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**English Language Proficiency among Malaysian Lecturers:  
Concerns, Controversies and Issues**

By

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## **Abstract**

*This is a summarized version of part of the writer's doctoral dissertation proposal on capacity-building in English among lecturers at Malaysian Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). Taking off from a synopsis of recent controversies surrounding the use of English as a medium of instruction in educational institutions, it discusses the importance of English in the regional and international arena. It then provides a brief historical background, noting that English had been introduced and implemented as a language of instruction and communication from British colonial times. Following this, the Malaysian government's position and language policies have been briefly outlined. The next part of this article discusses key aspects of English language proficiency, including the need to build capacity in English among lecturers in HEIs. The article concludes by reiterating that despite the political and emotional rhetoric embroiling language issues in Malaysia, the need to improve English language proficiency among lecturers will continue to be of concern for all sectors of Malaysian society.*

## **1. The Controversies**

Concerns about declining standards of English and the need to improve English language proficiency have come to the fore in recent months, in the wake of Sarawak's decision in November 2015 to make English the state's second official language. According to Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Adenan Satem, Sarawak had adopted English as an official language of the state administration, and official government correspondence could be in both Bahasa Malaysia and English. The chief minister said this was a practical and logical step as English is a universal language as well as the language of science and technology.

In a Facebook posting former Minister Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz said:

*Malaysians must not allow narrow perceptions under the guise of nationalism to come in the way of learning English in order to compete globally... communicating in good English or any other foreign languages would not make one any less Malaysian ...We need to nurture Malaysians with global exposure and who can compete globally. Please do not jeopardise the future of our young and the future of Malaysia by continuing to make education and language political... We must not be so parochial about language. We must not allow narrow perceptions to prevail under the guise of nationalistic spirit “semangat kebangsaan ...It does not make anyone less Malaysian if he or she can communicate well in English or any other language, for that matter.”*

Former Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir was the architect behind the change in the language policy for educational purposes. He has defended the move, saying that learning English will reinforce the spirit of nationalism when it is used to bring about development and progress for the country ...True nationalism means doing everything possible for the country, even if it means learning the English language.

Deputy Education Minister Dato P. Kamalanathan responded to these criticisms, stating that the Malaysian government is well aware of the language problems among local English teachers and the Education Ministry has never neglected the importance of mastering the English language among students.

According to him,

*The Ministry’s efforts can be seen through the Empowering Bahasa Melayu and Strengthening the English Language (MBMMBI) policy ...Not only the ministry, the Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak) during the tabling of the 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan*

*and Budget 2016, has specifically stated on how to improve mastery of English... The Ministry is also in the process of sending teachers to get specific training in English language usage.*

Dato Kamalanathan also revealed that more than 20,000 teachers were undergoing an English language usage course that would be completed by the end of the year 2016.

However, Bukit Bendera MP Zairil Khir Johari was critical of government initiatives. He noted that the federal government has spent RM500 million since 2011 to hire foreign English language mentors under the *Program Menutur Jati Bahasa Inggeris* (PPJBI) programme.

*"While the idea of getting foreign English trainers is good, there are many question marks about its efficacy and whether our teachers get enough exposure and training ... the most basic solution to solving this issue is to simply hire good English teachers."*

He added that the government needed to encourage the use of English, as immersion was the best way to learn the language. This was why he was in favour of the *Dual Language Programme* (DLP), and also supported a pilot programme allowing schools to choose their language of instruction.

He was unhappy with the reduction in the Budget 2016 allocation for the teaching and learning of English to RM135 million. He said it was a far cry from the RM208 million annually allocated for the Uphold Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthen the English Language (MBMMBI) policy. He also supported a pilot programme allowing schools to choose their language of instruction.

On the other side of the coin, there have been groups who have been vocal in their criticism of policies aimed at retaining the importance of English as a medium of instruction and

communication. These include politicians, activists in non-governmental organizations and also some prominent politicians, who fear that the importance of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language may be ignored. Some of these groups have launched a campaign called “*Kami Bantah Bahasa Inggeris* (we oppose the English language)” to make their views known to the government and the general public.

More recently, NST reader Ahmad Soffian Mohd Shariff (*New Straits Times*, April 12, 2016, p.19) called upon all parties not to politicize language education issues. He praised the government for its tireless efforts to enhance the quality of the Malaysian education system. He also noted that attacking the English educational policy was not the way forward and could not understand why some Malaysians have organized a demonstration against the *Dual Language Programme* (DLP).

Before returning to these controversies, it would be useful to discuss the status of English from regional and international perspectives.

## **2. English in the Regional and International Arena**

In the regional and international context, a re-examination of the nation’s language policies is timely and needed because of the following factors:

- (a) Increasingly, we are relying on attracting more and more tourists to visit Malaysia. As English is the primary means of communication with foreign tourists, our graduates

in the tourism, leisure and hotel industries must have a good command of English.

They can achieve this if their own lecturers are themselves proficient in English.

- (b) Over the past three decades or so, there has been an expansion in the number of private educational institutions at tertiary level. As English is the medium of instruction in these institutions, it is important that lecturers and instructors have a high level of English proficiency.
- (c) In this age of modern technology, everyone has access to obtaining a range of information from online sources. However, since most of this information is in English, researchers and lecturers need to be proficient in English. They need to be able to search for, retrieve, understand and store information that is relevant to their needs.

Despite this, over the past decade or so, there has been great concern expressed in both government circles as well as in private sector organizations about the importance of proficiency in the English language. It has been generally agreed that there needs to be improvements in the level of proficiency not only among students but also among teachers and lecturers working in tertiary educational institutions in Malaysia. These issues have been the focus of several studies conducted by academic institutions in Malaysia over the past two decades.

### **3. The Historical Perspective**

English was the official language that the British colonial masters introduced into this region from the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the territories of Penang, Singapore and Melaka were joined together as the *Straits Settlements* in 1826. The spread and growth of English language newspapers during the nineteenth century in Penang, Singapore, Melaka, and later on in Kuala Lumpur and Taiping strengthened its position as the *lingua franca* in the British territories right up to the beginning of the *Second World War* and the ensuing *Japanese Occupation* in 1942. Although the Japanese language was used during the *Occupation*, English was restored in 1945, when the British became victorious and returned to this region.

It is a matter of national pride to note that the *New Straits Times*, established in 1845, is the oldest English language newspaper east of the Suez Canal. In keeping with its proud heritage, it continues to be beacon of knowledge and information for opinion leaders at national, regional and international levels.

When the country attained independence as the Federation of Malaya on August 31, 1957, Bahasa Malaysia became the national language under the *National Language Act* of 1957. Subsequently, Bahasa Malaysia was introduced in all schools in stages, beginning from the primary school level. Additionally, the *National Language and Literature Agency (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka - DBP)* was established in June 1956 to promote the national language.

Apart from encouraging more local authors to write in Bahasa Malaysia, DBP also embarked upon compiling dictionaries and lexicons of technical terms, as well as translating English textbooks into Bahasa Malaysia over the next five decades. Hence, Bahasa Malaysia has become the main language of instruction in primary and secondary schools and in public tertiary educational institutions.

However, there was a change in 1996, when the government started allowing English to be used as the medium of education, especially in private *Higher Educational Institutions* (HEI) because of the following developments:

- (a) The need for Malaysia to respond to the increasing globalization and internationalization that the world is experiencing, and
- (b) The objective of the Malaysian government to make Malaysia into an educational hub in the region and thus attract foreign investments in education.

In pursuit of these objectives, the government introduced the *Education Act 1996* and the *Private HEIs Act*, which approve the use of English as a medium of instruction for courses provided through twinning programmes with overseas universities, as well as offshore campuses. Hence, there has been a mushrooming of twinning programmes and offshore campuses among Private HEIs in Malaysia over the past two decades.

As a result of this initiative, the monitoring of the education system in Malaysia has undergone changes. Firstly, the Education Ministry was reorganized and split into two, with the creation of a Higher Education Ministry, which was responsible for monitoring higher education. Secondly, the *Malaysian Qualification Agency* (MQA) was set up in



order to monitor standards among HEIs and also to approve and accredit new courses of studies, especially in private HEIs. More, recently, the two ministries for education have been combined under the same portfolio so that there can be better co-ordination.

#### **4. The Government Position**

With regard to the government's position, the need for improving English language proficiency among students has been stated in three documents, i.e. the *Government Transformation Programme (GTP)* and the *Malaysia Education Blueprint*, and the MBMMBI Policy, as explained below.

- **Government Transformation Programme:** This is a programme introduced by current Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak when he assumed office in 2008. There are many government initiatives aimed at transforming Malaysian society, among them are seven education initiatives. Two of them are related to the English language, viz.
  - **LINUS 2.0** – ensuring basic literacy in English among year 1 - 3 primary school pupils, and
  - Enhancing the quality of English language teachers.
- **Malaysia Education Blueprint:** The second shift contained in this blueprint is to ensure that every child is proficient in both English and Bahasa Malaysia. Various initiatives have been proposed in this blueprint in order to enhance English language proficiency through the national education system.

- **MBMMBI Policy:** This stands for *Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia dan Memperkukunakan Bahasa Inggeris*, whereby the sanctity of Bahasa Malaysia will be upheld, while simultaneously strengthening English language proficiency among students.

Based upon the above policies, it is clear that the BN government has been committed to improving the level of English language proficiency, especially for educational purposes. As the nation moves towards developed country status in line with *Wawasan 2020*, there needs to be a re-examination of the status of English as the second language of education and communication and a firm commitment on the part of the government. The government must not forget that this is a key strategy for the nation to achieve its development goals and take its rightful place as a developed nation, and one of the leaders of ASEAN.

## **5. Proficiency in English**

Despite these initiatives, over the past decade or so, there has been great concern expressed in both government circles as well as in private sector organizations about the importance of proficiency in the English language.

There are two levels of proficiency involving different groups of people affected that need to be addressed, i.e. improving proficiency among students, and improving proficiency among teachers and lecturers. This writer is of the opinion that improving proficiency among teachers and lecturers should take precedence as learning begins with the “gurus” who are mentors and role models.

In this context, proficiency includes the following aspects:

- (a) Usage by the individual lecturers in terms of oral and written communication.

Diction and pronunciation are the key factors for improving oral communication.

- (b) Encouraging colleagues to be more proficient in English Language; this means lecturers and teachers must communicate in English when talking with their colleagues and superiors within the college/campus settings.

- (c) Monitoring students and acting as role models, .e.g. when talking with students both within and outside the classroom, lecturers/teachers should communicate in English.

It should be emphasised that efforts to improve proficiency cannot and should not be considered as the sole domain and responsibility of government alone. All parties involved in the development of higher education, regardless of whether they are educational administrators from the public or private sectors, teachers, lecturers or policy-makers should consider this as being part of their individual and collective missions.

## **6. Conclusion**

From the above discussion, it can be seen that the issue of English language proficiency among lecturers is one that is of concern not only to the government but also to various sectors of Malaysia civil society. There needs to be open debates about this issue; debates that should be removed from the emotional and unbalanced rhetoric that is usually associated with the use and importance of languages in developing countries. Such debates are even more urgent and imperative as our nation moves inexorably forward in pursuit of *Vision 2020*, i.e. to achieve developed country status by the year 2020.

These debates should become the forerunners for the way forward, that is, to put into place capacity-building measures to improve English language proficiency among teachers and lecturers. It must be emphasized that these measures can and should involve participation from both public and private HEI's. Further, there must be a comprehensive and sustained programme aimed at improving English language proficiency among lecturers and instructors in HEI's. Since this is an important area of concern for all, the Ministry of Education should take the lead in determining the level and direction of these initiatives.

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