

## Status of English in Malaysia

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to explain the status of English in Malaysia and the constructivism learning theory which is of interest to the researcher for educational research and practice. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory is one of the foundations for constructivism which promotes learning contexts in which students play an active role in learning. A teacher should collaborate with his students in order to help facilitate meaning construction in students. Therefore, learning becomes a reciprocal experience for the students and teachers.

**Keywords:** constructivism, Vygotsky's social development theory

### 1. Introduction

The New Englishes or non-native varieties have their own distinctive linguistic features due to the process of nativisation. English is an indispensable language in these countries. It is not only used for communication but also for other purposes. According to Baskaran, English is referred to as a link language in Kenya and Nigeria, an associate official language in India, an additional language in Ghana, a bridge language in Singapore, a coordinate language in the Philippines and a strong second language in Malaysia (1985, p. 69).

Asmah (1977) claims that the function of English was first as an official language and then as a second language. She also claims that the languages in Malaysia for instance, the Chinese dialects and Indian languages are not foreign languages but are considered as the languages of Malaysia. Nevertheless, English had never been referred to as one of the Malaysian languages. English is only accepted as a second language, secondary importance in the ranking of languages of Malaysia.

Malaysia was under the British rule from the late eighteenth until the mid-twentieth centuries. The colonisation included both Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). The British administration policies (economic and politics) created a "network of multi-ethnic, multilingual speech communities via immigration of Chinese and Indian" (Platt & Weber, 1980, pp. 1-2). The Malay population which was pre-existent here was governed by state governments headed by Sultans.

With the increase in commerce, trade and industry, the British foresaw the need for "English educated non-Europeans" (Lowenberg, 1986, p. 73). These locals functioned as aids in the government infrastructure as clerks, interpreters, agents and lower rank officers. The colonial government then accommodated the establishment of private and mission schools where the medium of instruction was English. Initially these schools had British teachers using the Standard British English. As the quantity of these schools increased, the teachers were local teachers using nativised English. Gradually, English became the code of informal communication among the local students. This was because of its prestige and ethnically neutral status (Lowenberg, 1986). It was continually used by locals (Indians, Malays, and Chinese) involved in the administration of the British Empire in 'Malaya'. English was the primary language for transport, commerce (shipping agents, insurance, banks, etc.) as well as the mass media and films imported for entertainment.

When, then, the Federation of Malaya got its independence in 1957, Malay was adopted as the national language. Though Malay was taken as "politically and constitutionally" the national language, English was not discarded. The importance of English in Malaya as a legacy of the colonial era was due to:

- 1) Its position as the only language in post-World War II Malaya that had appropriate registers for the myriad language domains of a modern nation.
- 2) The availability in Malaya of the English educated inter-ethnic elites as the only non-Europeans who had the

training and experience to administer the new nation (Platt & Weber, 1980).

It was agreed then, that Malay and English would be used for a ten year transition period. During these ten years Malay was to enhance and assume prominence in the major domains of language use (Platt & Weber, 1980). After 1967 no official status was given to English (Asmah, 1981). There were more serious steps taken to strengthen the Malay language (Bahasa Melayu/Bahasa Malaysia) as the national language. In 1969, the Ministry of Education initiated a policy whereby all English-medium schools were to become Malay-medium, a process which was virtually completed nationwide by 1983 at the primary and secondary levels. Malay-medium instruction at the tertiary level has increased in recent years (nearly 100% usage in most faculties).

Though there has been emphasis on Bahasa Melayu, English is given recognition in the education policy and planning as the 'second language'. It has to be taught effectively at schools so that Malaysians who have undergone the national education system are able to communicate in the language (Asmah, 1981, pp. 230-231). However it does not require them to speak like an Englishman. It would be fine if they "could speak with acceptable rhythm and stress and to produce the sounds of English sufficiently well for a listener to be able to distinguish between similar words" (quoted in Asmah: *ibid.*). To give credibility to this status it is made a compulsory subject in the Malaysian schools. Every Malaysian student has to sit for it in the 'Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia' (SPM) and in the 'Penilaian Menengah Rendah' (PMR) (both are major public exams in Malaysia) though it is not a must to obtain a pass.

In recent years the English language has been viewed as an asset to achieve development and to acquire knowledge. There is more emphasis on how to create awareness to take English seriously. More English teachers are trained locally as well as abroad. The standard of the SPM English paper has been upgraded to coordinate with 1119 GCE English paper. Lowenberg (1991, p. 367) states that the current status of English in Malaysia is "constantly developing and changing in terms of adapting the norms of English to the political, economic and socio-cultural contexts of contemporary Malaysia". The importance to acquire this language is again and again stressed by leaders and policy makers. Even then this is backed with the assurance that this language policy will not threaten the national language (Anthonysamy, 1997).

According to Gill (2002), the development of English can be classified under two phases; the liberation and expansion phase and the linguistic pragmatism phase. In Malaysia, the liberation and expansion phase is where the English language has gone through the nativisation processes and the utilisation of the language for specific purposes namely international communications. The linguistic pragmatism phase is related to 1990 and current events. This period is marked due to a distinctive change in policy, rhetoric and tenor from one who relegated English to less importance to another who marked it as indispensable. Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia claimed that in order to compete with the advanced countries, Malaysians and the other Asian nationalities still have a long way to go. There are skills to learn and values to change. One does not become a European simply by wearing a coat and a tie, speaking English and practising democracy instead of feudalism. He stressed that we have to learn the language for international communication and also for telecommunications such as the internet (The Sun 11, September 1999, p. 40).

At least for now the age of pragmatism has forced the need for postcolonial nations like Malaysia to negotiate priorities that are related to nationalism and internationalism in favour of the English language, as mentioned by Mahathir Mohamad, "Learning in English language will reinforce the spirit of nationalism when it is used to bring about development and progress for the country". He further claims that true nationalism means doing everything possible for the country, even if it means learning the English language.

## 2. The Status of English in Malaysia

Recently (NST 7, April 2011; cited in Thirusanku & Melor, 2012, p. 11), among the Asian countries where English is not the mother tongue, Malaysia was ranked with the highest English proficiency level. According to the EF EPI (Education First, English Proficiency Index), which is a global education centre that specialises in academic degrees, educational travel, cultural exchange and language training, Malaysia came out first followed by Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan. The Asian countries were rated at five different proficiency levels; very high, high, moderate, low and very low. The report which was released on March 30 revealed that Malaysia was the only Asian country rated with a high English proficiency level.

Among the 44 countries listed globally Malaysia took the ninth place with a 55.54 score of high proficiency level. The online English tests were conducted on 2.3 million adults working globally from 2007 to 2009 by Education First. The participants were tested on grammar, vocabulary, reading and listening. The average English proficiency level of a particular country is measured and compared between countries. The EF EPI was the first index to provide a standardised way to measure the English competency among adults. Datuk Dr. Wee Ka Siong,

the Deputy Education Minister revealed his happiness on this matter and also mentioned that there is always room for improvement as we are only in the ninth place internationally. He also believes that with the increasing number of English language periods in schools, the command of English among students will also improve (NST 8, April 2011, p. 4; cited in Thirusanku & Melor, 2012, p. 11).

When questioned about bringing back the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English (PPSMI), he mentioned that the ministry will consider the option. Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek, the MCA president mentioned that PPSMI should be continued in selected urban schools where there are enough qualified teachers. He claims that this is necessary in order to achieve the developed nation status. The Prime Minister mentioned looking into the possibilities of using both mediums of instruction in schools when teaching Mathematics and Science. The cabinet decided that from 2012 onwards to go back to Bahasa Malaysia in National schools and mother-tongue languages in National-type schools. Malay opposition to Teaching of Science and Mathematics in English has a nationalistic and historical basis. Chinese opposition uses reasoning based on cognition asserting that their students have a better cognitive ability in the mother tongue. The Indians seem to be neutral for various reasons (Low & Azirah, 2012).

There have been a lot of issues related to the English language in Malaysia lately in the newspapers. Next year onwards there will be an approximately 300 US Fulbright scholars in Malaysia to assist in improving the English proficiency not only in the urban areas but rural areas too, including the two states in East Malaysia; Sabah and Sarawak (NST 30, June 2011; cited in Thirusanku & Melor, 2012, p. 11). This international educational Fulbright programme sponsored by the US government is to increase mutual understanding between the US and the other countries.

Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, the Education Minister said the Fulbright programme for fun learning is an agreement between the United States and the Malaysian Government. With the implementation of this programme, the English proficiency level among students could be improved. The implementation of a similar programme in the state of Terengganu showed successful results. By 2012, 50 scholars would start under the first phase. Based on this programme, the American scholars would volunteer to assist in teaching the language. Since there are already teachers assigned to teach the English subject, the scholars will instead teach fun related English activities to encourage students to speak in English during school hours which will be decided later.

This Fulbright programme differs from the Master Teachers' programme between Malaysia and UK where the Master Teachers guide the Malaysian teachers who teach subjects related to English. These Master Teachers will go to schools to assist teachers for a week or more on areas to improve the method of teaching in order to improve the language.

The Education Ministry is to introduce the 'To Uphold Bahasa Malaysia and to Strengthen the English language' (MBMMBI) policy in 2012. The aim is to make Bahasa Malaysia (BM) the main language of communication and science and also a medium of unity and solidarity. Steps to enhance the proficiency in English (BI) will also be taken to enable students to compete and explore new knowledge nationally and internationally. The enculturation and mastery of English from schools will assist to foster national unity and develop a new economy globally (NST 23, September 2011, p. 14; cited in Thirusanku & Melor, 2012, p. 12). Both languages are vital in producing human capital with necessary knowledge, competency and skills to guide a knowledge-based economy.

Brighton Education Group is midway through its three-year contract (2010-2013) to improve English language proficiency among rural school students on behalf of the Ministry of Education. This is in line with the government's MBMMBI policy to uphold Bahasa Malaysia and strengthen the English Language. Brighton's teaching English Language & Literacy (TELL) programme deploys 120 English language experts from around the world to mentor and coach approximately 2200 primary school English language teachers. They are based in 600 rural schools in Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and Johor. The company has also established its English Language Centres, which are rooms within schools dedicated to the teaching and learning of the English language (The Sun 3, July 2012).

The British Council reports that the increasing recognition of English as necessary for good career prospects in Malaysia has led to a 10% increase in registration on part-time evening English language courses in the centre (The Sun 22, March 2012).

Getting Malaysians to master English is a priority for the government, according to the Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, stressing that the language has played a significant role in nation building. He mentioned that the English language is also unique in the sense that it belongs to no one but used by everyone. Therefore, he claims that the government considers the English language as secondary importance and Bahasa

Malaysia as primary importance. Nevertheless, Malaysians are required to master the English language and measures are taken to achieve it. He also mentioned that the pace of globalisation required more creative and innovative ways to deliver education. Therefore, to acquire the latest knowledge one should be proficient in the language. In order to achieve this, there should be well-rounded and high quality English teachers who will be able to articulate and teach the language. Teachers should also be equipped with skills of nurturing the current generation students. This includes attaining language proficiency and also acquiring soft skills namely problem-solving abilities and leadership qualities. He also claimed that lack of proficiency in the English language would deter the country's competitiveness in the long run. The establishment of Kirkby International College in Malaysia is to ensure students receive high quality education equivalent to international standards. He claimed that the private institutions set up by private funding and the public universities funded by the government provided more options for tertiary education in the country (NST 1, May 2012).

The online proficiency test for English teachers recently is to provide the Ministry of Education with baseline data to work on the comment that the standard of English in Malaysia is deteriorating. According to the Deputy Education Minister Datuk Dr Wee Ka Siong, the test is not intended to question the English teachers' ability or experience. He said it was just a professional assessment that allowed the ministry to gauge the competency level of each and every English teacher. Wee said in order to have more competent teachers in the country, significant attention had to be given to the mastery of English (NST 6, July 2012).

A new teaching and learning system to enhance the proficiency in English among public university students will be implemented from September onwards. This is to help the undergraduates communicate in English and prepare them to meet the requirements of the working world. Essentially, students will learn English according to three tiers namely, English for Employment, Intensive English and General English. The introduction of the three-tier system would address the different levels of preparedness, motivation and more importantly, purpose for learning English among undergraduates. According to Professor Datuk Dr Rujhan Mustafa, the Higher Education Ministry's director-general, expanding on the English for Employment category would help students develop job search strategies and equip themselves with the necessary language skills (NST 18, June 2012).

According to Professor Datuk Dr Zaini Ujang, vice-chancellor of University Technology Malaysia, English cannot be taught in the classroom alone. Language can be learned only if there are practical applications. That is why it is important to expose students and provide opportunities for them to use the language (NST 24, June 2012).

The Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said the National Education Policy Review Blueprint will be launched on 11 September 2012 and will see major improvements to the current national education system. The blueprint would cover all aspects of the syllabus, right down to all the structure of the Education Ministry. He said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak would launch the blueprint at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre. After the blueprint's launch, it will be made public for feedback for three months before being finalised by the cabinet by year-end. The blueprint will be implemented in three waves over the next 13 years, with the first being over three years, and the second and third being five years each. Muhyiddin said the initial wave would prioritise areas that were easy to implement but would have impact without changes to the current structure and finance. He said it was hoped that by 2025, Malaysia would become one of the world's top nations in education.

Muhyiddin did not dismiss the possibility that new subjects would be introduced, especially at the secondary school level. He said Najib had made a suggestion that English Literature be introduced as a new subject. Muhyiddin (NST 21, August 2012, p. 1) claims:

It is a good idea, but we have to look into its implementation properly as at present we have English Language as a single subject, incorporating all areas of the language. This is important as any additional subject will affect the current students' daily schedule.

Muhyiddin said the public wanted the government to improve and fine-tune the current education system based on the series of nationwide dialogues held earlier. "The proposed changes will look at major shifts, including in the English Language, Mathematics and Science as well as the quality of teachers." Muhyiddin also stressed the importance of the realignment of the Education Ministry staff to state and district levels where they could become better involved in improving the performance of schools (NST 21, August 2012, p. 1).

In 2016, it may be compulsory to pass the English Language paper in order to get the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said secondary students would need to at least pass the subject to get a full SPM certificate. He further claimed that under the first wave of the (three waves) Malaysia Education Blueprint Plan (2013-2015), 61000 English Language teachers from primary and secondary schools were retrained

nationwide to be more skilful in the language. Muhyiddin said the Government was committed to promoting the use of English in schools to ensure the people had a better command of the language. He also mentioned that since English is widely used internationally, there is little choice but to encourage every child to be bilingually proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English (NST 9, March 2013).

The transformation of the education curriculum in the Malaysia Education Development Plan (PPPM) 2013-2025 focuses on the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) concept which aims to produce knowledgeable students who are critical and creative in their thinking and can compete at the international level. HOTS are skills which would equip students with the ability to apply, analyse, evaluate and think creatively in and outside the classroom. It is aimed at producing a generation of Malaysians who are knowledgeable, have good leadership qualities, are multi-lingual and have strong moral and religious values, qualities which would enable them to compete at the global level (NST 30, January 2014, p. 7).

These are some of the many steps taken to improve the standard of English in Malaysia and the education system in general. This clearly shows that the English language is given importance lately. According to Subramaniam (2007), most postcolonial nations like Malaysia have accepted the English language as an important language. However, based on previous experiences and political situations, the fate of the English language may once again be twisted due to changes in language policies. Whatever the situation maybe, the English spoken in these postcolonial nations will never be similar to standard native speaker varieties.

### 3. Learning Theory

There are many theories and models of learning for educational research and practice, for instance, behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism, design-based and humanism. These learning theories address how people learn. The learning theory of interest to the researcher is constructivism. Based on constructivism, learning is an active constructive process where the learner actively constructs new information linked to prior knowledge and creates mental representations which are subjective. It is a contextualized process of constructing knowledge not acquiring knowledge. Knowledge is constructed through past experiences and hypotheses based on the environment. These hypotheses are tested again and again through negotiation in the learner's social life. Every learner has his own process of interpreting and constructing knowledge. Therefore, the learner is not a blank slate; he should be given the freedom to construct his own knowledge and should not be told anything directly. All knowledge is constructed based on past experiences and cultural elements despite how the learner is taught. Even when the learner is listening to a lecture, the learner is actively trying to construct new knowledge.

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory is one of the foundations for constructivism. Social Development Theory argues that social interaction precedes development; consciousness and cognition are the end products of socialisation and social behaviour. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory is the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) who lived during Russian Revolution. Vygotsky's work was largely unknown to the West until it was published in 1962. Vygotsky's theory is one of the foundations of constructivism. It asserts three major themes:

- 1) Social interaction is the basis for cognitive development. This contradicts Jean Piaget's understanding of child development. According to Piaget, child development precedes learning whereas Vygotsky (1978) felt social learning precedes development. He claims that every event in the child's cultural development occurs twice, first socially, between people; interpsychological and later individually, inside the child; intrapsychological.
- 2) The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) refers to a person who is more capable at a specific activity than the learner. The MKO not only refers to a tutor, coach, older adult or teacher but it can also refer to a younger person, a peer or a computer.
- 3) The Zone of Proximal Development is the distance between a learner's ability to carry out an activity under adult supervision or peer cooperation and the capability of the learner to solve the problem on his own. Vygotsky claims that learning takes place in this zone. He stressed on the bonds between people and the social cultural context in which they react in shared experiences (Crawford, 1996). When the learner has conscious control over a new function or conceptual system, the learner is able to use it as a tool. It is the interaction within the environment which enables the learner to reach higher or more abstract ground which allows the learner to be more conscious.

Many schools have implemented the traditional way of transmitting information to students via a teacher or lecturer. Vygotsky's theory on the other hand, introduces a new learning experience where the learner plays an active role in learning. Therefore, learning becomes a reciprocal experience for both the teacher and the learner. The teacher's role is to collaborate with his learners in order to assist the construction of meaning in learners.

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on these realities, an appropriate approach and teaching materials have to be selected. It is important to select what is appropriate and suitable for our learners. Therefore, a pragmatic approach would be the best choice to produce students who are proficient in the language. Gill (1994) suggests that we adopt the exonormative norms and adapt according to our situation. Thus, the government should guide our teachers to perform better based on an endonormative model instead of spending money on foreign teachers and an appropriate learning theory relevant to our students, preferably the constructivist approach. Based on this approach a learner is not a blank slate but brings past experiences and cultural factors to a situation. The focus is on the connections between people and the context in which they act and interact in shared socio cultural experiences. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory is one of the foundations for constructivism. According to Vygotsky, humans use tools that develop from a culture, such as speech and writing, to mediate their social environments. Thus, with the Standard Malaysian English, our students will be able to mediate well with their social environments as the Standard Malaysian English itself has cultural related elements which will enable the learners to communicate their needs conveniently and appropriately. Vygotsky believed that the internalization of these tools led to higher thinking skills, which is definitely an advantage to our learners.

According to D'Angelo (2010), acknowledging the multi-linguistic and multi-cultural repertoires which various participants bring to the classroom, or to any human interaction, as a valuable resource to add to the richness of English, rather than as sources of "interference" or "negative transfer", will help facilitate better learning and the ever-richer variation of English (cited in Low & Azirah, 2012, p. 303).

The Standard Malaysian English is a tool to foster unity. Intercultural exchange among people of various races plays a vital role in ensuring that national unity can be achieved. The Standard Malaysian English can be used as a medium to improve intercultural exchange among people of various races. Through the Standard Malaysian English we can get to know others, our differences can be overcome and we can introduce the Malaysian culture to the world.

ESL teachers are always looking for ways and measures to improve the teaching and learning of English in schools in order to keep our learners interested and motivated to learn English. Thus, what other better way than to use a local variety with the correct approach. Therefore, with the Standard Malaysian English and the constructivist approach, our learners will be able to understand and connect easily. When the fear factor is decreased, learning is increased. Based on this, a compulsory pass in the 1119 English paper for the SPM examination in 2016 will not be a problem at all.

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