Bilingual and Multilingual Education in Brunei and Malaysia: Policies and Practices

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Introduction
Malaysia and Negara Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei) have more in common than most countries: they share a national language, common borders and both have a Muslim majority. In addition, both have experienced some form of British control and the countries often share and watch the same television channels. The nationals of both countries regularly cross their common borders, for shopping or simply to visit, and mixed marriages are not uncommon. Many Malaysians choose to work in Brunei in white as well as blue collar jobs, although fewer Bruneians make the opposite journey. It might be assumed that what is true of one country must be true of the other, but this is not the case. Of course, the major differences are the relative size, populations and GDP of the two countries. Another is the path the two have taken to bilingual and multilingual education and how differences in their history shaped recent policies and practices.

Malaysia has a much larger population (29,179,952) than Brunei (408,786) but Brunei has by far the larger GDP, US$50,500 compared to Malaysia’s US$15,800. However, Malaysia was introduced to formal education almost one hundred years before Brunei (1816 as opposed to 1914) and, most significantly, its colonial experience left a very different scar compared to Brunei’s period under British residence from 1906 to 1984.

Malaysia
Malaysia is divided into East and West, with the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak being East Malaysia while West Malaysia consists of Peninsular Malaysia. This large and geographically diverse country is home to many cultures, peoples and languages. In addition to the states there were and still are separate sultanates, which remained semi-independent even during British rule. While Malaysia today is typical of developing tiger economies, with both improving infrastructure and industry, it was until comparatively recently better known for its tough jungle terrain. This acted as a barrier to the movement of people and development, including educational development, particularly for those living in more remote regions.

The recent history and development of Malaysia is inextricably linked to the British colonial period. The British were initially attracted to Malaysia’s ports along the major trade routes, establishing the Straits Settlements in Penang (1786), Malacca (1818) and Singapore (1819). The rest of the country held little interest for the British, until the discovery of resources and the development of the tin and rubber industries. However, once this development did begin it changed the face and composition of Malaysia and its people.

Before economic exploitation, West Malaysia (Malaya as it was then) was peopled basically by Malays, who lived along its coast and estuaries, and smaller numbers of interior indigenous peoples. There were small Chinese communities in Malacca and Penang, but these
had closely assimilated with the Malays, even speaking their own version of Malay. However, Malaysia changed dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century as Chinese, mostly from Southern China, flooded into the country to work in the mines and migrants arrived from Southern India to work on the rubber plantations; work that the local Malays shunned and the Chinese were indifferent to (Turnbull, 1989: 176-7). These newcomers spoke mostly Chinese, Tamil and Malayalam.

The influx of huge numbers of Chinese and Indians to what is today West Malaysia fundamentally changed the language mosaic of Malaysia. These immigrants put down roots, brought wives from their own countries and very soon became a part of the country. While there may have been little initial mixing of the various races, inevitably individuals were exposed to and learned new languages. It was incumbent on the Chinese and Indians in particular to learn Malay.

The Development of Education: the early years

English played a dominant role in the everyday life of the Straits Settlements and the first English school (as well as Malaysia’s, aside from mosque schools) was established in Penang in 1816 (Asmah, 2012:156). This created a trend as English became the medium of communication among all the influential Straits citizens, regardless of their ethnicity.

Ozog (1993: 63) notes that two kinds of English schools were established: mission schools and free schools. The aim of the latter was to produce local junior officers who could help run the country. These schools were built in towns, thus attracting Chinese and Indian pupils, but few from the Malay community who still continued to work the land or fish. Primary schools that were established for Malays (there were no secondary schools) had a limited curriculum and no English tuition. Sadka (1968:292) suggests that this was deliberate policy to hinder ambition among the Malays. These schools were often regarded with suspicion by the Malays themselves and attendance was poor (Stevenson, 1975:119).

This was in contrast to the Malay elite, for whom a special boarding school was opened in Perak State in 1903. This ensured that the children of the elite would receive an English education (many pupils went on to study in Britain) and thus be in a position to both rule the country and work closely with the British, becoming anglophiles in the process. The Malay community was thus split between those who received a very good education and those who received a poor education or none at all.

The education of most Malays during this period compares poorly with the experience of the Chinese. From the very beginning the Chinese put great emphasis on education, not only being well represented in the English medium schools, but also building Chinese medium schools and bringing in teachers from China, following a Chinese curriculum (Wong & Ee, 1975:11).

By the outbreak of the Second World War and the Japanese occupation of Malaya and Borneo educational divisions in Malaya were deep, with the various races taking different paths. On the whole, as far as language was concerned, the different races continued to use their own languages. However, while the Malays, apart from the Malay elite, had no need to venture beyond Malay, the Chinese and Indian communities often acquired English and Malay in addition to their own languages. There was no language or long term planning evident in the education system.
Post-War Development

The British returned to Malaya in 1945. In the immediate post-war years the racial and political divisions in the society were becoming ever more apparent. In addition, the British and others in the region were concerned about the rise of communism in Asia and whether this might spread to Malaya.

Independence was another issue that marked the post-war period. Sooner rather than later the British realised that independence would have to be granted. However, the country was in danger of seeing racial tensions spill over into actual conflict and it was obvious that divisions were exacerbated by separate education systems and the lack of a common language. Ozog (1993:65) reports that between 1945 and 1955 six reports were commissioned and all called for some form of bilingual education. The three most influential, the Barnes, Fenn-Wu and Razak called for, respectively, a bilingual English-Malay system; primary education in the mother tongue and secondary education in English; Malay as the main medium of education in primary schools. (For further discussion see Asmah & Noor, 1981, and Hashim, 1999, for example.)

In fact, on the Malayan Federation’s independence in 1957, while bilingualism was recognised as important, Malay became the national language and everyone was expected to be able to use it. However, in what appears to be a form of appeasement, Tamil and Chinese medium primary schools were allowed and English was permitted as a medium in secondary schools. The elitist English medium schools remained unchanged, although from 1967 English was no longer recognised as an official language (Asmah, 2012).

To some extent, all races found fault with the new system. The Chinese had hoped for greater recognition of their language while the Malays felt the new system was being introduced too slowly. Problems with recognition and the role of the different languages and races was being played out in the wider community. Tensions reached boiling point in 1969 and spilled over into actual rioting in the capital, Kuala Lumpur (Turnbull, 1989:265-9, among others). The riots marked a turning point in Malaysian society. Resentment among the Malays was directed primarily towards the Chinese, given that it was the Chinese who appeared to be prospering at the expense of the other races. The disparities between urban and rural communities was also becoming more apparent, again reflecting in part divisions between the Chinese and Malays. Throughout, Malays retained political control, but it was the Chinese who largely controlled commerce.

In an attempt to redress the balance and to create a greater sense of national identity the government took steps to replace the bilingual education system with Malay as the main medium of education. The National Language Act of 1970 was meant to create a level playing field for all members of society and allow Malays greater opportunity to share in the country’s growing prosperity. While English would no longer be used as a teaching medium, the language itself would still be taught as a subject. Of course, the new Act was not without its critics, but the Sedition Act, also passed in 1970, forbade any further discussion of the subject. This did not prevent parents teaching their children at home or sending them to private schools, but from 1970 on the amount of English used in schools, and thus the proficiency of pupils in the language, dropped gradually.

Despite the Sedition Act, debate still continued about the role of English in education and the society, particularly given its increasing role as the international language of communication in business, commerce and politics. Politicians found themselves in the uncomfortable
position of having to support an education system that might actually lead to Malaysian school leavers and graduates becoming less competitive internationally at the very time of rapid economic growth throughout Asia. In 1992 Malaysia declared a vision for 2020 that involved full industrialization and developed country status, but a lack of English language skills would jeopardise this. Hence the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century saw a series of language-in-education policy changes which reversed earlier policies and signalled a move back to English-medium.

The Present
At present the Malaysian government offers two categories of government-funded schools: National and National-type. There are two National-type schools: those where the medium of education is Chinese and those where it is Tamil. In all schools, whatever the type, the national language is compulsory and English is taught as a second language.

The presence of National-type schools highlights the difficulties faced in trying to offer an education system that satisfies all races, but perhaps fails to please anyone (see Asmah, 2012: 169-171 for an interesting analysis). As well as the issue of satisfying the various ethnic interests, the question of which medium to use in schools has remained contentious. Despite the supposed use of Malay at all levels of the education system, including tertiary level, the reality was that English continued to be widely used in the sciences and law. Gill (2005, 2006 & 2007) provides detailed analysis of the issues. Conceding to demand and actual use, from 2003, in both primary and secondary schools, Mathematics and Science were taught in English. However, in 2012 the policy was reversed in primary schools, with these subjects being taught in Malay again; in 2016 secondary schools will also see these subjects revert to Malay, although students have, and will retain, the option to take public examinations in either English or Malay. This may be at odds with new plans that are described below.

Brunei
Brunei is bounded by the much larger Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah. In fact, part of Sarawak actually separates one Brunei district, Temburong, from the other three districts of the country. It might be assumed, given their proximity, that these Malaysian states and Brunei must share more than just borders and languages. In fact, all three have their own distinct national identities, the most telling of which is that Brunei prides itself on being a Malay Islamic monarchy while the language and religious composition of Sabah and Sarawak are diverse with both having large numbers of Christians. (For further discussion on some of the educational and socioeconomic differences between these states, Brunei and the rest of Malaysia see David & McLellan, 2013.)

At one time Brunei ruled over both Sarawak and Sabah, and even parts of the southern Philippines, but its power and influence waned at the time when European powers, most notably the Spanish and British, took an interest in Southeast Asia. As far as north Borneo is concerned, Brunei might have been subsumed altogether by the Brooke family-run state of Sarawak or by the British North Borneo Company in what is now Sabah. The history is fascinating, but what is most pertinent for this paper is that it was British intervention, at the bequest of the then Sultan of Brunei, that prevented Brunei from disappearing off the map altogether (see Cleary & Eaton, 1992). Thus rather than exploitative colonialists, the British arrived in the form of a Resident whose role was to advise the Sultan of Brunei, whilst guaranteeing the country its independence and British protection. Clearly a very different role from the one adopted in Malaysia and one that meant the British were never regarded as
oppressors. A major difference between Brunei and other “colonized” states (including Malaysia) is that Brunei never saw the need to divest itself of all things British (most particularly language) after the last Resident departed. In fact, the country has remained anglophile and positive in its attitude towards British institutions and the English language. Indirectly this has meant for greater stability in the country’s education system, with little opposition to the concept of bilingualism.

Although Brunei is home to a number of minority ethnic groups, the largest being the Chinese at 11.4% of the population, the great majority of the nation’s people are Malays. Virtually all Malays, as well as many people from other ethnic groups within the country, are Muslims. Thus Islam is the most widely practiced religion in the country and is the Official Religion of Brunei, as stated in the country’s Constitution.

The People and their Languages
For such a small country, Brunei has a diverse population and a number of speech communities. As a result of its geography, seven distinct communities (Belait, Bisaya, Brunei Malay, Dusun, Kedayan, Murut and Tutung) as well as two other non-indigenous communities (Iban and Penan) call Brunei home. Historically these communities lived apart from each other, separated by rivers, forest and mountains. As a result of this isolation, these communities developed different dialects, languages and cultures. It was only in the last century that road and bridge building brought these communities into regular contact with each other. While most Bruneians still identify with one of these communities, intermarriage and relocation for purposes of work, education or family mean that the former ethnic divisions are now breaking down and there has been significant language and identity shift towards Brunei Malay.

The Development of Education: The Early Years
The development of Brunei’s education system has been detailed in earlier publications (Jones, 1996b & 2012) however, a brief synopsis of the development is necessary in order to appreciate current policies.

The discovery of oil in 1923 meant that Brunei’s revenues increased quite dramatically. Throughout the 1930s as oil fields were developed, so income improved. By 1939 state revenues had risen to GBP1,274,644, almost ten times what they had been 10 years earlier.

The oil and gas industry resulted in men and machinery coming to Brunei and transforming the landscape and the population mix. While many of the oil workers learned rudimentary Malay (and some, particularly those from China who chose to remain and live in Brunei, learned the language properly) it was clear that some Bruneians would need to learn English given its role in the oil and gas industry as well as in the financial sectors that burgeoning wealth meant Bruneians were increasingly exposed to. Any locals that came into contact with the oil industry had a need to learn English. These included local officers who represented the government in negotiations as well as customs officers, clerks dealing with equipment and anyone else party to the myriad operations involved in setting up an industry.

With improved revenues and more demand the government planned to open at least one new school a year from 1930 over the following ten years (in the previous 20 years only four schools had been built). As the number of schools increased and as greater attention continued to be given to education, so, inevitably, did questions about the type of education and, in particular, the medium. In 1929 “an Enactment to provide for compulsory attendance at
schools (Enactment No.3 of 1929) was passed giving the Resident power to declare from time to time the parts of the State in which compulsory attendance could be enforced” (McKerron, 1930:20). However, as a later Resident pointed out:

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. It is proposed, therefore, to amend the Enactment to make attendance at Malay schools compulsory for all children of Malaysian race alike.

(Graham Black, 1939:34)

This is a very important amendment and one that set at least one parameter for language education in Brunei. At no time has the question of teaching in a child’s first language (other than Malay) been raised since 1939. On the one hand this is not surprising given the subsequent greater integration of Brunei society and the more widespread use of Malay and, latterly, English, but it is at odds with language planning in many other communities. Although globally greater consideration is being given to minority languages than was done in the past, this is not the case in Brunei. It is also important to note that the variety of Malay in Brunei (Brunei Malay) is substantially different from that of Standard Malay. So children starting school in Brunei have never had the benefit of studying in their mother tongue. (Brunei is a signatory to the Association of South East Asian Nations agreement that children should be taught in their mother tongue, but is the only nation in ASEAN that has failed to implement this.)

Post-War Development

As previously stated, government revenue in 1939 was GBP1,274,644. By 1951 the figure was GBP17,302,869, and by 1953 the figure had increased five-fold to GBP98,976,643, an enormous sum of money compared with twenty years earlier and an income that was to bring huge change to the country.

Recognising the need to have English educated Bruneians, a Government English School was established in Brunei Town in October 1951. This school had two trained teachers, one from the United Kingdom and the other from Malaya. The decisions that these two teachers made had a profound and lasting impact on the present school system. Many of the practices that they introduced back then, due to the circumstances of the time, still remain today.

The Government English School may have had two teachers, but it did not start with any pupils – there was no formal English being taught in Brunei so there were no English medium pupils to send to it. As a result, four selected primary schools introduced English lessons at Primary 4, when the pupils were eight years old. The more able pupils were then given tuition in English by the State Education Officer himself before proceeding to the English School. What is so important about this procedure is that it was to determine at what age English medium education would be introduced to Bruneian pupils. This practice continued right up to the introduction of SPN21 in 2009, when English medium teaching was introduced at Primary 1 level. Not surprisingly, given that the procedure was established to solve an immediate problem in 1951, and was designed anyway with gifted children in mind, this sudden transition created problems for many children. (For a fuller account of the education system and some of the problems, particularly those associated with curriculum issues, see Jones, 1996a.)
In the post-war period both Malaysia and Brunei published education reports and subsequent policy documents (the Bruneian reports borrowed extensively from the original Malaysian reports). Both stressed the importance of using the national language. It is clear that in both Malaysia and Brunei, having established a need for an education system and having provided an infrastructure, both countries then gave greatest consideration to the political ramifications of education. For both countries national unity and a clear sense of national identity was of great importance.

Due primarily to the disruption in the country from 1962-63 caused by a civil insurrection, Brunei failed to implement the education report recommendations, but schools continued to be built and most children had access to education by the end of the 60s. The Chinese community had its own schools and language medium, with books supplied from Taiwan; the religious authorities had a small number of pupils being taught through the medium of Arabic while the Government schools were divided between English and Malay medium, with books from Britain and Malaysia respectively.

Following a number of failed initiatives, a new education system was introduced upon the resumption of full independence in 1984. It has been well documented (Jones, Martin & Ozog, 1993 and Jones, 1996b, for instance) and needs little elaboration here. The concept of solidarity and nation building was given great emphasis throughout the 1984 document. The System and explanations are something of a balancing act, trying to satisfy the Malay medium lobby while also recognising the need for English for international trade and communication.

2009 – Today
In 2009 the Ministry of Education unveiled a new education system: Sistem Pendidikan Negara Brunei Abad Ke-21 (National Education System for the 21st Century), most commonly referred to as SPN21. The major difference between this system and the previous bilingual education system is that Mathematics and Science are taught in English from Year 1 together with English language itself. As well as giving greater emphasis to the role of English, the new system also pays heed to the need for holistically trained well-rounded pupils who should be the product of pupil-centred teaching approaches rather than traditional teacher-centred classrooms. The radical departure in terms of teaching methodology and greater use of English has resulted in the sort of disruption that marked the introduction of the bilingual system twenty-five years earlier. Schools and teachers have been struggling to adapt, but it is clear that the country views this type of education as necessary for the country’s development.

The Situation Today
Brunei has already introduced its new education system and Malaysia is planning changes to its own. Both countries have also mapped out new initiatives: Brunei’s Strategic Plan 2012-2017 and Malaysia’s Education Blueprint 2013-2025 are similar in many ways, suggesting, perhaps, a greater unity of thought about the education needs of the two nations.

Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013-2025
The Education Blueprint that Malaysia’s Ministry of Education ordered in 2011 became a huge undertaking involving some 50,000 people and a wide cross-section of interested parties. At the outset, of particular concern was that Malaysia devoted 38% of its GDP to education (above the OECD average of 34% and similar, in GDP percentage terms, to that spent by South Korea, Singapore and Japan). However, the Blueprint states that despite the investment, educational returns were poor, especially compared to other developing Asian countries. The
plan is to introduce a common curriculum for all Malaysian schools, based on the recommendations of the Blueprint.

The Blueprint calls for a new type of school leaver, one who would excel not just in the traditional academic subjects, but who would also have benefitted from holistic education, be better developed intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically. It also seeks to address some of the imbalances that have arisen in Malaysian education: a gender gap has arisen, with boys falling well behind girls in academic achievement, and, predictably, rural schools failing to match urban school results.

States with a high proportion of rural schools, especially Sabah and Sarawak, perform poorly compared to those states with large urban areas. Given that many of Malaysia’s poorest people work the land this is hardly surprising. As might be expected, there is a correlation between socio-economic status and educational achievement.

A trend that might be considered divisive is that increasing numbers of ethnic minorities are registering at national-type schools. In 2000 92% of Chinese had registered at such schools and by 2011 the figure was 96%. For Tamil speakers during the same two years the numbers had increased from 49% to 56%. 90% of the children in national schools in 2011 were Malay. (A small number of children were also enrolled in private Chinese and religious schools at secondary level.) While Malaysia prides itself on racial integration, and this is one of the avowed aims of the Blueprint, the fact that the different races continue to prefer different schools suggests problems for interethnic relations and national identity.

A further issue, and one that concerns Brunei as well, is the poor performance of boys at all educational levels – a gender gap that is increasing. 70% of Malaysia’s university students are girls, a figure that closely matches Brunei’s own gender imbalance in higher education.

As far as language education is concerned, the Blueprint acknowledges that while satisfactory proficiency is being achieved in Bahasa Malaysia (Standard Malay), the same is not true of English language standards. The proposal is that after three years of schooling every child should achieve 100% basic literacy in Bahasa Malaysia and English language.

Bilingual proficiency is just one of a number of skills that the plan seeks to enhance. The others are knowledge, thinking skills, leadership skills and ethics and spirituality. It is also hoped that the country’s races will overcome their differences to promote national identity.

Among the concrete measures to achieve these goals is the plan for a common curriculum from 2014 and remedial training for teachers and pupils who fall behind expectations. One of the plans is for 70,000 teachers to undergo a Cambridge Placement Test to determine who already has the necessary communication skills and who need further training. The Blueprint has also identified the need to transform teaching into a profession of choice. (This assumes that many current teachers chose the profession reluctantly.) To achieve this, higher caliber and better trained individuals will be recruited. Teachers will be given less administrative work to do and promotion will be performance based. It is also suggested that poorer teachers will be redeployed into administrative work. (There is some irony here, given that currently, in both Malaysia and Brunei, the most capable teachers are often ‘promoted’ to administrative posts as these allow greater opportunity for further promotion and better salaries!)
While stressing the need to promote teaching as a profession, there is no mention of commensurate salaries, without which it seems highly unlikely that the best graduates will be attracted to teaching.

The Blueprint is indeed ambitious, especially with regard to language attainment. In addition to achieving 100% biliteracy, the plan is to add an additional language by 2025. Given that the current pass rate for the Malaysian equivalent of the British Ordinary Level examination (the ‘O’ level) at credit grade in Bahasa Malaysia is 84% for Malays; 63% for Chinese and 57% for Tamils, while for English language the percentage of pupils gaining a credit grade is 23% for Malays; 42% for Chinese and 35% for Tamils. Even with extra training for teachers, better teaching and new methodology, a move from these figures to a 100% pass rate for all seems unlikely.

**Brunei’s Strategic Plan, 2012-2017**

The Strategic Plan of Brunei’s Ministry of Education and Malaysia’s Blueprint have much in common, with both stressing the need for better holistically trained children who become lifelong learners. Perhaps significantly, given that Brunei has been using a bilingual education system for almost 30 years, Brunei’s Plan does not specifically mention the need for children to be bilingual. In Brunei this now appears to be accepted as a given. Of course, not all pupils graduate from school with equal language competencies, but all Bruneian children do graduate with some competency in both languages. The Plan mentions spiritual, mental, physical, leadership and entrepreneurship skills, among others, but while adding the need for good communicators it does not particularly stress that skill - although public and private sector employers have stressed the need on numerous occasions.

**Conclusion**

What is perhaps most telling in both countries is the transition of education, particularly bilingual education, from a nationalist issue to become an economic issue. For Malaysia in particular, language medium in schools has been a political football. Today, however, the need for lifelong learning, for flexible school leavers with good communication and ICT skills is now regarded as paramount and academic needs may finally be replacing political needs. Such skills invariably require competency in English, especially in dealing with international markets, which is the case in the globalized markets in which Malaysia and Brunei operate. Nevertheless, both countries wish to ensure that their national languages are maintained, learned and used by all citizens. Malaysia will presumably continue to allow National-type schools that provide the sort of language medium favoured by the Chinese and Tamils, given that these are large minorities within the country and thus carry some influence come elections. Brunei will continue to teach through Standard Malay and English, with Chinese and Arabic offered at the few Chinese and Arabic schools respectively. (Despite being the country’s common first language and main lingua franca, it is very unlikely that Bahasa Brunei (Brunei Malay) will ever play a role in the school curriculum.)

For the first time since similar education plans were prepared for both countries in the 1950s, the education systems of Malaysia and Brunei will have much in common, particularly with regard to bilingual education and the role of Malay and English.
References


**Biographical Note**

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**Keywords**

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