THE MALAYSIAN EFL LANGUAGE PLANNING AND POLICY AND THE IMPACT ON EFL READING PROFICIENCY: A REVIEW

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Abstract

Within the Malaysian setting, the English language is a foreign language that is widely used and has gained its status as a prominent linguistic liaison not only in the political, economic and social domains, but also within the educational context. Hailed as a lingua franca, the English language maintains its significance at the global level and due to such status, it has been made a mandatory subject at the elementary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions in Malaysia. The purpose of this paper is to present the review of English as a foreign language (EFL) in terms of its historical path and its connection to EFL literacy issues within the Malaysian educational context. The historical review of the Malaysian education with regards to EFL reveals that the mandatory inclusion of the English language in the school and higher institutions' curriculum could be traced back as a linguistic culturalization effect of the British colonization. The review also indicates that the pattern of inclusion of the EFL in the Malaysian educational system seems to be developmental in nature but with some patterns of consistency at the initial stage of its inclusion. As with regards to the EFL literacy issues, the review shows that the shifting from the English medium to the Malay medium in Malaysian public schools could be inferred as one of the causes of the emergence of issues in the EFL literacy amongst Malaysian learners. The outcomes of the review have implications on EFL policy and curriculum development as well as their future revisions in the Malaysian context.

Keywords: EFL, secondary education, curriculum, literacy, educational policy

1 INTRODUCTION

English has been widely acknowledged as an international language (Tsui & Tollefson, 2006). According to Bruthiaux (Ridge, 2004), "English has all the key characteristics that make it likely to remain the dominant worldwide language" (p. 415). The importance of the English language has been established universally as a tool for social, economic, and political success (Phillipson, 1992; World Bank, 1995). Therefore, many non-English speaking countries promote English proficiency as an effort toward modernization and internalization (Pennycook, 1994; Tollefson, 1995) and so is Malaysia. Malaysia has had a history of valuing the EFL

instruction since the British occupation from the 18th to the 20th century. Although currently the medium of instruction in Malaysian schools is the national language (Bahasa Malaysia), the English language continues to be highly valued and remains as a mandated subject beginning from pre-school to university level. Despite the emphasis on the English language in the Malaysian setting, it is a phenomenon of why there is a persistent literacy issues in English as a foreign language (EFL). Hence, a review was called for the Malaysian EFL education in terms of its policy historical path and how it might have its share in EFL literacy issues within the Malaysian educational context.

2 THE MALAYSIAN EFL EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

In the Malaysian educational system, English as a foreign language (EFL) formal instruction begins in elementary education and extends from Year 1 to 6 or the American educational system equivalence of Grades 1st to 6th; that is from age 7 to 12. The English language is a compulsory subject at each grade level and this subject is one of the subjects assessed in the norm-referenced test known as Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (Elementary School Assessment) at the end of the 6th Grade in elementary school.

Formal EFL instruction continues to be taught as a compulsory subject during secondary education from age 13 to 17 from Grades 7th to 11th or Form 1 to Form 5 respectively. Malaysian public secondary schools comprise at the conclusion of secondary school, students have to sit for a standardized norm-referenced entrance test known as Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or the Malaysian School Certificate. At present, students' performance in the English language subject on this test is not a determinant for university enrollment. Instead, secondary school graduates who seek entry into public universities and colleges have to obtain a minimum required EFL proficiency level on an EFL test known as Malaysian University English Test (MUET), developed and managed by the Malaysian Examination Syndicate.

In Malaysia, currently, there are more than 31 public and private universities combined (www.etawau.com/edu/IndexUniversity.htm). There are two 4-year public universities that use English and Arabic as the mediums of instruction instead of using the national language, Bahasa Malaysia. At these universities, courses other than Islamic Studies are commonly taught in the English language. However, almost all private universities in Malaysia use English as the language of instruction. Due to the importance of the English language, it is a required subject at every educational level in the Malaysian educational system. Although the English language is made mandatory at all school levels, many past studies have reported that Malaysian learners continuously facing difficulties in the English language.

3 A REVIEW OF MALAYSIAN EFL EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

Before reviewing the historical path of Malaysian English as a foreign language (EFL) educational policy, it is important to describe the nature of language policy decision-making in the Malaysian context. Gill (2006) described the Malaysian language policy and planning processes to be "top-down" instead of "bottom-up" (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997, p. 196) in nature. The top-down mode constitutes "people with power and authority who make language-related decisions for groups, often with little or no consultation with the ultimate language learners and users" (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997, p. 196).

English education in Malaysia began in the early 19th century (Powell, 2002) during the British colonization and was made a compulsory subject in all primary and secondary schools (Course of Studies Regulation 1956, II). However, during the British colonial era, there was no consistent English language educational policy (Muthusami, 1987) due to the British *divide and rule* ideology. During this era, the Malay ethnicity in particular shunned English education for the fear of being Christianized (Asmah, 1996). However, the prosperity of crop agriculture in the early 20th century resulted in more Malays hired in the government sector and by the 1930s, the Malays demanded from the British for better English education for employment purpose.

During pre-independence, the Malay language and English held equal status in education. An education ordinance in 1952 proposed a Malay or English primary schools despite the emphasis in the Razak Committee (1955) on the importance of having a single system of education and language instruction. Although primary schools used Malay as the medium of instruction, contrarily, the medium of instruction for secondary schools was allowed to be either in Malay or English. However, on the eve of independence, the Malaya government at that time realized that bilingual educational system may cause divisiveness among the citizens. Therefore, the Education Ordinance (1957) proposed the Malay-medium and the National-type Chinese and Tamil primary schools with English taught as one of the language subjects. The 1957 constitution declared Malay as the national language with special provision for the official use of English (Foo & Richards, 2004).

In 1960, the Rahman Talib Report emerged and required all Chinese secondary schools to convert their

medium of instruction either to English or Malay resulting in most Chinese secondary schools switching to English. At the end of the tenth year of independence, in order to maintain educational standards (Asmah, 1979), the National Language Act (1967) proposed that English be retained as a required subject in all schools with secondary schools being shifted to Malay-medium schools. The National Language Act (1971) re-emphasized the leading roles of the Malay language and the secondary roles of English within the Malaysian educational context (Heng & Tan, 2006). In vernacular or national type Tamil and Chinese primary schools, the English language is taught beginning from the Third Grade.

"English was relegated to the position of a second language in the education system, a language which is compulsory to take, but not to pass, for all Malaysian schoolchildren" (Gill, 2006, p. 84). Due to the low status given to EFL, the English subject has recently become somehow marginalized since it is not a requirement to advance to the next school level. By the early of 1980s, all schools and universities in Malaysia except the International Islamic University shifted from English to Malay as the medium of instruction. "A credit in English was made unnecessary as a condition for university entry in 1988; and in 1995 it became official that English was not a compulsory subject to obtain the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*) after 11 years of school education" (Heng & Tan, 2006, p. 309). As a result of this situation, for the past three decades, proficiency in the English language among Malaysian students at all school levels continues to decline, resulting in a significant university graduate unemployment (Lee, 2004).

The English language competency issues have raised concerns in Malaysia. The issue of competence in English among students regained attention of language policy makers in Malaysia in the 1990s (Ridge, 2004). With political stability, the Malaysian government made effort to reinstate English language competence via its educational systems. Mahathir Mohammad, Malaysian fourth prime minister (1981-2004) was concerned with how English was cast aside in the educational system (Mahathir, 1986) despite the importance that this language should be acquired "for its utilitarian value, for employment and for guaranteeing access to the science and technology of the West" (Gopinathan, 2003, p. 21).

While the native language is deemed to have an integrative value in non-English speaking countries, English is considered to have a greater instrumental value for economic advancement and in the case of Malaysia, the number of less proficient students in the English language is becoming more prominent (Powell, 2002). This situation exists despite the fact that in 1985, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has increased the number of hours for English language instruction (Kalaverny, 1986) to enhance English language proficiency among students. Subsequent efforts was made in the mid-1990s when the Malaysian government increased provisions for the English language to be the medium of instruction for content areas at the university level such as science, medicine, engineering, and law (Powell, 2002) as well as technical areas (Ridge, 2004). The University of Malaya, the first university established in Malaysia, for example, requires a high attainment in English for entrants (Asmah, 1996). However, at the post-secondary level, for a three-year diploma, students in technical disciplines such as engineering are required to obtain a pass in English and a credit for a Secretarial Science course (Shukor et al., 1993). Nonetheless, post-secondary institutions do not require a pass in English at the certificate level. This reduces the importance English and the motivation of post-secondary students to acquire the English language.

In 2002, the change of paradigm concerning the importance of English for knowledge-based purpose has resulted in a new English language policy with the emergence of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) for pre-tertiary education students.

According to Heng and Tan (2006), this test was perceived as:

> Providing the essential continuity in the exposure and use of English for students leaving the general school system. In other words, students who aspired to further their studies in local tertiary institutions would sit the MUET in order to qualify for entry. This gave the impetus for English to play a bigger role in the national educational system, even though the MUET was limited to the promotion of general academic English (p. 310).

As stated by Heng and Tan (2006), the MUET sustains the importance of acquiring the English language up to the tertiary level by making the MUET a requirement for university entry or graduation. The MUET is a norm-referenced entrance exam that qualifies college students to enroll in Malaysian public universities. However, because so many students do not pass the MUET, they are are still accepted into the public universities but are required to achieve the minimum requirement on MUET in order to graduate of which for these students, this entrance exam becomes an exit exam for graduation. Students are allowed to take this test without limit until they obtain the minimum requirement. The implementation of MUET as a ticket for entry to higher institution suggests a continued emphasis on the English language in the Malaysian educational context.

The emphasis on English language competency among Malaysian graduates was further enforced by 2003 in which a new English language policy was implemented to teach science and mathematics in English to junior primary and secondary school students as part of a pragmatic approach to enhance the competency in the English language. In the same year, as a complement to the introduction of science and mathematics in English, a genre-specific approach to learning English known as English for Science and Technology was also introduced at the upper secondary school level beginning from Form Four or 10th Grade, as an additional subject to the existing general English language subject. The new English language policy implementation was also partly due to studies conducted by the Malaysian Ministry of Education, which showed that the majority of local graduates from Malaysian universities possessed a poor command of English, which led to the failure in getting employment from the private sector (Star, 29 June 2003 as cited in Gill, 2005). Malaysian public universities were also affected by this new language policy. "All public universities will also have to switch to English as the medium of instruction in science and technology subjects in 2005 when the first batch of the High School Certificate of Malaysia (STPM) students taught in English enter university" (Sunday Star, as cited in Kaur & Thiyagarajah, 1999). Nonetheless, there is no evidence insofar which indicates that introducing English for Science and Technology and teaching science and mathematics in English has helped improve students' English language proficiency and competency especially in EFL literacy. Hence, upon the historical review of the EFL educational policy, it is important to review if it might have some possible connection to EFL literacy issues within the Malaysian context.

4 EFL READING ISSUES IN THE MALAYSIAN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Many studies had been conducted in the Malaysian contexts concerning issues in EFL education (e.g., Abdullah & Sidek, 2012; Baharun et. Al., 2016; Saad et al., 2016a; 2016b; Sidek, 2009, 2010b, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2013a, 2013b; Sidek & Abdullah, 2013; Sidek, Abdullah & Rahim, 2013b; Sidek, Abdullah, Rahim & Mohamed, 2014; Sidek & Rahim, 2013, 2014, 2015; Sidek et al., 2016a, 2016b). One prominent EFL issue within the Malaysian setting is literacy, a phenomenon that is frequently reasoned to be connected to the EFL instructional practice.

Many (e.g., Nambiar 2005; Ponniah, 1993; Sidek, 2010a) have reported that it is a common practice at the Malaysian public secondary schools, instructional practice for EFL reading is often in the initiation-response-evaluation format (students read silently, teacher asks questions, students response and the teacher evaluates either the response is right or wrong). Ponniah (1993) contended that the teaching of reading in Malaysian schools often focuses on literal comprehension skills at the sentence level such as word recognition. According to Nambiar (2005), such practice implies that when teaching EFL reading students are trained to fulfill comprehension tasks without having the appropriate understanding of the entire text. Nambiar (2005) also added that it is customary in the Malaysian EFL reading classrooms that teachers' instructional focus is primarily on teaching students strategies to answer comprehension questions to prepare them for examinations, which are comprehension-based in nature. Oftentimes, the main aims are for students to get the right answers.

The following is a typical EFL reading lesson in Malaysian classrooms as described by Nambiar (2005):

Reading lessons are often conducted in a mechanistic manner with learners having to read a text first, underline difficult words and then use a dictionary to source the meaning of each word. Then the comprehension questions are used to identify the important ideas in the text. A very popular method employed in school is to get learners to identify main ideas in each paragraph and more often than not these main ideas are usually in the first few lines of each paragraph.
(http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=radha+nambiar-gopal)

Reading tasks such as described above show lack of cognitive demand in the training of EFL reading skills at the secondary school level in contrast to the cognitive demand in reading tasks that students are expected to engage in at the tertiary level. In addition, students are often taught to break the text into simpler segments to make it easier for them to understand the information without any instruction on how they should connect the dissected information into an integrated whole (Shih, 1992). According to LeVasan (1983), EFL reading instructional practices within the Malaysian context is highly influenced by the EFL reading assessments in which 70 percent of EFL comprehension assessments comprises direct reference type which influence the EFL reading teachers to be inclined toward such a teaching approach. Teaching students to merely get "the right answer" conforms to the Initiation-Response-Evaluation or IRE format, a method that has been argued to be less effective in assisting students to build understanding from texts (Beck & McKeown, 2006).

As a result of such training, students are merely able to perform short-answer questions and literal recalls, but fail to demonstrate the ability to infer and make connections among text ideas, a skill that is required in

content area reading (e.g., Kanagasabai, 1996; Nambiar, 2007; Ponniah, 1993). Students' inability in EFL reading becomes a more crucial issue especially for those studying at institutions where English is the medium of instruction. Not only do students not perform well on their EFL assessments, but their overall academic performance is also affected by their EFL reading ability (e.g., Ramaiah & Nambiar, 1993; Ramaiah, 1996; Faizah, Zalizan, & Norzaini, 2002).

A study by Kaur and Thiyagarah (1999) among EFL students at a public higher institution indicated that 48.6 percent of the respondents in the English Language and Literature Studies program rated their EFL reading comprehension ability as not being very efficient when reading materials in English in general as well as literary works. Based on the data in this study, it was concluded that students' enrolling at Malaysian universities merely have developing academic readiness due to lack EFL reading comprehension ability. As contended by some researchers (e.g., Kaur & Thiyagarah, 1999; Sidek, 2010c), reading in English plays a substantial role in meeting the academic demand at higher institution level in Malaysia. Therefore, academic literacy and achievements at the university level could be directly affected by students' ability to read and comprehend printed materials in English.

In Sidek's (2009) study, a survey conducted on EFL reading attitudes among students at a Malaysian public university in which one of its mediums of instruction is English. Among the popular students' responses are such as, "Reading in English is a daunting task for me", "Every time I tried to read in English I easily give up because I don't understand most of the words in the text", "I would be very proud if I could finish reading an English text and be able to understand what I read." The majority of the respondents admitted that being able to read and understand well in English is important and also reported that they do not have the reading comprehension skills that they need. Mustapha (1995, p. 28) contended based on her experience that at the university level, "many of the so-called "fluent" readers are still incapable of reading for comprehension. The problems become more prominent when they have to read for information and without the teacher close at hand to help them". This situation indicates that Malaysian university students are not self-regulated readers, a required condition for successful academic reading activities. As earlier mentioned, although students in Malaysia receive EFL instruction which includes reading comprehension instruction throughout elementary and secondary school, they are still facing with comprehension problems when reading in English at the university level.

5 DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The historical review of the Malaysian EFL education has revealed that at the language planning and policy level, a major shift in the EFL policy occurred in 1967 when the National Language Act was implemented in alignment to the proposition made in the Rahman Talib Report in 1960. All non-vernacular schools had shifted from using English as the medium of instruction to the native language, which is the Malay language or Bahasa Melayu. This implementation resulted in the Malay language being highly emphasized over the English language of which the English language began to be used only when teaching the English language subject. As the emphasis on the Malay language in Malaysian public schools beginning 1967 grew stronger, the emphasis on the English language became narrowed down to only in the English language class. Developmentally, the use of the English language amongst teachers and students inside and outside the classroom began to diminish as reflected by the present school context in Malaysia today. The amount and duration of exposure as well as the use of a language plays a role as a proxy of dominance in the rate of language learning (e.g., La Morgia, 2014; Place & Holf, 2011). Therefore, it can be inferred that Malaysian learners began to struggle with the English language as the result of the longitudinal adverse effect due to the shift in language policy, which brought the English language to its new lower hierarchy in comparison to the Malay language that has become dominant in all aspects of formal education. Due to the significantly less degree in emphasis on the English language, students have been receiving less exposure since instructional time that involves the English language has been prominently reduced in line of the national goal to inculcate the patriotism-based unity among the multi-ethnic Malaysians via the widespread use of the Malay language using education as the platform and a long-term vehicle. Adversely, such one-pronged vision has somehow overlooked the longitudinal impacts on the diminishing rate of students acquiring EFL, which leads to the deterioration of students' performance in the EFL until today. Nowadays, even if students performed well on EFL examinations, they have been reported to not be functional and competent beyond the EFL formal assessment domain (e.g., Mustapha, 1995).

Students' inability to function in the EFL reading beyond assessment has resulted in EFL reading issues in the Malaysian context (e.g., Faizah, Zalizan, & Norzaini, 2002; Kaur and Thiyagarah, 1999; Ramaiah & Nambiar, 1993; Ramaiah, 1996; Sidek, 2009, 2010b, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2013a, 2013b; Sidek & Abdullah, 2013; Sidek, Abdullah & Rahim, 2013b; Sidek, Abdullah, Rahim & Mohamed, 2014; Sidek & Rahim, 2013, 2014, 2015; Sidek et al., 2016a) especially at the tertiary level of which the majority of

tertiary students at Malaysian higher institutions are faced with difficulties in EFL reading. This phenomenon of the lack of functional ability in the EFL reading amongst many Malaysian university students despite the longitudinal EFL reading preparation that the students receive beginning from the elementary until the end of the secondary school is an issue that can be connected to the factor of the EFL planning and policy. One factor that could be inferred to cause such a phenomenon is the shift of the instructional medium from the English language to the Malay language. This suggests that language planning and policy is a sensitive factor that affects the success of the learning of the EFL reading in specific and EFL learning in general. Therefore, at the EFL planning and policy level, the policy makers need to be aware of the relationship between what is planned and the policy that is implemented, in a direct manner, subsequently shapes the direction and the effectiveness of the curriculum.

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