Mono, Bi or Trilingual Education? A question facing many education planners

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Introduction
Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei) has a bilingual education system that involves subjects being taught in both the English and Malay languages. In addition, it is also introducing Arabic into the school curriculum, in effect creating a trilingual education system. Hong Kong is an exception to what is happening in other parts of Southeast Asia. Here the virtues of mother tongue education are being extolled by the Special Administrative Region’s Department of Education (So, 2002: 199). This is against a background of separate English Medium (EM) and Chinese Medium (CM) schools and the wish of the former colony’s new administration to more closely align policies and practices with the rest of China. (The school language debate in Hong Kong is ongoing and two recent publications, So, 2002 and Tsou, 2002, help explain some of the developments.)

This paper examines current education planning in Brunei and Hong Kong and attempts to analyse the decisions that have been made and why they were taken. It suggests that external international factors and the wishes of industry and parents eventually outweigh those of politicians and nationalists.

Mono or Bilingual Education?
Throughout Southeast Asia government education systems that teach the national language plus English are becoming the norm. Teaching of the national language is done for reasons of national unity and identity and also because it is usually the most accessible and most widely used language in the community. These days English is taught for utilitarian reasons: it is the most widely used international language and allows its users access to communities beyond their home shores. Although rarely explicitly described as ‘bilingual education systems’ this, in effect, is the type of education system that has emerged. (The term ‘bilingual’ has negative connotations in many countries and this may help to explain why the term is avoided.)

In many parts of Southeast Asia, however, the national language is not the language of the home. It is not unusual for a local language to be different from the provincial language while the provincial language is different from the national language. It is not uncommon for a child to have parents from different language backgrounds and for the first school language to be different again. Add English to this list and the child grows up as a bilingual and then becomes trilingual eventually quadrilingual while at school – or not, depending upon how he or she fares in their education.

This pattern occurs throughout the region and it would be easy to find examples from all Southeast Asian countries. In fact, far from being extreme, the example given
above is one of the simpler examples that could be presented. It does, however, illustrate one of the difficulties and dangers in trying to present national education systems as being either simply mono or bilingual. It also serves as an example of the difficulty of trying to simplify the argument of ‘mother tongue’ education versus the rest. What, we might ask, is the mother tongue of the child described above? I have an Indian colleague who was brought up speaking his regional Indian language before completing his education in Britain and becoming proficient in English. He is married to a woman from a different part of India who knows different regional languages but who also shares English with her husband. They have a young daughter who is growing up in Malay/English/Chinese speaking Brunei, so what is the child’s mother tongue? Is this an extreme example that does not reflect the norm? I have many Chinese students whose parents come from different parts of China (or who were brought up using different Chinese languages). As a result the child often learns to speak two Chinese languages at home. However, the lingua franca of the Chinese community has become Mandarin, so the child learns to use this language as well. Outside the house the child hears and learns both Brunei Malay and often one of Brunei’s other indigenous languages, depending on the location of the family home (there are seven indigenous languages in Brunei). At school the child is initially taught Standard Malay and then English. That makes a total of seven languages.

Despite the complicated language mosaics that exist throughout the region it is still possible to hear voices promoting and defending the ‘mother tongue’ and mother tongue education. As I hope the examples above suggest, identifying the mother tongue is not easy. Nevertheless, despite the numerous exceptions, in most countries one language is usually understood and used by all from an early age and is normally regarded as the first language, or mother tongue, of the community.

It is commonsense to assume that we will understand and learn more if we are taught in a language with which we are familiar and in which we are proficient. If this is the national language shared and understood by everyone in the community then this will be the obvious choice for medium of instruction in the country’s schools. Such is the case throughout most of Europe and North America. In this part of the world, as already illustrated, the decision is not so clear cut. For Brunei the language would be Standard Malay. Despite the examples given that suggest it really is not the most widely used language (this would be Brunei Malay), its choice would not raise too many objections, for reasons that will be discussed later. In Hong Kong the language of first choice for most people is Cantonese, but it is no surprise that the language used in schools is Mandarin. Thus in both countries the choice of ‘mother tongue’ is really contrived and the result of circumstance rather than actual use.

**Hong Kong**
The choice of Mandarin (Putonghua) in Hong Kong seems an obvious choice. China is a huge country and has people from many different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. To forge a common identity, and also to ease translation and communication difficulties, the choice of one language as the national language, in this case Mandarin, is logical. Although it may not be the language of the home or even of the street in Hong Kong, the argument for Mandarin as ‘mother tongue’, as the national language of China, is clear.
Setting aside the issue of whether the ‘mother tongue’ really is one’s mother’s tongue, proponents of monolingual education are able to cite a number of reasons why this, and no other language medium, should be used. Central among these, of course, is that of comprehension. Pupils studying in their first language must perform better than in a second or subsequent language. Advocates of mother tongue education in China (So, 2002:199) cite this as an important reason for supporting such education.

Such arguments, as well as those to remove the country of the vestiges of colonialism, were heard a generation ago in Malaysia. However, as Malaysia learned and as I am sure will become apparent in China, a more important issue than comprehension is that of usefulness.

No matter how well a pupil has done at school, all will be for nought unless there is an actual demand for that pupil’s talents. As Malaysia has realised (Asmah, 1996 & Hashim, 1999), and as industrialists and parents in Hong Kong are arguing (So, 2002: 220), what use is education unless it fulfils the needs of industry? A pupil may pass all of his or her examinations in their mother tongue, be a star pupil in fact, but then find that employment opportunities are limited. In effect, such a pupil has not received an appropriate education for the world outside school.

It is not that parents are being unpatriotic to their nation or disloyal to their community. What they want, the same as parents the world over, is to ensure that their offspring are provided with an education that will prepare them for the demands of life. As has been observed in Hong Kong, there is “no popular demand for secondary education to be conducted exclusively in either Chinese Medium or English Medium” (So, 220). This reflects the findings of a national language attitude survey that was conducted in Brunei in 1993 when it was found that the vast majority of those surveyed, 90%, wanted neither exclusive English nor Malay medium education but a system that taught and used both languages (Jones, 1994: 196).

**Brunei**

When Brunei opened its first school in 1916, the teacher was brought in from what was then Malaya because there were no Bruneian teachers at that time. In fact, it was not until 1956 that Brunei opened its own teacher training college. The teachers in Brunei’s schools were therefore either from Malaya, or, latterly, Bruneians who had been taught at Malaysian teacher training colleges. The language of these teachers was that of West Malaysia - Standard Malay. Thus Standard Malay became the established medium of instruction in schools.

A teaching role in schools for Brunei’s other language groups was first raised in 1939 and the following assessment was made by the then British Resident about offering education in someone’s own language if it was other than Malay:

> As at least a quarter of the indigenous population of the state is composed of races whose mother tongue is not Malay, that criterion is hardly satisfactory. The provision of education in several languages is obviously impracticable, and it is inevitable that, linguistically at any rate, the other races must be assimilated to Malay.

(Graham Black, 1939:34)
The British Resident of the period obviously did not differentiate between Brunei Malay and Standard Malay. In fact, it was not until the establishment of the University of Brunei Darussalam and the subsequent research instigated by the University’s English and Malay departments that distinctions between dialect and language were acknowledged. The question of providing teaching in the first language of Brunei’s other races has never been raised since. If it were then I am sure the official response would be the same as in 1938, that is, it would be impracticable because of a lack of teachers and resources and also because of the small size of the speech community.

The question of whether to adopt a Malay or English medium education system was addressed in 1959, shortly before Brunei began the process of full independence from Britain and just after the country’s constitution had been drawn up. The constitution states that:

The official language of the State shall be the Malay language and shall be in such script as may by written law be provided.

Brunei Constitution, 1959: Article 82[1]

It was little surprise, therefore, that in the same year when asked to advise a Central Advisory Committee on Education in Brunei on general policy and principles to be followed in education, Aminuddin Baki and Paul Chang, Malaysians who had only spent two weeks in Brunei itself, recommended the use of Malay as the medium of education. Baki and Chang relied heavily on the Malaysian Tun Razak Education Report of 1956 for their recommendations. (The Razak report was adopted in Malaysia, as was Malay as the medium of education.)

While Baki and Chang’s recommendations were included in the Bruneiian National Education Policy of 1962, neither the Policy itself nor the recommendations were ever acted upon. A fuller description of why these recommendations were never implemented, nor those of a subsequent report, the Report of the Education Commission, Brunei, 1972, is described in Jones, 1997. Both the 1962 Policy and the 1972 Report advocate the use of Malay as the sole medium of instruction in the country’s schools. However, as a result of firstly civil insurrection and later political disputes, both issues outside education and over which the education authorities had absolutely no control, the proposed medium of education for Brunei’s schools was never acted upon. Instead, and to meet the country’s political and educational needs of the time, Brunei adopted its present National System of Education in 1984.

Ironically, given that Brunei initially looked to Malaysia to provide educational leadership, and given the obvious disparity in the sizes of the two countries, it is Brunei’s National System of Education that has subsequently passed the test of time. While Malaysia initially adopted a Malay medium of education it has recently taken steps to adopt an education system that has much in common with Brunei’s. That is, one that retains a place for the national language but at the same time tries to provide English language proficiency for its pupils. However, as Brunei discovered, adopting a particular type of education system does not result in an immediate change in the type of pupils that it produces. Education is a slow process. Most children enter school when they are five years old and do not leave until they are sixteen or eighteen. Similarly, not all teachers are able to adjust to sudden changes in a curriculum, particularly one of language teaching medium. Some teachers will never be able to
make the transition because they may be too old while others may simply be unable to learn a new language. As a result it takes time, a lot of time, before the benefits of a change in system might be realised. And it is during this transition period that the problems and weaknesses of using two languages in an education system are more apparent than any benefits.

Problems of Bilingual Education
Just as it is apparent that education in one’s first language ensures comprehension, so, conversely, it is apparent that education in a second language will result in comprehension problems. In fact, unless the teaching is of the right sort and caliber there is a danger that the second language will never be acquired and that any subjects taught in that second language will not be learned. Compounding the problem, especially in the early stages of transition, is the fact that it is often not only the pupils that struggle with the second language but the teachers themselves. Ensuring a cadre of well qualified bilingual teachers is a problem for any country that might be considering opening its education system to a second language medium. This is particularly a problem for poorer countries that lack the resources to provide the right sort of support, education and re-education for their teachers. In many instances it is not only the subject teachers that may have a poor command of English, but the English language teachers themselves. This is not a problem peculiar to Southeast Asia but one that is encountered in many parts of the world.

It was, and possibly still is, a problem encountered in Brunei. However, Brunei was fortunate enough to have the financial resources to improve the situation.

Having decided to adopt a bilingual education system Brunei implemented the policy with the minimum delay. For the country’s former English medium schools the transition was fairly painless, but for the former Malay and Arabic medium schools this was not always the case. As might have been expected, for teachers nearing retirement there seemed little point in undergoing any retraining. Similarly, for those that had virtually no command of the English language, trying to learn the new language, particularly in the latter stage of one’s career, seemed a pointless exercise. As a result many teachers were unable or unwilling to change the medium in which they taught. Consequently there was much disquiet among teachers and parents alike. Teachers because of the new burdens and disruption to their lives, and from parents because they were worried about the standard of education being offered to their children. Their fears were understandable: what kind of teaching could be achieved by a teacher who had difficulty conveying the message? But that was eighteen years ago. Many changes have occurred since.

The problems of teachers who could not cope with the new education system and of those who were too old to change are now, mostly, a thing of the past. There are still teachers who struggle with teaching in the English medium, and there are those who, sometimes unbeknown to themselves, are poor models for their pupils. For the most part, however, teachers are now able to cope with the system and are comfortable teaching in the medium prescribed. There are two main reasons for this: retirement and teacher training.

The retirement age for local government teachers in Brunei is 55. Some teachers may be asked to return to schools and teach after this age, but not those who would have
been struggling with the new education system. As a result anyone over 37 years of age when the system was introduced in 1984 would, by now, have retired. Anyone who was under 37 could, presumably, have learned to adapt (this is a big assumption!). However, considerations about older teachers are only one half of the equation. Over the last eighteen years the University of Brunei Darussalam has made teacher training a priority. As a result many new, young teachers have entered schools and all have been trained with the National Education System in mind. Most of the country’s young teachers are graduates who have completed four-year bachelor of education courses, so they should be well prepared for their vocation. This compares favourably with graduates from the former teacher training college, many of whom entered the college with no qualifications other than a willingness to become teachers.

Initially it was not just teachers that were a problem. The curriculum, examinations and textbooks had to be rewritten. Throughout the initial period there was a lot of disruption and upheaval, and, inevitably, disquiet. This was to be expected, particularly since the outcome of the new system could not be assured. In fact, given the confusion, it would have been logical to assume that the pupils were not coping and that the eventual result would be failure. Given the voiced opposition of the time from some quarters it might also have been assumed that there was widespread opposition to the system from the general public. This was one of the reasons that the national survey on attitudes to education was conducted in 1993. However, as stated earlier, despite misgivings the vast majority of the population were in favour of bilingual education. It became apparent when interviewing some of the respondents that, while they might have been concerned about its actual application, most Bruneians were in no doubt about the value of knowing and being able to use both the Malay and English languages.

**Mother Tongue Education**

The history of education in Hong Kong’s is well documented (Askar, 1998, & Pennington, 1998, for example). However, for the present, it has taken a different path to most of the countries in Southeast Asia and has opted for mother tongue teaching, but in the national language, Mandarin, rather than Cantonese. The Ministry of Education argues that students prefer learning in their mother tongue and that this has a positive affect on their learning (reported in So, 2002). However, as already suggested, what students prefer and what might ultimately be of benefit to themselves and the state may be two different things.

In many respects it would appear that Hong Kong is making the same sort of language planning mistakes that other newly independent countries made. (Of course, Hong Kong’s case is different from most given that it is a small part of a much larger country and politically it reverted back to Chinese rule rather than gaining independence.) The adoption of a national mother tongue as the medium of instruction in schools, despite the wishes of parents and industry, suggest considerations of nationalism have outweighed nationism.

Malaysia, as one example, went through a similar process. Back in 1987, while still extolling the virtues of mother tongue education, Nik Safiah suggested that Malaysia’s administration should heed its own slogan *Leadership by Example* and themselves use and encourage the use of Malay. As she noted, the use of Malay at that time was spreading “except in the business world, the judiciary and the non-formal
elite circles’ (Nik Safiah, 1987). However, as we now know with hindsight, the change did not occur and English continued to be used. I think that we also now realise, and as Hong Kong’s business community knows, it is not always possible to manipulate language nationally to suit political ends, particularly not in sectors that deal with international markets or international issues.

Arguing along the same lines, but in the Philippines, Gonzalez (1990:332-3) made a similar point:

Nationalism alone cannot make up for the intellectual immaturity of a language in the process of development. What is needed is a … well planned and systematically funded program of language cultivation for the entire society, involving all ministries, government and non-government organizations, learned societies, and the universities and their scholars (i.e. the Philippine elites).

However, as in Malaysia, the result has been the same and for the same reasons. The ‘elite’ move in international circles; their activities involve people and places from outside the Philippines itself and thus Pilipino could not replace English.

Given these arguments and examples it is not surprising, therefore, that some researchers in Hong Kong see the emphasis on mother tongue education as a passing phase. So (2002:223):

This author is confident that a few decades down the new millennium, as far as the MoE-based school type is concerned, the norm in the public education sector of Hong Kong will be neither CM schools or EM schools. Of course there will be a small number of such schools in Hong Kong, but the infrastructural forces will select plurilingual schools that are able to develop a good combined use of Cantonese, Putonghua and English to deliver a quality education.

So is therefore suggesting that at some point Hong Kong will come more into line with other parts of Southeast Asia. Of course, time will tell, but there is a major difference. Hong Kong is part of East Asia rather than Southeast Asia, and more particularly, it is a part of China. Unlike Southeast Asian countries, which individually have small economies, China has a global presence and is one of the world’s major economies. The country’s global impact is set to increase rather than decrease, and its language is likely to grow in international importance alongside its exports and wealth. Rather than Hong Kong being absorbed into English-knowing Southeast Asia, it seems more likely that Hong Kong will increasingly lose its individual identity and become more closely identified with China itself.

Trilingual Education
As illustrated earlier in this paper, many children in Southeast Asia grow up in multilingual societies and may be at least trilingual before they even start school. As argued in an earlier paper (Abdelrahmen & Jones, 2001) there does not appear to be any limit to the number of languages that a child can acquire in natural settings and simultaneously. It is a question of need and relevancy; at an early age a child does not consciously need to learn a language which is immediately relevant to her. Despite
this, parents and education authorities still fret over the introduction of second and third mediums of instruction. The problem is that school languages may not appear immediately relevant to a child, and therefore she will have little inclination to learn them, compared with those that are encountered in the home and with friends and which therefore are obviously useful.

As teachers know only too well, it is very difficult to teach pupils a second language if they do not see a need for it. This applies even to English language teaching. Careers, further studies and employability mean very little to a primary school child. However, at least with English, and assuming that homes have access to such things, there is a plethora of real world support in the form of films, books, cartoons and television programmes in the language. Most children want access to these and are therefore willing to make some effort to learn the language. The child’s motivation may not be educational, but that does not matter - the motivation is there, the language will be acquired and eventually it will help with the child’s education.

For those countries that are considering going beyond bilingual education and adding a third language, as Brunei is with Arabic, recent research (Cenoz & Jessner, 2000 and Broby, 2001) suggests there are some positive points to consider:

- First, we have the capacity to learn more than two languages
- Second, research suggests that it is easier to learn a third language having acquired a second language
- Third, linguistic transfer not only takes place from L1-L2-L3 but also vice versa and that learning an L3 has a positive influence on L2 development.

Perhaps the most important consideration, however, is whether there is a genuine need for the third language. As illustrated earlier, there is little question about the need for English as a second language in most countries, even though young children may fail to appreciate the real reasons behind learning the language. If an obvious need exists and a third language can satisfy this need then it should be possible to teach it successfully. This is the case in most continental European countries, especially those that share borders with a number of countries. Speakers of other languages are regularly encountered and there is often a wish and need to communicate with each other. Furthermore, even though none of these countries share a border with Britain, English is also studied for the same reasons that it is studied in Southeast Asia. As a result, foreign language teaching in two or more languages is the norm and is mostly done successfully. (See Baetens Beardsmore, 1993 and Cenoz & Jessner, 2000 for discussion about European models.)

Having introduced a successful bilingual system Brunei is now planning to take this a step further and offer trilingual education, the third language being Arabic.

The need for Arabic in Brunei is of a different nature than the need for English or for the need to communicate with other nationalities. Muslims have an obligation to learn Arabic so that they can study the Holy Koran. (The Holy Koran cannot be translated, it is only acceptable in its original presentation.) Among Brunei’s majority Malay Muslims, therefore, there is a reason and a need to learn Arabic. However, the need is specific and limited and does not translate into a need for every day speech, or even for modern spoken Arabic. (The Arabic of the Holy Koran is Classical Arabic.) However, while a need exists among Malays for a particular type of Arabic there is no
such need among Brunei’s non-Muslim population. Learning the language for these pupils will therefore amount to studying another school subject rather than learning the language for any obvious reason. Better pupils will study hard to get good grades, just as they do for any subject, but that will be as far as their motivation extends. For weaker students there will be no motivation whatsoever, with the inevitable consequences.

The implications and suggested outcome of introducing this particular type of trilingual education were presented at the 5th English in Southeast Asia Conference (see Abdulrahmen & Jones, 2001). Suffice to say that for the moment it is unlikely that the wider use of Arabic in the Bruneian school system will have anything like the same impact as learning Malay or English: the three languages are learned for three very different reasons.

**Conclusion**

The choice of mono, bi or trilingual education depends on the aspirations of a country. Education is a response to the needs of a nation; schools are opened and subjects taught in response to these needs. The needs themselves are a result of pressure from the community for certain skills and eventually from government to determine a national ethos and identity. It is government that normally controls the budget and makes appointments, thus it is government that is able to dictate curriculum content. However, unless this curriculum fulfils the needs of industry and the wishes of pupils and parents then these lobbies will pressure the government to change its education system. This is what has happened with many post-colonial administrations as the ideals of independence later give way to the pragmatics of actual demand. Regionally, Malaysia has undergone this transition recently and I believe that Hong Kong will eventually have to change course, although, as described earlier, the political influence of China may determine otherwise. Brunei has been fortunate in that it adopted a system that has satisfied the needs of both nationalism and nationism, although the country should not be complacent. Any system of education requires regular reviews and adjustments. The relative importance of languages in a community is never static; change is inevitable.
References


