

# English Language Policy Changes in Malaysia: Challenges and Practices in Content-based Classrooms

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*Abstract: Malaysia implemented its new education policy of teaching mathematics and science in English in 2003 in a move to keep abreast with global developments and have greater access to science, technology and business knowledge. In order to understand the impact that this new policy has on classroom practice, this study was conducted to find out how teachers of science met the challenges of teaching through the medium of the English language. Fifty three science teachers from various secondary schools located in a sub-urban area in the state of Selangor participated in this study. Questionnaires, written protocols and audio-taped interviews were used to obtain feedback from the teachers. The results indicated that the respondents faced pedagogical challenges such as lack of teaching skills in integrating content with language teaching and English language proficiency. In turn, they employed various strategies to cope with the challenges. Implications for teacher education and professional development are addressed.*

Keywords: Malaysian Language Policy, English for the Teaching of Mathematics and Science (ETeMS)

## Introduction

**T**HE MALAYSIAN EDUCATION system has undergone major changes in the last few decades. Prior to the implementation of the National Language Act in 1963, English was the primary language and Malay, the secondary language. Language policy during the early years of independence (1957-67) was clearly focused on “educational agendas of nation-building, national identity and unity...” (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004: viii). It was argued that through the medium of a common language national unity would be fostered. With the passing of the National Language Act, English medium schools were phased out and Malay became the medium of instruction in all national schools, and of university education by 1983.

However, in 2003, a large-scale national-level policy initiative involving a shift in the language of mathematics and science instruction from Malay to English in primary and secondary schools was implemented. This change in language policy was seen as a “pragmatic response to the inevitable challenges of technological advances and globalisation, and linked to the fear in the falling standards of English” (Martin, 2005: 94). More importantly as Ridge (2004) rightly noted that “language policy in Malaysia has been and is still entwined with the ongoing moves towards newer versions of nationhood, especially in the more fluid environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world (p. 409).”

Facing the sudden change of medium of instruction, mathematics and science teachers are challenged by an urgent need for developing ways to make their

instruction responsive to their English language learners (ELLs).

## Background of the Study

The implementation of English as a medium of instruction for mathematics and science was simultaneously carried out at Standard One (Grade 1) in the primary schools and Form One (Grade 7) as well as Form Four (Grade 10) in the secondary schools. This decision has brought about mixed reactions from students and teachers. On the one hand, many students consider learning English as a subject that is compulsory in the school curriculum daunting; learning other subjects such as mathematics and science through the medium of the English language even more so. They do not have the language skills to cope with the switch and this can have an adverse effect on the students’ learning process (Chan & Ain Nadzimah, 2005).

On the other hand, teachers, who have been schooled and trained and been teaching mathematics and science in the Malay medium, find teaching the respective subject through the English medium a disheartening experience (Pandian & Ramiah, 2004). First, they have to deal with learners who have a low level of English proficiency. English language learners especially those in the rural areas are not equipped with an adequate level of English proficiency for them to learn content subjects effectively in English.

Second, a large number of them are not proficient enough in English as their educational experience has largely involved the use of Malay as the medium of instruction. Studies conducted by Chan & Ain

