of mother tongues in schools remains unchanged. English is and will remain our common working language. It is the language of global business, commerce and technology. But the mother tongue gives us a crucial part of our values, roots and identity. It gives us direct access to our cultural heritage, and a world-view that complements the perspective of the English-speaking world.”  
(1999: 1)

The language policy changes from 1965 to 1992 had been discussed extensively by Gopinathan (1998). He concluded through his analysis that the disfunctionality of an English-driven modernization process had become more apparent in both class and cultural

terms and political power has moved to accommodate it (Gopinathan et al., 1994:90). To suit the economic demands of the country, the government implemented a series of changes within this bilingual language education framework of Singapore. The Goh Report (1979) emphasized further the Singapore's brand of bilingualism. English becomes the main medium of instruction for all other subjects.

One consequence of this policy as can be seen now is the language shift towards English. Although Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are maintained for socio-cultural reasons, there are signs to indicate that more parents are speaking English at home. More parents especially those who are products of the bilingual school system, speak English at home (Census of Population, 2000). The use of ethnic languages in the preservation of culture as envisioned by the government is undermined with the extensive use of English in schools and at home. Studies reported by the Ministry showed high incidence of students going to school with English as their home language. The belief that culture preservation implied in ethnic language leads to disparity about the intended goal of the bilingual policy. Consequently, there had been rethinking of language policies albeit within the framework of current language policy. The rethinking of the mother tongue policy had led to changes within the curriculum of Mandarin, Malay and Tamil languages in schools so that these languages are taught in more lively and attractive ways as a step forward to make young Singaporeans enjoy and make sense of learning their mother tongue languages.

Any type of bilingual education that takes shape in a community is largely a result of the socio-historical, cultural, economic and political dynamics. This is particularly so in small nations with multi-ethnic groups within its fold like Singapore. Bilingual education has evolved in many countries and often understood within the historical context of in-migration as well as political movements such as civil rights, equality of educational opportunity and melting pot policies (Baker, 1996). Likewise, language issues in a small nation state as Singapore is shaped by socio-economic demands of the political elite on education. As an example, Mandarin was also 'chosen' to be the unifying language of the Chinese, but not was stated not to be a unifying language for the other groups i.e. Malays and Indians. This policy has its political overtones. Its decision is seen as a pragmatic way to deal with a larger multiracial nation surrounded by Malaysia and Indonesia.

The above section has briefly discussed the development of bilingual policy in Singapore and how it had dealt with these issues. The following section discusses more specifically the impact of bilingualism on the Malay language.

### **Policy Development and Implication on the Malay Language**

Unlike in Africa where there is a feeling of lost of respect for the mother tongue languages (Kamwangamalu, 2003), mother tongue languages in Singapore are not facing any grave consequence yet. Nevertheless, the increase usage of English and a diminishing role of ethnic languages in everyday life are greatly felt within the different ethnic groups. More parents are using English at home. Singaporean parents are the product of the new English education system after independence. They prefer to speak to their children in English than in other languages. Ethnic languages are being taught in schools as school subjects. It is used less and less frequently outside class. The number of primary one Malay children coming from English speaking homes has increased over the years (Mohd Noor Daipi, 2004).

This creates higher anxiety within ethnic groups especially amongst the Malays as they fear the future generation losing their language hence cultural identity.

Arising from a public debate about language issues, the government kept its assurance to the public that it has not changed its longstanding bilingual policy or shifted its position on the mother tongue, hence the statement, “Bilingualism and learning the mother tongue will remain the cornerstone of our education policy” (Ministry of Education, 2002:2).

Standing by this policy meant that English would continue to be the language of unity and functionality. With economic demands and globalization, its hegemonic strength over the other ethnic languages is heightened. In the light of globalization, the instrumental benefits of learning the mother tongue Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are at times invoked in association with economic giants of China and India. However, due to the political sensitivities of being surrounded by Malay speaking nations, the Malay language remains to be the important language of the country.

Within the Malay community, the Malay language has been a language of communication. It is used widely amongst the Javanese, Boyanese, other Indonesian groups and some Arabs. The language is so interwoven with the society that it is regarded as the core element in cultural identification of the Malays here creating fear within the community that Malay Singaporeans lose their cultural identity with less usage of Malay.

The Malays have several institutions within the mainstream population, which allows for the use of language as a cultural tool for maintaining family values and religious instructions. Many religious subjects are taught in Malay. The Malay language is still regarded also as a tool for the transfer of religious values. The continued existence of ‘*madrassahs*’ or religious schools is also an avenue where Malay language is used widely although many *madrassahs* are also turning to instructions into English following the announcement of Compulsory Education in 1998. Within the Malay community of whom 99% are Muslims, carry out religious instructions and many sermons in mosques and religious classes in Malay. These classes are organized outside the formal school system. To a large degree, religious instruction helps to perpetuate the use of Malay language.

The teaching of Malay language is therefore being scrutinised by a number of groups i.e. parents, teachers, community leaders and language groups who are considered to be the main stakeholders in Malay language circle. The Malay community fears that without the language the ethnic identity is also at stake.

### **Can Malay Language be a Foreign Language within the Bilingual Policy?**

With the current interest to project the image of Singapore as a global city, the education system now encourages interested students to learn new non-native third languages. One example of such a move is that the ministry now provides more opportunities for students to pick up conversational Chinese and Malay. The learning of a third language is now no longer restricted to the top 10% of the students’ cohort at the elementary level. Malay language could thus develop in this regard.

## **Malay as a Third Language**

Malay language is now being taught as a third language. Malay as a foreign language as such is not a new phenomenon in the socio-economic history of Singapore. It was taught to colonial officers who were interested in Malay language and literature through language teachers like Abdullah Munsyi as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, it has not caught on as a language taught to foreigners in the way European languages, East Asian and South Asian languages are to foreigners. Malay speakers particularly in the Singapore context are bilingual and they become easily dependent on the English language. Malaysia's move to teach Mathematics and Science in English within their Malay medium schools also led to questions of the declining importance of the Malay language, which is a recurring debate on the integrity of the Malay language in education institutions.

In Singapore, it was only in 1986, that the Malay language was introduced as a school subject to non-Malay speakers through a subject called Malay Special Programme. Malay was then offered to only non-Malay students who are the top ten percent of the twelve years old students sitting for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). It is now offered also to the eleven to twenty percent of the PSLE cohort. Other languages offered as third language options are German, French, Japanese and Mandarin. From 2005, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has been encouraging schools to offer conversational Chinese and Malay as enrichment programmes. In a recent announcement, the MOE is taking further steps to enhance the learning of the mother tongue and other Asian languages, to help prepare young Singaporeans for a globalised future and strengthen Singapore's identity as an open, diverse and cohesive society.

At the university level, Malay language is taught to students who fail to acquire a minimum pass in their second language (or later mother tongue) grades to gain admission to the university. Undergraduates have to meet the mother tongue language minimum requirement for university entrance. Subsequently, the mother tongue language requirement is not used as an entry requirement to the National University of Singapore (NUS) and National Technological University (NTU) (Ministry of Education, 2004). The Malay language taught as an academic module is thus restricted to those already fluent in the Malay language. The setting up of the Centre for Language Studies of the Faculty of Arts and Social Science in 2001 allowed the teaching of Malay language together with another eight languages to undergraduate students.

## **Malay Language in the University Setup**

The interest in Malay language has been high judging from the bid points that are placed to offer for a place to learn Malay. The faculty allows students to bid for modules through a system, which is called the Centralised Online Registration (COR). The students are given bid points and this bidding system allows the system to look at bid points for each module. The bid points do display the numerical vote for a module. Although it is not a requirement to learn Malay in relation to a core module, the interest at the beginners' level has been high. The number of students studying Malay has been on a steady rise in NUS. Other Singapore universities like NTU and the Singapore Management University (SMU) offer Malay to their undergraduates also as non-essential modules. Malay language is also taught at the Civil Service College to civil servants who are interested to learn Malay. The college conducts Malay language courses for government officials and administrators while ministries have special programmes for their officers.

Within the university, social work students and pharmacy students find learning the language most useful as they find that they may apply the language when they interact with the community locally. Others chose to do Malay as a 'useful' language for travel and work in Malaysia. A survey of 95 undergraduates of Malay language at NUS done by two NTU students showed that there was different motivation to do higher level Malay in the university. Generally, many students want to learn Malay because of the utilitarian purposes which as stated in Gardner and Lambert's (1972) study on motivation. In this study, students more commonly cited utilitarian reason when they choose to study a new language. On the other hand, more affective reasons than instrumental reasons are sighted for studying Malay language amongst NUS. Foreign students (usually non-Asian students) make up a handful of students who opt to learn Malay language. They are usually from the Students' Exchange Programme of the NUS who are interested in learning the language where they show more interest and desire to work in this region and communities here. Some responses like wanting to immerse with target culture and allow one to communicate with people of the target language are weak indication of integrative motivation to learn Malay language. Yet immersion in the Malay language is difficult for students at NUS as Malays prefer to speak English.

Theorists and researchers have found that it is important to recognize the construct of motivation is not a single entity but as a multi-factorial one. Oxford and Shearin (1994) analyzed a total of 12 motivational theories or models, including those from socio-psychology, cognitive development, and socio-cultural psychology, and identified six factors that influence motivation in language learning. Sustaining a language programme like Malay language just on one construct of motivation like instrumental reasons may thus be a difficult task. Hence, an approach to allow for more affective and integrative motivation can be built into a programme to encourage more learners of *Bahasa Melayu*. Being aware of the history and its place in this region and close proximity with Malay speaking nations are emphasized to give this dimension.

### **Impact on the Teaching of Malay as a Foreign Language**

The growth of interest in Malay language (hence the increase in Malay language learners) has not been met with the growth in the production of language teaching materials for Malay as a foreign language. In terms of approaches to language teaching and curriculum development, the teaching of Malay has not been able to embrace changes within the language acquisition and pedagogical research for three main reasons; that the teaching and learning of Malay have largely been geared towards native speakers, lack of interest amongst the Malay graduates to teach Malay, and native speakers or teachers who are not fully aware of pedagogical implications on language instructions for non-native learners.

As a result, there are not many textbooks found on Malay language learning strategies for non-native speakers. One example of an attempt to fill this void is Zaharah Othman and Sutanto Atmosumarto (1995) "Colloquial Malay: A complete language course" which provides a complete language course for non-Malay speakers. It is accompanied by a cassette (now available in CD) containing conversational Malay for graded acquisition of the Malay language. The book is 'written by experienced teachers' and aimed as a 'step-by-step' approach to written and spoken Malay. Though not clearly stated that it is for beginners, the intended outcome of using the book is to be able to communicate confidently and effectively

in the Malay language. For students in the Singapore context, some conversations in the book are structured within a more rural and specific Malaysian context. This proves to be a barrier to the understanding of certain vocabulary.

Local textbooks that are written by Liaw Yoke Fang (1998) “Standard Malay Made Simple” and “Speak Standard Malay” are textbooks, which are also in good circulation and have been reprinted over the years to accommodate increasing demand of Malay language learners. The two books, while contain dialogues for practice in classroom and explanations on grammar, sentence patterns, and word formation, are rather limited in terms of the approach in dealing with new language learners. It is presented in specific themes to a stated audience i.e. the adult learners and guided throughout the book with English translations of the given text. No strategies for learning a new language are suggested for the new language learner except for the conversation being structured according to assumed interest of a new learner.

The emphasis in Malay language teaching to native speakers had been on grammar structure but from 1995, the approach had been task based and communicative (Mohd Noh Daipi, 2004). Shortage of Malay language teachers for native speakers also makes it difficult to channel resources to train Malay language teachers as foreign language teachers. More resources are also channeled to promote the use of Malay within amongst native speakers.

As such, there has been little development of teaching of Malay as a foreign language. Other than travelers guide and basic Malay phrase books, not many materials are found for teaching of Malay as a foreign language. Pedagogical materials are also lacking in terms of teaching of the language to non-native speakers

The effort to introduce Malay as a foreign language is important since generally there is a growing number of learners who are aware of the benefits of being trilingual but education policies on language learning which initially restrict the number of learners, has limited the growth the Malay language.

The new shift in policy to allow for more flexibility in the learning of the language will help to increase the usage of Malay language. The development of materials, however, has to go hand in hand with the rising demand in learning the Malay language. The learner’s perspective must also be incorporated in new teaching methods for learning Malay as a foreign language.

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