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Language planning in its historical context in Brunei Darussalam

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Although Brunei is one of the oldest established states in Southeast Asia, education planning and language planning in particular are recent phenomena. Basic formal education, limited to a small number of boys only, was introduced in 1912 while language planning was only vaguely described in the 1950s and then formally as a language-in-education plan in 1984. This chapter analyses present language planning in relation to its historical context. In particular, it examines why two non-Bruneian languages, Standard Malay and English, emerged as the current mediums of education in the country's schools. Brunei's geography, its recent history and current economic and political events all contribute to the present status of language planning in Brunei.

Keywords: language planning, Bruneians, post-war development, educational policy, bilingual education

1. Introduction

Negara Brunei Darussalam, to give the country its full title (henceforth Brunei), is a small sultanate on the north coast of Borneo. It has a coastline of 161 km along the South China Sea and a total land area of 5,765 sq km. The country is bounded by the much larger Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah. Part of Sarawak actually separates one Brunei district, Temburong, from the rest of the country.

Brunei is the third largest oil producer in Southeast Asia (henceforth SEA), producing 163,000 barrels a day, and is the fourth largest producer of liquefied natural gas in the world. Thus the oil and gas industry is obviously of key importance to Brunei, playing by far the biggest role in the country's economy. The country has a small garment manufacturing industry, as well as agricultural and fishing industries, but all other industries in the country are overshadowed by oil and gas. The government is the single biggest employer in the country, employing approximately one third of the labour force.

The 2004 census returned a population of 357,800 people. Of this number, 237,100 (66.2%) were recorded as coming from the majority Malay indigenous community; 12,300 (3.4%) from other indigenous groups; people of Chinese origin numbered 40,200 (11.2%) and people from other non-specified races 68,200 (19%).

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, with His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei as head of faith. Other faiths that are practiced in the State include Christianity and Buddhism.

2. The people and their languages

The brief demographics of Brunei was described in Chapter 4 of this volume. This section gives a more detailed coverage on the topic. For such a small country, Brunei has a diverse population and a number of speech communities. As a result of its geography, seven distinct Malay communities (*Belait*, *Bisaya*, Brunei Malay, *Dusun*, *Kedayan*, *Murut* and *Tutong*) as well as two other non-indigenous communities (*Iban* and *Kelabit*) 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, inter-marriage and relocation for purposes of work, education or family mean that the former ethnic divisions are now breaking down.

Until 1991 it was assumed that the seven Malay communities in Brunei all spoke dialects of the same language. However, research by Nothofer (1991) dispelled this notion. He showed that the principal dialects of Malay spoken in Brunei include only Brunei Malay, *Kampong Ayer* (meaning water village, a large stilted village next to the country's capital) *Kedayan* and Standard Malay, but exclude the other five indigenous codes. Thus *Belait*, *Bisaya*, *Dusun*, *Murut* and *Kedayan* should not be considered dialects of Malay but as separate languages.

Locally, the most widely used local dialect of Malay is Brunei Malay, which is assumed to have its origins in the *Kampong Ayer* dialect. However, the dialect that is used in official correspondence and which is taught in schools is Standard Malay, which originated in West Malaysia.

Other significant language communities in the country are *Iban* and *Kelabit*. While indigenous to Borneo, these communities are not indigenous to Brunei, having crossed into the country from neighbouring Sarawak. Similarly, a small community of *Penan* people, perhaps numbering only 51 people (Martin & Sercombe 1992), also resides in the country. Apart from the Bornean people, the other significant ethnic group is the Chinese who, as stated earlier, make up 11.2% of the country's population.

Mandarin is the *lingua franca* of the Chinese community, with the two most dominant communities being *Hokkien* and *Hakka* (Niew 1989, 1991). However, it should be noted that many young Chinese now use English as their first language.

In addition to these local people, the remaining 19% of the country's population is comprised of "other races", referring to the country's large expatriate foreign workforce. This consists of large numbers of construction and manual labourers from the Indian sub-continent, Indonesia and the Philippines. In addition, together with Malaysia and Singapore, these countries also provide many of the country's doctors, engineers, nurses and middle managers. Many of the country's teachers and other professionals come from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. As will be described, Brunei was formerly almost totally dependent on its foreign workforce, but increasingly most technical and professional positions are being localized.

All the languages described above are used in Brunei today. However, only three, Malay, in its various forms, Chinese and English, are likely to be encountered on a regular basis, especially in urban areas. Today, Bruneians from whichever background are familiar with and use Brunei Malay, except when they know that they are talking to someone from their own language community. Similarly, most Bruneians, particularly the young and better educated, know English and often switch codes between this language and whichever form of Malay they are using. Official notices and road signs throughout the country are written in either Standard Malay or English. Notices on shop fronts are written in *Jawi* script (a form of written Malay derived from Arabic) and English (as well as Chinese, if it is a Chinese business). Sign boards, official notices and advertisements are only presented in these languages, never in any of the country's other languages. Thus, both publicly and privately, aside from Brunei and Standard Malay, the country's other languages are not being promoted or widely used.

It is also very important to note here that while Standard Malay, Chinese and English have strong literary histories, the same is not true of the other languages. Brunei's indigenous languages have an oral tradition but not a written one. Thus there are no texts, dictionaries, reference works or, therefore, teaching-learning materials that potential students could use.

3. Language planning: The early years

Tracing the origins of Brunei's present language-in-education policies is relatively easy because formal education is a recent phenomenon in the Sultanate and the history of the country's educational development has been well documented.

Although Brunei was once an important regional power, by 1906 its political survival was in jeopardy and the country turned to Britain for protection from its avaricious neighbours (see Cleary & Eaton 1992). Thus began a close relationship between Brunei and Britain that has continued to this day: a relationship that, among other things, has greatly shaped Brunei's education system.

From 1906, Brunei became a British Protected State, with a British Resident who advised the Sultan, the ruler of the country, on all matters other than those pertaining to religion. For the most part, Brunei continued to manage its own affairs, safe in the knowledge that it was protected from outside aggression by Britain. For his part, the British Resident provided the same sort of advice to the Sultan and his government that was being given to rulers of the various Malay states that now constitute Malaysia. Initial advice concentrated on transport, communication and health care. By 1911, however, some attention was being given to education. Between 1914 and 1918, four vernacular schools for boys were established in the country, although no further schools were added till 1929.

In 1923, oil was discovered in Brunei and this was to transform the country from an economic backwater into a comparably wealthy state. The development and exploitation of the country's oil and natural gas reserves did not have an immediate social or economic impact on the country. Rather, the change was slow, with a gradual appreciation of the benefits and problems that the oil industry could bring. Initially, of course, there was the revenue. In 1909, Brunei had enjoyed revenues of GBP27,640; in 1919, this figure was GBP132,300 and, by 1929, GBP145,800.¹ Throughout the 1930s, however, as oil fields were developed, so income improved. By 1939, state revenues had risen to GBP1,274,644, or almost ten times what they had been ten years earlier. Brunei was on the path to becoming what it is probably most famous for being today – a small oil rich sultanate.

It was those Bruneians who initially came into contact with the oil workers who had the most pressing 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.

One indication of the need to improve communications occurred in 1928 when "a start was made teaching elementary English at afternoon classes. These were attended by members of the Government Subordinate Staff and the Police" (McKerron 1929: 19). These were the first recorded English classes in Brunei. Such classes, and adult education in general, proved popular and have continued up to the present in one form or another.

As the number of schools increased and as greater attention continued to be given to education, so, inevitably, did questions arise 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). Given the transportation difficulties of the day, the Act only applied to boys speaking Malay as a first language. However, as a later Resident pointed out:

1. GBP refers to British Pound currency.

At least a quarter of the indigenous population of the state is composed of races whose mother tongue is not Malay, so 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.

Brunei experienced occupation by the Japanese from 1941 to 1945. During this period educational development came to a halt, although the Japanese did conduct some classes, in their own language, and the most promising pupils continued their studies in Japan itself.

4. Post-war development

After the War, the British Resident returned to Brunei and the country embarked on reconstruction. With growing revenues from oil and gas, the need for English-knowing Bruneians was becoming ever more apparent. Late in 1949, a professional Education Officer was appointed to the post of State Education Officer. From this point, the infrastructure for Brunei's present education system, including the resulting language-in-education policies, was laid.

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. In 1954, fuelled with the burgeoning revenues from the sale of oil, Brunei embarked on a five-year Development Plan for Education. As the Resident reported two years later:

Relatively vast wealth has fallen to their hands, and instead of being able to use it directly, themselves, they must perforce employ others to provide for them the services they need and their money can buy. (Gilbert 1957: 42)

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, no doubt in collaboration with the State Education Officer,

have 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 the age at which English medium education would be introduced to Bruneian pupils. For the next fifty-eight years, English medium education was introduced to pupils in Primary 4 (until the introduction of SPN21, a new National Education System that was introduced in January 2009 and which will be described briefly later in this chapter). However, unlike the early pupils who were selected for the English School and who had the benefit of individual attention from the State Education Officer, later pupils had no such support. Whether they were ready or had the aptitude, all pupils followed the same curriculum. 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.)

An important statement about language and culture, related to the introduction of English in Primary 4, is included in the Resident's Annual Report of 1951:

There are other matters, however, which must be considered with this type of school. One is the very important consideration as to the extent such schools should be made available; and again, what repercussions they would have in respect of the languages and cultures of the two main racial groups in Brunei, i.e. the indigenous races and Chinese. There is also the consideration of the impact upon the economy of the State if all children went direct to English schools. Again it is felt that the great majority of parents are in favour of their children acquiring their first and early education throughout the medium of the child's mother tongue in vernacular schools, with the study of English as a second language. This study ... begins in their third and fourth year. There is no reason, it may be said, providing the subject is taught by a qualified teacher, and providing also that sufficient time is devoted to it, why results should not be as good as those in recognised English schools? (Barcroft 1952: 33–34)

This is the first recorded statement linking language and culture in Brunei, and raises an issue that has been current ever since. On the issue of the preferred medium of education, Barcroft would seem to be contradicting earlier (and subsequent) statements: this subject appears to have given rise to some confusion. The last question, about whether the results can be as good as those from English schools, is still open to debate.

The assumed standard attained by graduates from such schools is also vague. While parity with English schools was the objective, this does not necessarily assume a particularly high level of attainment for all pupils. In 1953, the same author reports:

Thus, pupils who enter a Malay School at 6 years of age and make formal progress through the six Primary Classes would at the age of 12 be able to take up an Artisan Course where Primary V English is required as the basic qualification. (Barcroft 1953: 40)

On the assumption that a sufficient command of English to undertake an Artisan Course translates to only a minimum competency in the language, then clearly the language proficiency expectations of graduates from the Malay medium were very limited, more so than the previous year's statement might suggest.

It is also informative to note that the "great majority of parents" favoured the mother tongue. But which mother tongue? The writer is almost certainly assuming that this is Malay, which would have been far from the reality for many children at that time, and certainly not Standard Malay. This suggests a naïve appreciation of the country's linguistic mosaic.

By the completion of the Development Plan in 1959, 15,006 pupils were enrolled in the State's schools, 30% of whom were girls.

The State Constitution was also drawn up in 1959. It states:

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 Government Publication 1959)

The Article stipulates that English might be used with Malay for a further period of five years for all official purposes and thereafter until dictated by written law; the assumption being that Malay would eventually replace English, and quickly, for all official business. Sheik Adnan notes that:

A survey carried out to find out the wishes of the people before the drawing up of the State Constitution indicated that there was unanimous support for choosing Malay as the official language. (Sheik Adnan 1983: 10)

The choice of Malay (Standard Malay, not Brunei Malay) as the national language was to have implications for the choice of language within any National System of Education. It draws attention to the perceived instrumental demand for English and the demand for Malay as an integrative language bound with the heritage and culture of the local population.

In 1959, a Central Advisory Committee on Education appointed two Malaysians, Aminuddin Baki and Paul Chang, to advise the Brunei Government on general policy and principles to be followed in education. Having spent only two weeks in Brunei, and using the Malaysian Tun Razak Education Report of 1956 as the source of their recommendations, Baki and Chang presented their report.

The recommendations of the Report were accepted by the Government and subsequently became the National Education Policy of 1962. This Report places "an emphasis on the need to foster a common loyalty to all the children of every race under a national education system and policies" (Brunei Government Publication 1972: 3).

National unity is a recurring theme throughout both the Malaysian and Bruneian reports. The Razak Report states:

We believe further that the ultimate objective of the educational policy of this country must be to bring together the children of all races under a national education system in which the national language is the main medium of instruction though we recognise the progress towards this goal cannot be rushed and must be gradual. (Ministry of Education, Federation of Malaya Publication 1956)

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. Both countries are multilingual and multiethnic (although this is more immediately obvious in Malaysia than in Brunei). For both countries national unity and a clear sense of national identity was of great importance. Other issues such as syllabus design, teacher supply and so forth were still being considered and worked on, but, at the macro level, focus was on the integrity of these newly independent states and assurances were needed that the various peoples could work together for the common good.

Brunei, however, failed to implement the Baki-Chang Report or the National Education Policy that followed it. While preparations for its implementation were being made, an insurrection broke out in the country. Although the insurrection was quickly squashed, the normal routine of the country was severely affected, including plans that had yet to be implemented. Instead, after the trouble, the country and government tried to re-establish themselves, going back to practices and procedures that had existed before the insurrection. In the process, the proposed education changes seem to have been dropped.

Throughout the 1960s, the Government continued to add to the number of schools, teachers and, of course, pupils attending school. Development was across the board at both primary and secondary level and included both Malay and English medium Government schools. The number of girls in schools had grown enormously so that, by this time, there were almost as many girls enrolled in schools as boys.

The question of language medium, however, had not been resolved. 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 mediums, with books from Britain and Malaysia respectively. An Education Commission, begun in 1970, subsequently presented the Report of the Education Commission, 1972, which called for the implementation of the 1962 Education Policy.

This Report provided the basic structure and procedures for the present Ministry of Education. What was not implemented, however, was the very first recommendation:

1. to make Malay as the main medium of instruction in National Primary and Secondary Schools as soon as possible in line with the requirements of the Constitution (Brunei Government Publication 1972: 9)

The commissioners went on to quote the country's constitution and national unity as well as to provide sound educational reasons for adopting Malay. It also recommended that, until such time as Brunei's own system had been prepared, the country should adopt the Malaysian system of education.

Once again, however, fate intervened to prevent the introduction of Malay medium education. In 1974, political and diplomatic relations between Brunei and Malaysia deteriorated, to the extent that Bruneians studying in Malaysia were recalled and the option of adopting the Malaysian system of education was cancelled. Further, Brunei had no diplomatic relations with Indonesia, the only other country with Malay medium universities, so it could not send its students there. There was no problem for English medium students, as they had always gone to universities in the United Kingdom and to other English-speaking Commonwealth universities. The solution to resolve the problem for the Malay medium Bruneian students was to send them to English-speaking universities, but having first provided them with crash courses in the English language (up to two years) at private language schools in Britain.

5. From 1984 to 2008

The question of language medium was to remain unresolved for another ten years, until the introduction of the Education System of Brunei in 1984. This System, apart from fairly cosmetic changes, is still the one that is used in Brunei today. It has been well documented (Jones, Martin & Ozog 1993 and Jones 1996b, for instance) and needs little elaboration here. Briefly, the System attempts to weave the recommendations of the 1972 Report into a bilingual education system rather than a Malay-only model. The concept of solidarity and nation building is 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. Within the document, the "Concept of Bilingualism" is defined as:

- 3.1 The concept of a bilingual system is a means of ensuring the sovereignty of the Malay Language, while at the same time recognising the importance of the English Language. By means of the Education System of Negara Brunei Darussalam a high degree of proficiency in both languages should be achieved. (Brunei Government Publication 1984: 4)

It is clear that once again planners were at the mercy of circumstances. Without a doubt it was the events of 1962 and 1974 that had a decisive influence on the adoption of a bilingual education system in Brunei. A decision that might appear to have been far-sighted, given the subsequent decisions of other countries, notably Malaysia, to adopt such systems themselves was made not for any pedagogic reasons but because of the circumstances of the day. How much the lack of Malay medium tertiary education was a factor is indicated by point 3.2 of the System:

3.2 This recognition of the importance of the English Language is partly based on an assumption of its importance for academic study, and thus its ability to facilitate the entry of students from Brunei Darussalam to institutions of higher education overseas where the medium of instruction is English. Such a perception may, of course, be subject to review should Brunei Darussalam itself be able, in the future, to provide its own facilities for higher education. (Brunei Government Publication 1984: 4)

As it is, Brunei has been able to provide its own facilities for higher education, but the majority of programmes in these institutions are English medium, reflecting the actual demand from students and employers. (In addition to Universiti Brunei Darussalam, the country's Institute Teknologi Brunei was upgraded recently to the status of a university. As its title suggests, it offers engineering and technology courses and these are all taught in English. However, two other institutes of higher learning, a religious teacher training college and a newly created Islamic University, offer the majority of their subjects in Malay and Arabic.) Since 1984, there has been an enormous upsurge in the amount of English being used worldwide, and thus the demand today from Bruneian students is mostly for English medium programmes. Once again, events have overtaken the planners.

6. From January 2009

In January 2009, Brunei introduced a new National Education System for the 21st century, locally referred to as SPN21. Among other objectives, SPN21 aims to create better holistic learning, create a pupil-centred rather than teacher-centred learning environment and better prepare pupils for life in the 21st century. Clearly, the Ministry of Education sees an increasingly important role for English in its planning and pupils now learn Mathematics and Science, in addition to the English Language itself, through the medium of English from Primary 1. The debate about whether this is beneficial for bilingual language acquisition or whether it will actually improve all round ability is another matter. The bottom line is that more English is being used in Brunei schools at an earlier age than ever before. (Of course, given that the majority of the country's primary teachers are locals and thus share a common first language with their pupils, actual classroom language use may not be as officially prescribed.)

It is too soon to argue whether this new system has been successful or not. However, it has certainly not been without its critics. At a recent language forum, three local Malay language experts expressed concern that the new education system lays less stress on Malay and more on English. They are concerned that Malay has been "sidelined" from daily life and that in "20 to 30 years from now we will face a language tsunami in the country" (The Brunei Times 2009).

Otherwise, there has been no obvious public disapproval. It should be noted that parents with the financial means are in the habit of sending their young children to English medium pre-schools and kindergartens on the assumption that this will give their children an academic and language advantage when they start primary school. In addition, many of these parents want to see more English being used at an early age, presumably on the assumption that this will help their children when they eventually enter the job market. In effect, therefore, the government might appear to be giving parents exactly the sort of education that they want, hence the lack of objection.

7. The situation today

In his 2005 PhD thesis, Noor Azam Haji-Othman provides a detailed account of *Changes in the Linguistic Diversity of Negara Brunei Darussalam*. Among other things, this provides an analysis of how and why Bruneians have moved from using one language medium to another. Perhaps most pertinent to this chapter are his observations on the use and spread of English in Brunei, particularly since he had not intended to mention this language at all but to concentrate solely on Bruneian languages.

During his research, which he attempted to conduct solely in Brunei Malay, or the other local languages that he knows, *Tutong* and *Dusun*, the role of English in peoples' lives was repeatedly brought up. Noor Azam remarks that "English was constantly being referred to by the informants throughout the discussions about indigenous languages as though it were an indigenous member of the language ecology" (Noor Azam 2005: 203). In fact, Noor Azam notes that some of Brunei's new generation have shifted to English, especially among the elite and well educated. As Noor Azam explains, there are a number of possible explanations for this.

Historically, Britain played a far more benign role in Brunei than it did in countries that were colonized. The country appears to have helped Brunei's development rather than hindered it and thus its actions were favourably received. In addition, Brunei's royalty has close personal relations with Britain's royalty; the armed forces of both countries cooperate closely and many Bruneians study in British schools and universities. And most important, the English language has always been associated in Brunei with education while over the last thirty years it has also become the dominant world language and one of the two languages used in the country's bilingual education system. Thus the language and Britain have been seen in a positive way. Nowadays, however, the historical ties are far less important to the spread and use of English than

its utilitarian value. Noor Azam goes so far as to suggest that a Bruneian "could now be defined as a Malay-English bilingual" (Noor Azam 2005: 239).

8. Conclusion

As I hope this chapter has demonstrated, Brunei has a language-in-education policy that has evolved in response to economic, political and international influences. It is one that began monolingually 100 years ago to provide education to boys, but which, after fifty years, encompassed education for girls as well. As the nation forged its own identity, so the various races and languages used for education came under one controlling influence. Latterly, the demand for bilingual education became apparent and this has recently morphed into a new system that gives even more prominence to English.

With the introduction of SPN21, Brunei's Ministry of Education has clearly signalled its intention of promoting the use of English in schools to a greater extent than it did under the previous bilingual education system. Whether the new system will succeed is not yet apparent, but it has already created concern about the long-term use of Malay.

In a sense, Brunei has its own Malay dilemma – how much teaching should be conducted through this language to ensure its continued use and vitality in the country and how much should be taught through English to ensure that pupils fully master that language? It is a question that perhaps other countries throughout SEA have to grapple with. Finding the right educational formula and balance is crucial for all.

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