

English language in Brunei: Use, policy, and status in education – A review

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Abstract

This paper explores the literature on the status of the English language in Negara Brunei Darussalam, particularly in education. The review encompasses a total of 103 sources, including 44 journal articles, 27 book chapters, 15 books, and 17 other items (institution/organisation websites and reports, government documents, newspaper articles, and conference presentations), published between 1985 and 2020, with at least 70 sources published in the last decade. The author summarises findings from research in key areas in the Bruneian context including bilingual education, linguistic diversity, the status of English, educational policies, educational divides, and challenges to the student experience, particularly in higher education in the bilingual setting. The author found that: i) while there are concerns over the impact of English on the Malay language and on indigenous languages in the Sultanate, and apprehension around an educational divide, the majority of attitudes appear to be very positive about the use of English in Brunei, including in education; ii) the bilingual education policy has evolved over time, and now places an emphasis on English as a key competency for the 21st century; iii) the student experience in the bilingual context is a particularly under-researched area. Staff working in tertiary education can always benefit from further insights into different aspects of learning, teaching, and content delivery, which may be applicable in many settings. The paper concludes with recommendations for further research in Brunei.

Keywords: bilingual education, tertiary education, Brunei Darussalam, English language, linguistic diversity

Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to knowledge and existing research around education in Negara Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei), by reviewing the literature on the status of the English language in Brunei, particularly in education contexts. In addition, the author aims to help educators and

curriculum designers gain a deeper understanding of elements influencing learning and teaching, such as challenges experienced by students working in a bilingual environment, as well as student expectations. Staff working in tertiary and/or further education, including, for instance, at the University of Brunei and at the Military Academy of the Royal Brunei Armed Forces, can always benefit from further insights into the student experience and into factors affecting student performance. The practical benefits of this paper extend beyond the Bruneian context, and will help identify aspects of learning, teaching, and content delivery which may be applicable in many settings, such as the delivery of other educational programmes in cross-cultural and/or multilingual contexts, and tertiary-level studies delivered through the English-language medium for students from a non-English speaking background.

This review of the literature summarises findings from research in key areas including bilingual education in Brunei, linguistic diversity, the status of English, educational policies, educational divides, and challenges to the student experience. The paper concludes with recommendations for further research in the Bruneian context.

The Bruneian context and linguistic diversity

The small sovereign state of Brunei Darussalam, located on the north-western coast of the island of Borneo, in south-east Asia, was under British protection until achieving independence in 1984 (BBC, 2019), and maintains strong ties with the United Kingdom. The population of approximately 450,000 is predominantly Malay (in the region of 66 per cent), with a significant Chinese minority (around 10 per cent), and indigenous peoples (around six per cent) making up nine ethnolinguistic groups: Belait, Bisaya, Dusun, Iban, Kedayan, Mukah, Murut, Penan, and Tutong (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.; Sammons, Davis, Bakkum, Hessel, & Walter, 2014). While Standard Malay, or *Bahasa Melayu*, is the official language (Sammons et al., 2014), English is spoken widely, with Brunei sitting in the ‘Outer Circle’ of Kachru’s (1985; 1992) much-cited model. In addition, multiple other languages are used in Brunei (Barry, 2011; David, Cavallaro, & Coluzzi, 2009), including Mandarin, Tagalog, Arabic, Urdu, Thai, and seven indigenous languages (Martin, 1995; McLellan, Haji-Othman, & Deterding, 2016). The country is certainly multilingual, with ‘societal multilingualism’ being broadly defined as the coexistence of two or more languages used by any person or group of people in society (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 493). Standard Malay is used in formal contexts, including media broadcasts and government speeches

(McLellan et al., 2016), but it is the local version of Malay, Brunei Malay, that is the lingua franca (Martin, 1992; McLellan et al., 2016), with other unique varieties used within particular groups. These include Kampong Ayer, the dialect of the Water Village; Kedayan, the dialect of the land Malays; Lun Bawang, spoken mainly in Temburong (Brunei's easternmost district); Iban, also spoken in Temburong, and in the districts of Tutong and Belait (which, in turn, have their own Tutong and Belait varieties); Dusun, "an unwritten language with a number of varieties, mainly found in the Tutong district" (Noorashid & McLellan, 2018, p. 218); Bisaya, closely related to Dusun; and Penan (spoken by only "40-50 speakers in the village of Sukang in the Belait District" (Haji-Othman, McLellan, & Jones, 2019, p. 315)) (Poedjosoedarmo, 2004; Haji-Othman et al., 2019; McLellan et al., 2016). This rich linguistic diversity, not highlighted until Nothofer's fieldwork study conducted in 1987 (Nothofer, 1991), is particularly high for a country of only 5,765 square kilometres (BBC, 2019).

Although the official government position is that the minority indigenous languages "are all dialects of Malay" (Haji-Othman et al., 2019, p. 315), none of them are recognised or carry any status in education, in language planning, nor in the media, and some are at risk of dying out altogether (David et al., 2009; Sammons et al., 2014). This would mean the loss not only of the language itself, but also of the cultural heritage and identity of these people (Crystal, 2014; Haji-Othman, 2012). Having said that, "Community members and language experts have taken up the challenge of maintaining the use and vitality of indigenous ethnic minority languages in the Sultanate" (Noorashid & McLellan, 2018, p. 218), and credit-bearing courses in several of the indigenous languages (specifically Iban, Belait, Dusun, Tutong, and Lun Bawang), alongside Brunei Malay, are currently available through the Language Centre at the University of Brunei Darussalam (Language Centre, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, n.d.). Research by Noorashid and McLellan (2018) suggests that students enrolling in these courses do so not only out of personal interest, but also "to maintain the language as part of Brunei's heritage" (p. 223). This is certainly a positive step, but is perhaps only one part of a complex puzzle.

Another aspect of the linguistic diversity in Brunei is that English is the main language for business and government affairs, and is the only official language of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN Secretariat, 2013; Lim, 2017), of which Brunei is a member state. Barry (2011, p. 212) cites ASEAN's *Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint* (2009), which "promotes English as 'an international business language at the workplace'... and ranks English... as [a] key area to be invested in", along with applied science, technology, and communications. It is also worth noting that, with huge oil revenue in Brunei contributing to the

nation's wealth since the 1950s, the British and Dutch-owned multinational oil company *Royal Dutch Shell* plays a major role in the national economy (Deterding & Sharbawi, 2013; Jones, 2016a; Sercombe, 2014), which is possibly one contributing factor in Brunei's strong connection with the United Kingdom. Officially, standard British English is encouraged over other varieties (Haji-Othman & McLellan, 2014), although, informally, American English appears to be on the increase in Brunei (Gardiner & Deterding, 2019), and Brunei English is gaining ground as its own distinct variety (Deterding, 2014; Deterding & Sharbawi, 2013; Ho, 2016; Low & Ao, 2018). As Martin (2002, p. 182) summarises, then, the English language, in whichever form it may be, "has a significant position in Brunei's language ecology".

The status of English, however, is not always viewed in a positive light, with concerns over, for instance, its impact on the Malay language (Barry, 2011; Kon, 2013; Martin, 1999; Poedjosoedarmo, 2004; Sercombe, 2014), and its influence on traditional Bruneian culture, values, and identity (David et al., 2009; Deterding & Sharbawi, 2013). O'Hara-Davies (2010) goes so far as to question "the spread of the English language in Brunei in terms of its deliberate orchestration or its occurrence as part of a market-force-type response of supply to meet demand" (p. 108). Others, though (Chin, 2007; James, 1996; Ramly, Othman & McLellan, 2002), maintain that the English language is not considered a threat in Brunei, and that, while competence in English is important, it is still a choice; Malay remains the first and only official language of the nation (Berns, 2010; Jones, 2015). As Sammons et al. (2014) highlight, the so-called "'anachronistic views of linguistic imperialism' seem unhelpful here" (p. 13). Furthermore, for Haji-Othman et al. (2019), "it would be wrong to claim that English has directly caused or contributed to the reduced role of Brunei's minority languages in the linguistic ecosystem" (p. 322). Instead, English should be seen as one part of the complex linguistic diversity in Brunei.

Back in 2003, Jones (pp. 124-125) asserted that:

South East Asia is undergoing something of a language revolution - developing forms of bilingualism that include both English and the national languages... National languages and cultures are still being promoted, but increasingly with the acknowledgement that a country's development involves access to and involvement in global markets, and such involvement is improved by use of a common language, most usually English... Development of the role of language and national aspirations continues to be fascinating process in Southeast Asia in general and in

Brunei in particular. This is an unfolding story and one that still has a long run ahead of it.

That “unfolding story” includes the evolution of bilingual education policies in Brunei.

Bilingual education in Brunei

For a good indication of the value placed on English language education by policymakers in Brunei, we can turn to Gardiner, Boye, Salleh, and Yusof (2018, p. 2), echoing Kirkpatrick (2010), when they propose that “the bilingual education policy in Brunei is probably the most successful of all the ASEAN member states”. With this in mind, it would be helpful to examine how this policy has evolved over time.

An extensive library search revealed that there is very little published literature on education, language use, or on student experience in Brunei, when compared to the wealth of similar research on bilingual education in nearby Singapore or Malaysia. Indeed, in 2011, Barry lamented the “paucity of research” (p. 203) around the bilingual educational context in Brunei, although this does seem to be improving somewhat over time, particularly with the work of researchers at the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD), established as a bilingual institution in 1985 (Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 2016c), and the more recent focus in Brunei “on providing English language training to other [ASEAN] member countries” (Gardiner et al., 2018, p. 3), led by UBD in collaboration with the Bruneian Government.

The most recent United Nations Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2019) rates Brunei in its “very high” category, ranking it 43rd overall in the world, and indicating high educational achievement ratings as one of several contributing factors (Booth, 2019). This is especially noteworthy when we consider that there was no formal education system in Brunei until after the Second World War (Haji-Othman et al., 2019; Jones, 2016b), during which time the country had been under Japanese occupation. Mainstream government schooling was introduced in the 1950s, using Standard Malay as the medium of instruction (Haji-Othman et al., 2019), but, for most Bruneians, formal education did not begin until the 1960s (Jones, 2016b). Shortly after Brunei gained independence in 1984, bilingual education or the *sistem dwibahasa* (literally ‘two languages system’) was introduced (Barry, 2011), aiming to “[ensure] the sovereignty of the Malay language, while at the same time recognising the importance of the English language” (Sammons et al., 2014, p. 15). From 1985 onwards, a national curriculum, set by the Ministry of Education, was adopted by all primary and secondary schools (Haji-Othman et al., 2019). Initially, children

were taught in Standard Malay at pre-school level and in their first three years of primary education, with English then taking over as the medium of instruction in many subjects (Martin, 1996), specifically Mathematics, Science, Geography, and English Language (with History also taught in English up until 1995, when it reverted to a Malay-medium subject) (Haji-Othman et al., 2019).

While its intentions were positive, the *sistem dwibahasa* “was found to be divisive, privileging those students who had a sound grasp of English from their home and family background” (Haji-Othman et al., 2019, p. 317). As O’Hara-Davies (2011) stresses, “the situation was further exacerbated by the fact that the use of Standard Malay as a medium of instruction itself constituted a second language” (p. 295). In addition, many were concerned that English was being used to teach core subjects, while Malay was used to teach less ‘concrete’ subjects, such as Art and Craft, Physical Education, and Civics (Haji-Othman et al., 2019). The intention was that, “Malay would be the language of the heart, maintaining the moral fibre of the society, while English would be the pragmatic language of science and technology” (Deterding & Sharbawi, 2013, p. 15), but, again, there were concerns over an educational divide (an apprehension which continues today (Ishamina & Deterding, 2017; Jones, 2016a) and the perceived value being accorded to some subjects over others.

In January 2009, the Bruneian Ministry of Education introduced a new ‘National Education System for the 21st Century’, *Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad ke-21*, or SPN21 as it is commonly called (Ministry of Education, Brunei Darussalam, 2018; Sharbawi & Jaidin, 2020), aiming to “better prepare pupils for life in the 21st century” (Jones, 2012, p.184):

The SPN21 curriculum is designed to provide learners with broad, balanced, relevant and differentiated learning experiences and takes into account each learner’s needs whilst making provision for progression and continuity. It is intended to be more responsive to changes in the society and the economy, and will lead learners towards lifelong learning. (Ministry of Education, Brunei Darussalam, 2013, p. 42).

This new system is much more student-centred (Ishamina & Deterding, 2017; Jones, 2016a), and places a greater emphasis on English “as an employment and further education enabler, reflecting its role as a key competency” (Sammons et al., 2014, p. 15). Mathematics and Science are now taught in English from the first year of primary education, alongside English language lessons, with Social Studies, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), Music, and Drama also taught in English at primary level (Haji-Othman et al., 2019). Consequently, “more

English is being used in Brunei schools at an earlier age than ever before” (Jones, 2012, p. 184). Haji-Othman et al. (2019) outline that, at secondary level, students continue to study Malay language, Malay Islamic Monarchy, Islamic religious knowledge, and Physical Education through the Malay medium, with Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Business, and Technology all taught in English, and ICT, Commerce, Music, and Art taught in either language. As students move through secondary school, they can choose elective subjects taught in Malay and others taught in English. Indeed, “if students so desire, they can avoid all the Malay-medium electives altogether, thus completing an English-dominant secondary education” (Haji-Othman et al., 2019, p. 319). Overall, through its introduction of SPN21, “Brunei has moved in the same direction as those nations who subscribe to the ‘earlier is better’ argument for second-language acquisition in formal education” (Haji-Othman et al., 2019, p. 319), and this would appear to be paying dividends, with Sammons et al. (2014, p. 19) highlighting that some teachers have reported increased English language proficiency in students starting secondary school.

For a student perspective on the bilingual education system, O’Hara-Davies (2010) investigated students’ attitudes to English, and the role it plays in their education and in Bruneian society in general. She reports that only one out of the 60 participating sixth-form students claimed to dislike the system, feeling that it “compromised his achievement in other areas” (p. 112). O’Hara-Davies goes on to say that “participants were keenly aware of the need for English in their lives, linking it with enhanced career prospects, modernity, and inclusion at a global level. One of those interviewed used the expression ‘English is gold’” (p. 114). In secondary education, then, the available research would suggest that learners are very positive about the bilingual system.

In terms of tertiary education in Brunei, English is the main language of instruction at UBD (International Association of Universities, 2019), with two British universities (specifically University College, Cardiff, and the University of Leeds) overseeing English-medium programme development (Ishamina & Deterding, 2017). Together with Malay, English is also used at the Brunei University of Technology (International Association of Universities, 2020). At the Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA), English is taught, but only as a second language, given that programmes are taught primarily in Malay and Arabic (Haji-Othman & Wood, 2016). Elsewhere, other post-secondary technical and vocational programmes are available in both English and Malay through the collective Institute of Brunei Technical Education network (IBTE) (Institute of Brunei Technical Education, 2020), with seven campuses across the country.

At around the same time as the introduction of SPN21 in early 2009, there were two other significant developments in education policy in Brunei. The first of these was the University of Brunei Darussalam raising its standards across the teacher-training programme for its locally trained English teachers (Gardiner et al., 2018). The second development was the Bruneian Government's decision, through the Ministry of Education, requiring student teachers to study at postgraduate level (by enrolling in a Postgraduate Certificate in Education, a Master's in Teaching, a Master's in Education, or a PhD programme), rather than enrolling in various undergraduate options (Certificate in Education, Diploma in Education, or Bachelor's degree in Education), previously offered by the Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah Institute of Education (Ishamina & Deterding, 2017; Mundia, 2012). Mundia (2012), while challenging the speed at which this change in policy was implemented, as well as questioning the lack of research into teacher effectiveness in the Bruneian context, acknowledges that the government's intentions were good and in the nation's best interests:

The two main reasons given by the government for this change were that, (1) in general, teachers lacked adequate knowledge of the subject matter for the school subjects they teach, and (2) that the country wanted to improve the overall quality of education in the nation by raising the qualifications of teachers. (p. 326)

A further development, in 2011, saw UBD introduce its 'GenNEXT curriculum' (Tan, Shahrill, Ali, Daud, & Naing, 2016; Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 2016b), "to provide local students with international exposure" (Tibok & Hiew, 2019, p. 7) through compulsory engagement in various programmes during their third year of study, including student exchanges, internships, and/or community programmes (Tibok & Hiew, 2019). In addition, the Bruneian Government provides various scholarship opportunities for citizens to study overseas (Tibok & Hiew, 2019).

Also on the rise in Brunei is offshore or 'transnational' education; in other words, "the provision of academic courses to students who are physically situated overseas" (Seah & Edwards, 2006, p. 297) from the awarding institution. Tynan and James (2013) explain that this may include collaborative arrangements, such as franchise programmes and joint degrees offered by more than one institution, and non-collaborative opportunities such as branch campuses. Examples include UBD's joint Bachelor of Engineering programme with Zhejiang University in China (Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 2016a), joint postgraduate programmes offered with Korea University (Faculty of Science, 2015), and a variety of joint initiatives with Stevens Institute of Technology in the United States (Stevens Institute

of Technology, 2019). While transnational programmes may have their advantages, offshore education has been criticised for “eroding national cultural identities and leading to cultural homogenisation, most often in the form of Westernisation” (Knight, 2014, p. 55). The implications of using materials designed by Western educators for learners in non-Western countries are the subject of various research (e.g. Doherty & Singh, 2005; Gulati, 2008; Shilkofski & Shields, 2016; Wright, Dhanarajan, & Reju, 2009). Luke and Dooley (2011, p. 857) suggest, perhaps controversially, that “the international spread of English via Western curriculum and language teaching methods is a form of “linguistic imperialism” (Phillipson, 1992)”. Cousin (2011), on the other hand, while agreeing that there is a need for sensitivity, does challenge “issues of imperial power and hegemonic grip” (p. 585) and calls for educators “to look with a fresh lens at what it takes to produce an internationalised curriculum” (p. 592). In their research into the professional practice of teachers across more than 30 countries, focusing on how these teachers conceptualise global citizenship, Harshman and Augustine (2013) report that one teacher in Brunei recognised that “it remains the responsibility of educators...to be aware that much of our academic knowledge and news reflects a Western perspective and is limited by inbuilt cultural assumptions” (p. 457). In addition, as Hamdan (2017) highlights, educators

must... no longer view themselves as local education providers merely to secure the goals of national interests, but rather as global education providers tapping into both local and overseas job markets. Rather than competing with several local or regional universities, [institutions] must now compete on a global scale. (p. 76)

It would be interesting, then, to research the extent to which tertiary curricula (including those for vocational and technical programmes) are internationalised in the Bruneian context.

Alongside particular concerns over tertiary curricula, there are also questions about the quality of higher education in Brunei in general (Hamdan, 2017; Metussin, 2017): “Despite efforts by the government to make education accessible to all, access to quality education remains a major concern” (Alani, Yaqoub, & Hamdan, 2015, p. 232). Overall, though, as Sammons et al. (2014, p. 12) summarise, “One significant course of action appears unchanged...: the Bruneian government’s long-standing and firm commitment to its bilingual education policy since its launch in 1985”.

For such a small nation, it could perhaps be said that Brunei is making economically ‘smart’ choices in its approach to English language use. While precise statistics on the number of English-speakers worldwide

are elusive and ever changing, “there has never been a language so widely spread or spoken by so many people as English” (Crystal, 2012, p. 189); it “has become the standard for international communication” (Labassi, 2008, p. 409). The decisions of the Bruneian government may well be about “power and purse” (Baker, 2011, p. 54), while, on the one hand, “charting out a national identity that is racially, linguistically and religiously exclusive from British residential powers” (Ho, 2019, p. 151), it is also strengthening the country’s position on the world stage by maintaining strong ties with its Western allies. One illustration of this is the rise in the number of UBD’s partner universities, increasing over a ten-year period from 70 to 112, with partners across more than 30 nations and six continents (Tan et al., 2016). Haji-Othman (2012) portrays Malay and English as two duelling Aunts, with “English, the more distant but eminently ‘useful Auntie’, ...being learned for the instrumental purposes of competing internationally” (p. 188). In Bruneian education policy:

Crucially, English was not only perceived as a necessity for going abroad, but as another strong language that would help Brunei as an outward-looking country to develop and move forward. In the political sphere, the English language was conceptualised as a powerful ‘instrument of learning’, which is crucial for the country’s ability to overcome its strong dependence on gas and oil production and achieve the move towards a knowledge-based economy. (Sammons et al., 2014, p. 15)

Education certainly has an important role in sustaining national prosperity, developing a country’s workforce, and generating economic growth (Abdullah & Osman, 2010). In addition, there is widespread agreement (Haji-Othman et al., 2019; Ishamina & Deterding, 2017; Ministry of Education, Brunei Darussalam, 2013; Sammons et al., 2014) that, given the use of English as a global language, its bilingual education policy can only be beneficial for Brunei’s young people.

Educational divides in Brunei

For many Bruneian students enrolled in tertiary education, their spoken English is typically at a very high, almost native-speaker level (Ishamina & Deterding, 2017; McLellan et al., 2016; Svalberg, 1998), yet their written English is neither as accurate nor as developed as that of their international counterparts from, for example, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, or India. It is unfortunate that solid evidence of comparative levels of proficiency is so difficult to find (Bolton, 2008; 2016), and an extensive

library search still reveals little, if any, research comparing English proficiency (spoken or written) across similar nations.

As several authors (for example, Deterding & Sharbawi, 2013; Ho, 2016; Ishamina & Deterding, 2017) highlight, there is no guarantee that classroom practice in the use of English is consistent within and across different schools or institutions “even when English is specified as the medium of instruction” (Gardiner & Deterding, 2017, p. 283). In a kind of vicious circle, this may also both contribute to *and* be one consequence of the substantial educational divide in Brunei:

Those who attend private schools tend to end up with good English..., but pupils who go to one of the less fashionable schools often struggle, especially with English, and the overwhelming majority of these students fail to pass English ‘O’ level. (Deterding & Sharbawi, 2013, pp. 19-20)

The continuing use of assessments designed for native speakers of English, such as Cambridge O-level and A-level examinations, could also be challenged and perhaps considered out-of-date (Gardiner & Deterding, 2019; Nicol, 2005; O’Hara-Davies, 2010), particularly if educators wish to prepare their learners for work in the 21st century, when the use of English as a lingua franca may be more appropriate (Fang, 2016; Tomlinson, 2010). After all, as Kirkpatrick (2002) underlines, “Only a relatively small number are learning English in order to develop an understanding of any ‘Anglo’ culture” (p. 222). Alongside a comprehensive analysis both of O-level results in Brunei and of initiatives implemented to improve these results, Sammons et al. (2014) report that the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) in English as a Second Language was introduced in 1999 for *some* students as an alternative to the O-level, “but was removed in 2003 and subsequently reintroduced in 2010” (p. 11). The rationale for this kind of ‘chopping and changing’ is unclear, and a more stable commitment to assessment choices could only be beneficial for all involved.

In terms of educational assessment, an additional divide may exist in the treatment of students whose first language is English when compared with those for whom it is (at least) a second language. As Barry (2011) summarises, native speakers of English “are endowed with cultural capital that provides them with a wealth of privileges – employability, status and prestige, access, and education. In many Asian countries, a native speakers’ [sic.] English proficiency translates as an individual’s accumulated competence” (p. 211). This is particularly relevant given the increase in international students travelling to Brunei to study at UBD (Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 2016b).

Some researchers (e.g., Angélic-Carter, 2014; Ferguson, 2007; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Starfield, 2002) have found that the written work of native and non-native speakers is often assessed differently, albeit perhaps subconsciously, by markers who perceive a native speaker's ability to manipulate language and structure as an indication of greater understanding of the subject content, while second language speakers are often seen as relying too heavily on recognised authorities in the subject area. Starfield (2002) explains that, if this type of 'patchwork plagiarism' does occur, that it may be "a survival strategy rather than a conscious effort to deceive" (p. 126). Furthermore, it is worth noting that, for some cultures, using the exact words of a published author, for instance, is seen as a sign of the utmost respect, rather than a case of academic theft, and that plagiarism is considered a very Western concept (Adiningrum & Kutieleh, 2011; Bloch, 2007; Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Pennycook, 1996). In the multicultural context of tertiary programmes in Brunei (or similar settings), clear guidelines and expectations would help students understand how to cite the work of others in their own academic writing and presentations. Questions of plagiarism aside, though, Starfield goes on to propose that "Students...who speak and write the legitimate language have a greater likelihood of becoming successful; their writing appears to be subjected to a lesser degree of scrutiny" (2002, p. 138). This echoes Bourdieu's much-cited work (1991) around inequality and power imbalances in language use, with language a mechanism of power (whether applied consciously or subconsciously), and not just a means of communication. Moore (2000) asserts that, for Bourdieu, "the language used in the curriculum and by educationalists [gives] an advantage to those learners who were brought up in a culture where such language was in everyday use" (cited in Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p. 53). In other words, students with English as a first language are likely to have more positive outcomes than those for whom it is a second or third language (as in the Bruneian context, for instance), regardless of their understanding of the subject matter in question. This leads us to consider the student experience in more detail.

The student experience of bilingual education in Brunei

Linked to challenges around the educational divide in Brunei and to choices around curriculum and assessment design is the importance of the student experience in the bilingual context. The term 'student experience' encompasses all aspects of an individual's enrolment in a particular course or programme (Crossing, 2018), including, for instance, the application process, communications, staff and student culture, departmental and/or institutional facilities, course design, teaching approaches and materials,

learning support, assessment methods, and community and/or industry engagement. This holistic experience of learners could be explored at every level of education, but, for the purposes of this article, the author has focused on post-secondary education in particular. “Understanding the reputation of universities, often expressed in terms of students’ expectations, experiences, and satisfaction, is imperative” (Hamdan, 2017, p. 76). Again, however, there is very little published research on the student experience in Brunei, and this is a definite gap in the literature.

In bilingual and multi-cultural contexts generally, including at many institutions of higher education, students, educators, and other stakeholders may have very different expectations around what they consider ‘best practice’. For instance, student and tutor understanding of what exactly is required to produce a ‘successful’ piece of work might differ (Lea & Street, 1998; Starfield, 2004). Is it enough for teaching staff to provide instructions and marking guides, for example, for each assignment and/or assessment? Similarly, it may well be that students and stakeholders, possibly from different countries and cultures, have different ideas about how much information and support should be available to learners, so that they might succeed in their studies. The extent to which an undergraduate or postgraduate student is expected to be independent in their work, for example, or to apply their thinking to contexts beyond Brunei itself may be unclear. A review of different aspects of the student experience at Brunei’s tertiary institutions could be beneficial for staff in various roles, including learning designers, programme managers, teaching staff, marketing teams, and student support staff right across those same institutions, with a view to developing their strategies and improving outcomes for all.

A handful of literature is available on elements of the student experience, or on factors potentially influencing the student experience. Ebil et al. (2017), for instance, report on the annual Graduate Employment Survey conducted by the Research and Development Division of the Institute of Brunei Technical Education, “to find out students’ opinions on the programmes learnt, the quality of teaching-learning, the relevance of their industrial attachment, and their employment status after graduation” (p. 3). Their research, however, focuses on improvements to the content and uptake of the survey tool, rather than on the findings themselves. Hamdan (2017) sought staff views on transformational initiatives implemented at UBD, bemoaning the “dearth of information about how [the] Brunei higher education sector responds to the challenges of globalisation including the needs of revolutionising education systems and providing more real-world training and experience with high-tech tools” (p. 76). Hamdan acknowledges that the perceptions of students at UBD, as well as those of external stakeholders, would be valuable, but sets these aside for future research.

Obiwulu, Yunus, Ibrahim, and Zuruzi (2019) investigate and compare the experiences and perceptions of creativity of students in higher education with those of employees of small and medium-sized enterprises, all in Brunei, while Haji-Othman and Wood (2016), besides commenting on “the paucity of research” (p. 80), focus on English language teachers’ perceptions of learner autonomy in the tertiary context in Brunei, concluding, as one might expect, that learner autonomy is “a useful quality” (p. 93) in second language learners, and is required of university students more generally.

Relating specifically to the bilingual context in Brunei, Haji-Othman et al. (2014) explore codeswitching (alternating between languages or language varieties in conversation) in Bruneian and Malaysian universities, and found that student perceptions of lecturers who were non-native speakers of English were mainly positive:

The students, it would seem, feel encouraged to [codeswitch] because they share the same [first language] as the teacher, or they are fully aware of the fact that they and their teachers are ‘cultural natives’- with shared views of how and to what extent [codeswitching] can be used in the Bruneian classroom. (p. 155)

Ho (2016) inquires into student attitudes towards the different varieties of English used by lecturers at UBD, as well as student perceptions of the professional qualities of their native and non-native English-speaking lecturers. Ultimately, Ho calls for “more extensive research on the topic, considering the fact that there is an increasingly large number of non-native English speaker teachers and lecturers in the language classrooms, and particularly in [English as a Second Language] contexts” (p. 117). Again, while this is certainly valuable research, it does not capture the complexity of the student experience.

Although not investigating the student experience directly, Alani et al. (2015) report on student views of the overall quality of education offered at UBD, but do not mention the bilingual (if not multilingual) context at all, which is somewhat puzzling. Metussin (2017) examines the gender gap in academic achievement at a tertiary level in Brunei, and elements of their findings (such as teaching methods, class size, and school facilities and environment) reflect the student experience, alongside factors such as study habits and strategies, and family and social life. Students and teachers potentially coming from “different cultural backgrounds” is mentioned (p. 38), but was not the primary focus of Metussin’s study, and bilingual education again is not explicitly mentioned. Similarly, Rajak et al. (2018), examining students’ opinions on the accessibility and benefits of e-learning in higher education institutes in Brunei, and Hoh, Khattak, and Li (2018),

exploring student and employer satisfaction with higher education available in Brunei, fail to report on any language-related aspects of the student experience. It would be interesting to know whether tertiary educators and learners take the bilingual context for granted in some way, which could potentially explain its absence from these research findings.

Opportunities for further research

Several authors of literature reviewed here (including Barry, 2011; Bolton, 2016; Haji-Othman & Wood, 2016; Hamdan, 2017; and Mundia, 2012) comment on the occasionally significant lack of research available in different fields. Further research is certainly needed in many areas relevant to Brunei (and potentially to other bilingual or multilingual populations and/or settings). These include linguistic diversity and the maintenance of indigenous ethnic minority languages, the evolution and adoption of different varieties of English (including comparative levels of proficiency), and bilingual education policies and practice. Additional research around multiple aspects of education would also be beneficial, including tertiary education in general in Brunei and, more specifically, university and vocational programmes delivered through the English-language medium, including the extent to which curricula are internationalised in the Bruneian context. Furthermore, capturing the student voice would contribute to the existing knowledge and literature, for instance, by investigating whether Bruneian students consider their English language level to be sufficient to undertake an undergraduate and/or postgraduate programme, for example, and asking about their perceptions of their own proficiency in English, in relation to other non-Bruneian students in their course(s). In addition, as already stated, there is a significant gap in the literature around the student experience in Brunei, and there are multiple opportunities for diverse research projects in this area.

Closing remarks

The purpose of this review was to explore and bring together the literature on the status of the English language in Brunei, particularly relating to education policy and practice. It offers insights into different aspects of learning and teaching in the Bruneian context, including planning, assessment, and the wider student experience, which may also apply in similar bilingual or multilingual contexts.

This review has found that Brunei is a country of considerable diversity, with multiple ethnolinguistic groups contributing to its culture.

Although there are concerns over the impact of English on the Malay language and on the indigenous languages of Brunei, and apprehension around an ongoing educational divide, the majority of the literature suggests that most people are very positive about its use across the nation, both in education and in everyday life in general. Positive steps are being taken to revive and maintain interest in the ethnic minority languages, with proponents understanding the wider implications for the country's heritage.

While the government has been consistent with its bilingual education policy for more than 35 years, it is clear that policy has nevertheless evolved at all levels (from primary through to tertiary), with a shift towards learner-centred teaching, and a focus on preparing students for success in work and/or further study, as well as closer attention being paid to teacher training and to international partnerships in education.

The nation of Brunei, its linguistic diversity, and its bilingual education system are rich with research possibilities, both at different levels of education, and from different viewpoints. This paper has drawn attention to just some aspects of the use, policy, and status of the English language in Brunei, and has identified potential areas of interest for current and future researchers in these areas.

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