English and the linguistic ecology of Malaysia

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ABSTRACT: The Southeast Asian region is undergoing rapid social, economic and cultural change brought about by movements of capital, people and ideas within and beyond the region. The dynamics of independence, nation-building and globalization have had an impact on most of the nation-states in the region, many of which attained independence only in the second half of the 20th century. This paper focuses on the development of Malaysia's language ecology within the context of nation-building, its embedding in the Southeast Asian region, and the global challenges it seeks to meet. Malaysia's languages are an essential component of the nation's ability to communicate internally in a multilingual country and externally to the region and the world. The interplay of English with Malay and other languages, and the tensions that arise and call for responses in education and other domains like the law in the wider multilingual situation are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the emergence of Malaysia’s language ecology, its growth and transformations at different periods of nation-building and the more recent roles of the Southeast Asian context and the global challenges Malaysia needs to address. It looks specifically at the interplay of English with Malay and, in passing, other languages, and the tensions that arise and call for responses in education and other domains like the law in the wider multilingual situation.

The socio-political history of the region, which forms the background to language development and the growth of language ecologies, suggests that there were a series of transformations of the language situation, as new languages entered into contact with Malay, especially the colonial languages and English. The sultanates did not call for a national Malayan, let alone Malaysian language policy, given that they were in a dilemma between the maintenance and expansion of local power vis-à-vis the rakyat (people). The various colonial clusters formed by the British like the Federated States of Malaya in 1895 and the Non-federated States did not require that either. As independence was achieved in 1957 it is best to assume that partial and highly localized ecologies existed at that stage. Seen from the new national level they constituted a tapestry of languages used mainly by the respective ethnic communities and some elites. They did not form a viable pattern for the new nation. As in similar cases elsewhere in Asia (e.g. India) or in Africa (e.g. Nigeria), the first governments needed to reflect upon what a nationally viable and consensual future language policy could look like and they had to devote energies to develop to that end. The controversial issue of choosing one local language as official language or to maintain (or even shift to) English has been with Malaysia from the start of independence. The crucial

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developments that transformed Malaysia’s language ecology until it reached the current position especially vis-à-vis English can be told in four steps.

The issue of choosing between languages is embedded in a history of at least 2,000 years during which the Southeast Asian region had been at the cross-roads of trade, migrations, religions, and languages. Malay emerged as a regional lingua franca, strongly supported by large numbers of speakers and its ties with Islam. Malay-speaking traders and travellers included Chinese and Indians who came into the region where Malay had developed into the language of trade and diplomacy (Sneddon 2003; Asmah 2004). Simplified forms, influenced by local languages, began to develop, especially in the eastern regions of the archipelago. Contact between Malay dialects and regional languages and their dialects has been strong for many centuries. As early as the 3rd century, evidence of Indianization can be seen in Chinese accounts of the region. It brought a number of Sanskrit words into Malay (Asmah 1983: 18; Tham 1990: 29–31). From the 8th century, Malaysia was under the control of the Sri Vijaya Empire in Sumatra and this lasted up to the 16th century. Contact between Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Arabs was well-established at that time and in a population that was already multi-ethnic and multi-religious. Arabic and Persian words found their way into Malay either directly or through other languages.

The second phase began with the Portuguese defeat of the Sultanate in Melaka in 1511 and brought Europeans into the region. The Portuguese were followed by the Dutch in 1641 and the British in 1824 who established large colonies and had more enduring political and economic interests. European languages had now come into the already multilingual region and brought about a new kind of contact scenario with mutual borrowing. Portuguese words were incorporated into Malay and vice versa. Kristang, a Portuguese creole, emerged and still shows traces of existence in Malacca. Subsequently, Dutch became the language of administration although its influence was not as strong (outside some areas in today’s Indonesia).

The third phase brought the British to Malaya in the early 19th century. In 1826, after years of trading in the region, they established the colony of the Straits Settlements in three major trading posts, namely Penang, Malacca and Singapore. They gradually expanded their area of control to Malaya itself with the 1874 Treaty of Pangkor resulting in the installation of the first ‘British Resident’ as the official advisor to the Sultan of Perak (Kirkpatrick 2012a: 14). As an exploitation colony, Malaya had tin and rubber as major sources of wealth. To increase benefits, the British imported labour such as the Chinese to work in tin mining and the Tamils from India to work in the rubber plantations. As a result, the languages of the local people and those of more recent migrant workers engaged in new contacts with English, the language of the colonizer. A novel hierarchy of languages emerged.

Independence brought further change as nation building gradually localized language and culture contact. Malaysia’s language education policies began to differ from those of Singapore and contact outcomes differ too. While contact continues to accompany all levels of interactions, it became also a topic of national language policy in a new nation. The creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has created a new regional public domain where English has become the major regional lingua franca. Regional English may well include influences from local languages, unavailable in other regions.

Language contact and multilingualism had, thus, been the rule in that region so exposed to trade, traffic and migrations since its early history (Tarling 2008; Wade 2010). Such
contact has had all the characteristics Thomason (2001) identifies to produce significant outcomes in participating languages. The main participating languages in this complex contact situation were Malay and Malay dialects, Chinese dialects and Mandarin, Indian (esp. South Indian) languages such as Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu but also Punjabi; East Malaysian: Iban (Sarawak), Kadazan (Sabah) and other indigenous languages; Arabic as a colloquial language and classical Arabic in law, religion, etc.; and European colonial languages (with subsequent impact on the languages of Europe). Arabic is a particular case and needs to be mentioned in Malaysia.

Malay had been a widely spoken language far beyond its current region of Malaysia, Indonesia or border areas in Thailand. It had been a major trade language from the 15th to 17th centuries in Southeast Asia – the so-called ‘Age of Commerce’. It had become a regional lingua franca especially with the rise of Malacca in the 15th century (Reid 1988: 7; Sneddon 2003; Asmah 2004) and continued to be during the Dutch occupation of Malacca and British colonization of Malaya. Arabs, Persians, Chinese, Tamils, and Thais used Malay to trade with one another and the Portuguese and the British used it or Bazaar Malay for their dealings (Lim & Poedjosoedarmo, forthcoming). It was, one could argue, both a recipient and a disseminator of linguistic influences. None of the other languages in this linguistic landscape could challenge its wide use and status except English, hence the conflict between the two languages.

EDUCATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICIES

It has been 57 years since the country has gained its independence. The education system has undergone tremendous change over the years. The earlier policies attempted to make education accessible to children of all ethnic groups and focused on national integration. In the 1990s the education system tried to cater to different groups of students from abroad and to internationalize education for revenue and to create an image of Malaysia as an education hub. If during the post-independence period, the education system was supposed to fit in with the history and constitution, it was meant to support the national socioeconomic development and respond to regionalization and globalization during the later years. This section will provide a brief survey of the shifts that have taken place since independence and have led to the call of a new policy altogether.

During the colonial era English was seen as a language of power and prestige and was made available only to the privileged in urban areas. English schools were only situated in such areas and were attended mainly by non-Malays who would want to speak English. The vernacular schools – Malay, Chinese and Tamil – were located in the rural areas except for some Chinese schools in those urban areas where Chinese were involved in the business sector (Zuraidah Zaaba et al. 2011: 160). Towards the end of colonization, negotiations took place to set up an education system for Malaya that would cater for all ethnic groups. The outcome, the Razak report, endorsed Malay as the national language and suggested it to be used as the medium of instruction in all schools from 1957. English was to remain an official language of Malaysia for ten years after independence while Malay was to be promoted to ensure that it was widely accepted and used. It was made the language of government, media and education and gradually rose to sole medium of instruction in national schools. Language materials productions, translations and the creation of terminologies received special emphasis with Dewan Bahasa, the body that was set up to enhance the use of Malay.
Malaysia became one of the few former colonies that has successfully reduced the role of English and promoted a local language, *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malay) to the position of national language after independence. Whether this was a wise decision seen from the angles of regionalization with the creation of ASEAN and from globalization with the United Nations, International Monetary Fund and other bodies is a controversial issue; the choices made in Singapore and Brunei were quite different – they maintained English – and have obviated some problems that Malaysia continues to face.

The educational language policy after independence favoured a uniform system for all in terms of overall curriculum and languages of instruction in national schools. In line with it Malay and English were to be those media. English schools were allowed to go on using English. Gradually, Malay was implemented as medium of instruction in all primary and secondary schools so that the role of English was further reduced. The final turning point in favour of Malay came in 1970 when English schools were gradually converted to national schools and made to use Malay as medium of instruction. English was a compulsory, but second language for all students. Chinese and Tamil schools continued unchanged except that they now had to teach Malay and English as compulsory subjects. Malay expanded as the language of teaching and learning in most tertiary institutions, beginning with the first government university, *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia* (established in 1970). Where the legal domain was concerned, the 1957 constitution specified that English could still be used for a transitional period after independence. A constitutional amendment in 1967 allowed for Malay to be used in courts without translation and subsequently in 1970s English was phased out from parliamentary debate (Powell 2012: 248–249).

However, as Malay became the main language of education and expanded in other public domains, the competence of the masses in English began to decline. Many graduates from local Malaysian universities became virtually monolingual in Malay and were often unable to secure jobs especially in multinational organizations that their parents had been able to get. They no longer met the demands and requirements of multinational companies or organizations that functioned in English. Lack of competence in English became the barrier they faced in getting jobs in an environment where the private sector was expanding due to privatization policies.

As internationalization and globalization accelerated, the visibility of linguistic complexities in higher education and of English dominating over all other languages, the declining levels of proficiency reached the national agenda. Experts and public alike blamed the national education policy for the failure of students. Their failure was particularly troublesome as the impact of science and technology affected the long-term economic prosperity of the nation. The government was called upon to come up with an effective policy to overcome the unemployment problem of graduates from local universities. The response was that the importance of good proficiency in English was recognized again in the last few decades. With science and technology being essential to development and modernization, it made sense to government and its supporters to introduce the teaching of these subjects through English, the language of modernization, from 2003 (Azirah 2009; Asmah 2012). More than that, English was also considered culturally ‘neutral’ and free from the ideological load of the other Malaysian languages. Measures were taken to ensure the implementation should be effective at school level and would facilitate the transition to the study of science and technology in higher education.

Yet, the policy of Teaching of Science and Maths in English (TSME) was not a total success and received mixed reactions. There were protests from various quarters. Malays
were divided: those in the urban areas preferred English but those in the more rural areas favoured Malay. The latter argued that the mother tongue would help students to understand concepts in these subjects better than in English. This group found the support of two non-governmental organizations, namely, the National Writers’ Union and Gabungan Mansuh PPSMI (a movement for the cancellation of this policy). Interestingly, these institutions and a large body of the dissenters did not argue on the basis of the success or failure of the policy but from an ideological perspective. Replacing Malay with another language in the teaching of important subjects such as mathematics and science was seen as ‘desecrating the symbol of nationalism’ (Asmah 2012: 173). The Chinese opposed the new policy as they favoured Chinese as the medium of instruction (MOI). The Indians were mixed regarding the language for MOI. Both groups were similar to the Malays as the MOI issue was also a reflection of the desire to maintain an identity that connects them to their linguistic and cultural roots.

The opposition to English through maths and sciences also found support from an academic angle. The Filipino educator Alan Bernardo (2000: 313), for instance, has argued that ‘there seems to be no theoretical or empirical basis [. . . ] to obligate the use of English in teaching mathematics’ and that, ‘there are clear and consistent advantages to using the student’s first language [. . . ] at the stage of learning where the student is acquiring the basic understanding of the various mathematical concepts and procedures’. A similarly cautious note has come from Kirkpatrick (2010: 153) recently, who asserted that, for the policy to succeed, a number of conditions needed to be met: children had to have access to resources; there had to be enough competent and qualified teachers, a supportive language learning environment and motivated learners who already had proficiency in the first language. However, many children did not come from such an environment but from poorer socioeconomic classes with limited access to resources. To force children from these backgrounds to learn English, even as a subject, from Primary 1 meant to condemn them to cognitive overload and failure.

The policy had already shifted by then as the government, too, had recognized failures of this MOI policy by 2008 and sought the feedback and opinions of the public about its continuation. Seven possible options were put forward for discussion:

1. Continuation of the policy of TSME as it is.
2. Partial modification by continuing TSME in secondary schools, while primary schools would revert to Malay, Mandarin and Tamil.
3. Shifting of TSME to later in Year 4 Primary.
4. Full-scale reversion to Malay, Chinese, Tamil in primary and secondary schools.
5. Permission of schools to make their own choice.
6. Retention of Malay, Chinese, Tamil in Primary One; bilingual teaching from primary two onwards, and shift to English in secondary schools.
7. Science not to be taught in Primary One, but contents integrated into other subjects. (Asmah 2012: 171–172).

It was the most drastic decision that won, namely, a full reversal to Bahasa Malaysia in primary and secondary schools. There were several reasons for this. The government argued the shift away from English was necessary because of the poor success rate of TSME nationally. It also drew attention to the opposition from both parents and teachers and from national, Chinese and Tamil schools. It acknowledged that many children from the lower socioeconomic classes and rural areas were unable to cope with English as
medium of instruction and that there was an insufficient number of teachers who could teach the two subjects in English competently.

The debates continue and some interest groups now maintain that the shift clearly disadvantages urban children. While these arguments are based on the interpretation of testable data, any pro-English policy is also interpreted ideologically as a weakening of Malay by nationalist groups. From their point of view the status of Malay as national language has to be preserved, in conjunction with other languages. In contrast, proponents of English as a medium of instruction argued that in the past when Malaysia emerged as a new independent country, there was rapid development in all sectors and jobs were available to meet the demands of the employment sector. Fluency in English was not a major point of debate as it had been achieved. However, the intermediate decline of a broad societal competence in the country and the region showed that a good command of English was now essential to secure jobs in multinational and private companies. While there are countries like Japan, Korea and Germany that are able to prosper despite having English as a second language, they have expertise and technology that sell all over the world. Those who want to acquire such an expertise just have to learn the respective languages of these countries. Malaysia, on the other hand, does not have the necessary skills or expertise that can be offered in the same way.

The government must have been aware of the force of these realities. Its new argument was that the reversal in policy will not water down the objective of empowering students with English language skills in any way as alternative programmes were to be introduced that would be implemented with enough resources to achieve these objectives. The training of teachers will be given priority, and English will be taught at the pre-school level as part of the government’s efforts to integrate the subject into the national education curriculum, and professionals from English-speaking countries will be recruited to train local teachers. This new programme, it is claimed, will be more effective than TSME. To counter the ideological opposition, Malay and English are, according to this argument, given equal emphasis in classroom teaching.

As in other countries, the education system tended to focus on strengthening national identity by balancing local needs and national priorities with available resources and global demands. The pressures of global demands have already been alluded to as they make such a policy difficult to maintain. A new educational policy is clearly called for. There are on-going issues that call for action and there are new ones. The long-standing issues are, first, the strengthening or even preservation of Malay as the national language and, second, the retention of Mandarin and Tamil as community languages (Kirkpatrick 2010: 28). There are new challenges or those that have not been addressed seriously. For instance, although present in the past, the gap between urban and rural schools must be narrowed by developing teaching methodologies that lead to a stronger competence in English in rural schools, rather than by levelling urban schools down. English must be taught for empowerment, enabling ‘real’ communication in relevant contexts. Extensive programmes on teaching pedagogy and methodology are necessary to strengthen teacher confidence and raise their proficiency in student-centred classrooms (Azirah 2009).

Partly as a consequence of this, there is the issue of which variety of English should be taught in a context where a number of varieties compete with one another. Apart from native varieties like American, British and Australian English, there is a gamut of local forms. On top of that, there is the need to ensure international participation in English and to resolve the tension between General English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP).
The following sections will illustrate these new issues and argue what they mean in and for a new language education policy.

The recent Education Blueprint (2013–2025) is an attempt to overcome the problems of the past. It combines past responses to global challenges with new ones and envisages changes in secondary education that will bring about a higher level and broader base of English proficiency. The role of English as a medium of instruction in mathematics and science has been abandoned but English is taught as a strong and compulsory subject at school-leaving age (Azirah & Leitner 2014).

CHALLENGES TO POLICIES: DIFFERENT DOMAINS

In a situation like Malaysia’s, English does not, of course, solely develop under the influence of education. With internal role as ‘second important language’ (Azirah & Leitner 2014) and its function as the world’s leading language, English it is used in different functions in domains like business, education, technology and the media. In these domains it fulfils both international functions in multi-national companies and institutions and local purposes. It frequently functions in inter-ethnic contexts at multi-ethnic and multilingual workplaces. It is also becoming the first home language of a growing number of families. Though Malaysia has a long tradition of multilingualism, the nature of individual or family multilingualism now typically includes English.

The use of English reveals a speaker’s ethnicity, their level of education and their socioeconomic background. The middle ground variety of English, a so-called ‘mesolect’ is increasingly used by most educated speakers and is considered an indicator of social proximity. It has an essential integrative social function (Kirkpatrick 2010; Azirah & Tan 2012; Leitner 2012) and cannot easily be ignored any more in Malaysia. Quite clearly, its texture must be taken into consideration in educational policies (Azirah & Leitner 2014). To illustrate the nature of the mesolect, I will turn to samples from some domains where it is particularly strong.

Very good illustrations come from popular music, radio and television broadcasting and advertising. Azirah’s (2010a, 2010b) and Moody’s (2012) studies, for example, of advertising and pop culture have revealed that English is often highly edited here to impact on the intra-ethnic and intra-national mass markets. The following examples show noticeable characteristics that illustrate what is meant here.

(1) Chinese Man: Egg, ah . . . everything extra lah (discourse particle).
   Indian Man: Eh, extra this, extra that! Wait for Tesco Extra to open first lah (discourse particle) dey (emphatic intonation)!
   Chinese Man: Huh? When?

(2) Employee: Ah, boss! ‘I Talk’ ah . . .
   Employer: Talk lah (discourse particle)!
   Employee: No, no, no, ‘I Talk’.
   Employer: Okay, talk.
   Employee: ‘I Talk’
   Employer: I also can talk! But, what are you talking about?
   Employee: Aiya (Exclamation)! I want ‘I Talk’.
Announcer: Keep talking on ‘I Talk’. Enjoy low, low rates for longer talks on IDD and long distance calls. Easily available at Maybank2u.com, most petrol marts, and more than 10,000 other outlets nationwide. Get yours today. ‘I Talk’ only from TM.

Employer: Oh, ‘I Talk’, ah?
Employee: Ha, talk more, pay less. ‘I Talk’ lah (particle)!

(Azirah 2010b)

Studies of spoken Malaysian English (MalE) in computer-mediated communication have identified the extensive use discourse particles and of borrowings. Abbreviations and acronyms as well as a number of online conventions or features used only by Malaysians have been found alongside those known internationally (Norizah & Azirah 2009; Norizah et al. 2012). Below are some examples.

(3) Code-switching: sorry my bahasa (language – Malay) very teruk (bad -Malay).
(4) Discourse particles: coz I’m not important to you oso (also) mah (particle); sorry for the late reply on the thingy . . . busy lah (particle)
(5) Borrowings: Went back to my kampong (village – Malay) on Friday evening, reached there around 7pm; Angpow, angpow (red packets – Chinese) . . . I like to get more money; Macha (brother – Indian), kk we go . . . settle, we go and enjoy.

Due to the medium used, a number of colloquial expressions like whassup, camwhore, ciggie were found that have a global, not a local flavour.

As the examples from the public domain show, there is a considerable body of loan words from the languages of the Malaysian ecology, namely, Malay, dialects of Chinese and Tamil as well as Arabic. To add some more examples, one can come across bomoh (traditional doctor – Malay), towkay (boss – Chinese), kiasu (afraid to lose – Chinese), dhobi (laundrette – Indian) and khalwat (close proximity – Arabic), which were discussed in Azirah and Leitner (2011). They revealed that some of the loan words studied were more or, alternatively, less widely known across ethnic groups, and thus signalled common ground, put differently, an integrative usage in MalE. Others showed stratified patterns across ethnic, religious, and age groups, which would reveal the maintenance and accentuation of ethnic patterns. Other loans still have become features of the entire languages ecology or habitat.

A particularly striking feature of language use in Malaysia is code-switching between different languages, but specifically between Malay and English in the public domain. English language newspapers constitute an important site for language play and creativity by code-switching. For example, in the headline ‘Another case of tidak apa-thy. Nobody helped me!’ the word ‘tidak apa’ (never mind – Malay) is blended with apathy to describe a case of urban apathy. Newspaper articles often code-switch between English and Malay to appeal to a local readership (Moody 2012: 316). That can also be seen in songs as the following example shows.

(6) “Kantoi” (busted – Chinese) Zee Avi (2009) [a music album – lyrics below]
Semalam (yesterday – Malay) I call you, you tak (did not – Malay) answer
You kata (said – Malay) you keluar pergi (went out for – Malay) dinner
You kata (said – Malay) you keluar dengan kawan (went out with friend – Malay) you
But when I call Tommy he said it wasn’t true.

The language of law is regulated in the constitution. There are legal provisos for the use of English in the ‘interests of justice’ that justify the continuation of English in many
areas in law. Thus it is used frequently in the High Court, the Court of Appeal and the Federal Court. It remains the default language of most commercial law and civil litigation. Malay is used in legal practices in the lower courts and involving people with limited proficiency in English and English is commonly used where participants are proficient in the language. Thus, the provisions are for one language, but the use of more than one language is creeping into the law domain (Powell 2008; Powell & Azirah 2011). The legal profession has been transformed from one dominated by lawyers trained in English to a bilingual one over the last few decades. Bilingualism occurs everywhere now and seems both pragmatic and consistent. It is so ingrained that language alternation occurs in courtroom discourse regularly and spontaneously.

(7) Counsel: *Bila*? Same day as you told Razak?

   When?


   Yes, the same day.

   (Powell 2012: 250)

Closely related to this is the growing role of Arabic in *Syariah*, commerce, banking, religion, etc. in Malaysia. As English intrudes into a range of public and professional domains and increasingly plays a role in the home or social domain of individuals and groups, it acquires local features. As in many parts of the world, so in Malaysia, local features so far escape educational debates that confine themselves to the concept of English. But if English is to be taught as enrichment and as an empowering tool in communicative settings, the nature of localizing English and usage patterns cannot be ignored as they may have an impact on educational policies. They must be addressed from the angle of linguistic and of social norms.

**CHALLENGES TO LANGUAGE POLICY: THE REGIONAL CONTEXT**

The goal of creating an ASEAN community by 2015 has spurred the discussion on the importance of English as a lingua franca in the region (Kirkpatrick 2010, 2012b). It is the only common working language whose position appears to have been assumed, rather than discussed, by the founding member states. It is the sole dominant language in regional institutions and networks like Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). There has never been an attempt to replace it with Malay or any other language of the region and any attempts to debate language choices are mooted quickly (Kirkpatrick 2010: 10–11). With such a strong institutional and legal support system, the use of English carries over into discussions about an ASEAN identity and the creation of a supra-national common Southeast Asian identity. Of course, the role of English and the levels of English proficiency achieved differ between ASEAN countries. In Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines and Brunei it is either the official language or the second most important language; in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar it is a foreign language and not used among the local communities much, although it has become or is fast becoming the most important foreign language. Although the three countries, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, share the history of English as a colonial language, the roles and attitudes differ considerably and educational policies have been quite divergent. Malay is the official language of Malaysia and Indonesia. In Singapore it is an official ethnic language, while it has a strong demographic base in Southern Philippines and southern Thailand. English,
on the other hand, plays a dynamic role in both intra and international communication and is increasingly the lingua franca unifying the different ethnic groups that live in the region. The spread of globalization and economic growth in the region will see an emergence of varieties of English not only in countries that were former British colonies but also countries where English has been a foreign language.

Malaysia is actively involved in reducing the disparity in secondary and higher education systems by supporting research, policies and aid through the Ministry of Education in Malaysia under the national higher education plan (PSPTN Phase II 2011–2015, Malaysia Global Reach: A New Dimension). For instance, the Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV) programme aims to facilitate knowledge transfer and sharing between Malaysia and the CLMV countries. Part of that programme is on-location training projects conducted by Malaysian academics in areas such as English language education, and information and communication technologies (ICT) penetration. While in the past, the locals were exposed to first language speakers from Australia and the US where English language training is concerned, they are now exposed to models of English from other Southeast Asian countries. By implication, localized Malaysian English is gaining ground outside without creating serious communication problems.

The CLMV project just mentioned is operated by the University of Malaya on behalf of the Ministry of Education Malaysia and looks at possible sites for bilateral cooperation in terms of teacher development, linguistic skills enhancement and international staff and student exchanges. It is based on, and benefits from, the consensus in ASEAN that English is the means of achieving success in life, better prospects, global interactions. It is needed for educational support, for example, for access, opportunities, communication and it is needed for specific purposes as in translation, tourism and business.

A project on the nature of English in ASEAN countries, namely, the ASEAN Corpus of English, was initiated in Hong Kong and involves the collection of a corpus of one hundred thousand words of naturally occurring spoken interactive data of English as a lingua franca in a number of Asian countries. The aims of this project are to carry out an analysis and description of linguistic features of the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in Asia, the identification and description of the types and causes of any breakdown in communication, and the identification and description of the communicative strategies of Asian ELF users. Although in its preliminary phase of analysis, findings show that despite the different features found in the different Englishes, there were few disruptions in the conversations, and only a few instances when one or more participants did not understand something but let it pass and that even with the lack of understanding with one or more interlocutors, the conversations progressed successfully (Azirah & Kaur 2011). Research has shown that among ASEAN speakers, there is less of a tendency to use lexical items and idioms that describe culturally specific phenomena which may not be understood by people from outside their own speech communities. Kirkpatrick’s (2012b: 21) study shows how when speakers from a shared speech community like Singapore and Indonesia interact, they would use a lot of code-switching and code-mixing but when there is the presence of, for example, a Cambodian, they would not resort to this so as to achieve cross-cultural communication rather than presenting their own identities.

Quite clearly, such studies support the practical experiences in, for example, the University of Malaya project and prove the regional viability of local and regional features of English. They cast into doubt the sole insistence on native varieties of English in education. A new language education policy cannot ignore such findings.
Globalization is positively accepted by most ASEAN states, groups and individuals although there are some sites of contestation, such as the arguments about the role of Malay vis-à-vis English in Malaysia. Looking at the role of English in this situation, McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008: 10–17) have identified several incentives for the learning of English. The first is economic and has to do with the use of English in transnational corporations and in outsourcing. An increase in the proficiency of English to obtain jobs was described as a problem that called for action, given the rapid increase in business, multinational companies and media expansion in recent years. English has gained strong institutional support as the most important language of communication. Graduates who have a good command of English are usually employed immediately upon graduation, while the ones who do not have a good command of English are generally rejected. Graduates from private universities or universities abroad are usually favoured by employers mainly because of their competence in English and their past intercultural exposure. As the discussion of the changes in educational policies in Malaysia has shown, this has had an impact on the national languages in countries in the region and has brought about a re-emphasis of the role of English.

The second incentive is educational mobility. There have been initiatives to globalize higher education since the 1980s. One of the policies to assist those who did not have the means to study abroad was to set up local private higher education institutions (PHEIs). They gave another push to English, as they operated outside the scope of national policies. They had the freedom to choose their own medium of instruction. English was the natural choice. The Education Act 1996 had ‘implicitly approved the use of English language in science and technology courses in PHEIs’ and the 1996 Private Higher Education Institution Act ‘approved English language in dual programs with overseas institutions and offshore campuses’ (Zuraidah Zaaba et al. 2011: 161). Moreover, the liberalization of higher education resulted in the corporatization of public higher institutions. One of their priorities was now to make money, which triggered the need to commercialize their activities and to become relevant to the country’s economic development. As a result, there are now two streams of higher education. The public universities have Malay as the medium of instruction and take in mainly Malays and students from a working class background. Private universities use English as medium of instruction and cater mainly for Chinese students and children from middle class families. However, there is a growing trend in public universities to also offer courses in English so as to attract qualified students from abroad. Many local universities are recruiting students from other countries and English has to be the medium of instruction in programmes that accept these students. There is also the pressure to publish in English and to compete in the international arena.

The introduction of PHEIs thus led to a type of bilingualism with English as one of the languages for at least non-Malays; Malays who studied in national schools and public universities were often monolingual. It was not surprising that 35,000 Malay and Indian students enrolled in Chinese-medium schools in 1995, which is an increase of 2,000 per cent in just one year. Some Malay parents clearly turned away from the national school system and saw Chinese schools or international schools as the ones that provided a better education and recognized the value of Chinese (Ridge 2004: 409).

Once the Malaysian government opened the door to the establishment of private universities, there has also been an increasing number of international students. It is estimated
that there are 75,000 foreign students in private institutions and the number is expected to
grow to 200,000 by 2020 (Malakolunthu & Rengasamy 2012: 157). Study abroad too helps
students to acquire new competences and can help them succeed in the labour market. It
also helps with intercultural dialogue. Transnational activities are on the rise and many
universities are now getting involved. They enrol students from other continents, exchange
staff and students and engage in research projects and activities with partner universities
from other regions of the world. English has always been the medium of instruction in these
universities. Some have twinning programmes with British, Australian and American uni-
versities, which further pushes the importance of English in education. As a result, higher
education has become divided into either Malay-medium or English-medium, with the
government universities using the former and the private universities the latter, resulting
in graduates of private universities became more sought after because of their competence
in English. A third incentive, the role of media, of business and the sciences in spreading
English and motivating people to learn it have been referred to earlier. Globalization, thus,
introduces a new dimension in the push for English.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the development of Malaysia’s language ecology within the
context of nation-building, its embedding in the Southeast Asian region and the global
challenges it seeks to meet. It has looked at the interplay of English, Malay and other
languages and highlighted especially the dynamic tension between Malay and English,
and to some extent, with the other languages in the country. Foregrounding education, it
has also developed a narrative of the rise and shifts of language policies since independence.
A summary of some of the main findings is given below.

To begin with language policy, its foundation was based firstly, on the pragmatic need of
an independent country to create infra-structures and institutions that could communicate
successfully and, second, on the ideological need to create a national identity that tran-
scended the discrepancies between and aspirations of different races, religions, and their
languages. On the basis of its demographic strength Malaysia opted for Malay, while Sin-
gapore, for example, opted for English. Malaysia’s policy had a bitter price to pay, namely,
the decline of English competence. The period from the 1990s saw a re-emphasis on En-
glish to address the economic benefits of the country, regional demands (ASEAN) and
globalization. A long period of uncertainty on how to harmonize the necessary competence
in English with the values placed on Malay, has led to the need for a new, broader-based
language policy.

Such a policy will be marked by several factors. The first is that it will continue to relate
the status of languages to functions and communities in terms of the language of the nation
for national integration (Malay); the language that is needed for communication in the
region and the global world for business, science and technology (English); and languages
of ethnic identity (Chinese, Tamil, etc.). These allocations are not static and likely to shift.
Chinese is a good example of a language that is increasingly seen as an economic and
business language. Neighbouring languages should not, one would hope, be ignored as
cross-border small businesses may develop and worker mobility be encouraged like in the
European Union. The foreign language segment may play a bigger role in a new policy.

Second, the issue of competence in English will no longer solely be defined in terms
of a native English model but will include viable models of local English that have been
shown to carry across other ASEAN nations (e.g. the CLMV programme, Ministry of Education Malaysia). A new educational policy will need to discuss this shift, largely brought about in the unmonitored parts of the public domain. Second, it will attempt to bridge the urban and rural divide by presenting English in a way that makes it accessible and relevant to both sections. This will mainly relate to teaching methodologies, teacher training and teaching materials production. Finally, a research area should be initiated that looks at the historical study of MaE; that is basically unknown although one presumes there to exist sound materials that have been archived. Such research would assist some of the teaching methodologies to be developed and help provide material that makes English relevant across the rural and urban and ethnic communities.

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(Malay names are alphabetized under first name).


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