Language Policy and Research on Technological Developments in English Language Teaching in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study examines the language policy and research on technological developments in English Language Teaching in Malaysia. It analyzes the country's language policy and research on technological development in language teaching which has greatly influenced innovations in English language teaching. In the 21st century coupled with technological development, the demand of English has resulted in changes to the teaching of English in schools, colleges and universities. It is evident that the exposure of students to technology has encouraged the integration of technology in English language teaching in Malaysia. The study reveals that the use of facebook, blogs, whatsapp and other technologically driven approaches in teaching English have become popular methodologies in teaching English. Due to rapid technological development, it is recommended that training for English language teachers is necessary in order to cope with the rapid demand for pedagogy that incorporates IT so as to meet the needs of technologically advanced learners.

Keywords: language policy, English language teaching, technological development, innovations

Introduction

Recent development in education has encouraged innovations in the teaching of English language in Malaysia. Such innovations exist as a result of changes in the language policy, development of information technology, modernization and globalization/ internationalization of education. Malaysia has experienced a number of changes in the education policy, massive developments in technology, rapid globalization/ internationalization and stiff competition among industries. As a result, the teaching of English language has become a major concern of

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the government and this has resulted in the introduction of new innovations, especially in the teaching of English as a second language.

Before discussing the research on innovations in English language teaching in Malaysia, it would be appropriate to present a brief history of the education language policy of the country as this has greatly influenced innovations in English language teaching.

English Language Policy in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multilingual society which consists of three major ethnic groups; Malays, Chinese, and Indians and there are also other minority groups like the Orang Asli and the ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak. Bahasa Malaysia or Malay is the national language and from an educational viewpoint English is the country's second most import language. Many people can speak English albeit with different levels of proficiency. The major languages spoken are Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese (Mandarin), and Indian (Tamil).

Before independence, English was the official language in Malaysia while the other languages - Malay, Chinese and Tamil were deemed vernaculars. However, Malay scholars believed that English in Malaysia "produced a detrimental effect on the development of the Malay language as it was confined as the language of the home and the medium of instruction of a limited number of primary schools, Malay was deprived of the opportunity to develop" (Karim Nik Safiah, 1981: 45). It would therefore be timely to "release the Malay from the shackles of British colonialism which was best represented in the vestiges of the English language" (Mitchell, 1993: 61). While there may be some truth to what the Malay nationalists and intellectuals felt about the development of Malay language and indigenous rights, the rationalizations remain rhetoric because the compelling reason for the accelerated use of Malay especially in education was according to Watson (1983), to some extent based on the belief that the non-Malays had done well in English medium schools and at tertiary institutions. The English educated urban non-Malays had dominated major commerce/ business sectors as well as the professions while the largely rural Malay population had been by-passed.

During independence in 1957, Malay was declared as the national language, a symbol of national unity, although less than 50% of the population at that time spoke Malay (Gill, 2004). According to Asmah Haji Omar (1997), Malay was chosen to fulfil this function because

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of "its dignity, its role as a lingua franca, its position as a major language, its possession of high literature, and the fact that it once had been an important language of administration and diplomacy in the Malay archipelago" (p.15).

Even before independence, political parties like the Malay UMNO and the Chinese MCA had agreed that Malay would be the national language via a memorandum in August, 1953. Thus there was little controversy over the acceptance of Malay as the national language and this has been confirmed by Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution. However, the Constitutional framers did not phrase Malay as the "official" language, a stamp that allows the language to be used for all official purposes. Consequently, from 1957 to 1967, English continued to fulfil this official role and would have continued unabated but for the rise in linguistic nationalism among Malay nationalists.

After independence, the leaders of the country chose to progress along a pragmatic path, pacifying minority communities of the continued role for their languages and at the same time assuring Malay nationalists of a greater role for Malay. At this time it was apparent that the nationalists would not accept the notion of a multilingual nation. Discontented Malay nationalists were unhappy with the slow progress in the institutionalisation of the Malay language in the country and sought to champion Malay in political domains (vis-à-vis the official language, the language of administration, education and for all formal and official purposes) (David and Govindasamy, 2003).

The Malay groups particularly the powerful Federation of Malaya School Teachers' Association and the Malay National Action Front, were also unhappy with the provisions of the 1967 National Language Act and criticized it as not enhancing the status of Malay as the primary language of the nation because the Act asked for the continued use of English (Mitchell, 1993). The opposition to continued use of English is understandable as Chai (1971) observes, "English came to be regarded not only as the language of colonial education but also, after independence, as an obstacle to the educational, social and economic advance of the majority of Malays" (p. 61). Their suspicion was confirmed by an important fact: there was a steady increase in enrolment in English medium secondary schools (Watson, 1983).

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The Ketuanan Melayu ideology (or Malay rights or ownership), that spurred nationalists to promote and encourage Malay was also highlighted in the former Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohomad's book, the Malay Dilemma- which is not surprising as he was a strong proponent of strengthened affirmative action for the Malays. Mahathir, in his highly one-time controversial book wrote that the Malays are the "definitive people" of Malaysia as they have a birthright guaranteeing them special privileges such as those outlined by Article 160 of the Constitution of Malaysia. The Article states that a Malay is one who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, adheres to Malay customs, and is domiciled in Malaysia (Shuid and Yunus, 2001). There were Malay nationalists who viewed that having other languages in educational domains were detrimental to the nation's unity. For instance, Syed Nasir Ismail, a Malay nationalist political leader during that period, insisted on closing down all Chinese schools in Malaysia as soon as possible, in order to make Malay the sole official language and to reduce competition (Lee Kuan Yew, 2000).

The Malay language as a medium of instruction was implemented in government schools but vernacular schools at least till primary level were allowed to remain. In order to enable students from vernacular schools to effectively transfer to Malay medium secondary schools, transitional classes called Remove Classes were introduced in 1960 (Rahman Talib Report). Pupils from Chinese, Tamil and at that point in time Malay medium primary schools, were required to undergo an extra year in these "remove classes" in the secondary school. This was to enable students from vernacular schools to become proficient in Malay or English as the situation required. With independence in 1957 and the consequent need for nation building Malay was made the national language of the country in 1967.

The Malay nationalist leaders also took the opportunity to assert that Malay should be used as a lingua franca to promote unity amongst the ethnic groups as it is stated in the Federal Constitution (Article 153) that Malay is the national language of Malaysia. Malay thus was seen as an identity that is shared by all Malaysians hence it was appropriate to learn it in order to be considered Malaysian.

The leaders, spearheaded by the Barisan Nasional, jointly agreed to reduce the influence of English as it was associated then with British imperialism. In the process, English schools were converted to the Malay-medium in West Malaysia by 1983 (Asmah Haji Omar, 1997),

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while English schools in Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) were converted by 1985 (Solomon, 1988: 46). The conversion of the English medium schools to Malay medium began in 1968 at a gradual pace and on a piecemeal basis (Solomon, 1988: 47). Initially, those subjects that could adopt the Malay language as a medium of instruction without difficulty were the first affected by the conversion process (Asmah Haji Omar, 1982: 15). From January 1968, all English medium primary schools were required to teach physical education, art and craft, local studies and Music in Malay in Standards 1, 2 and 3. More of the Arts subjects were taught in Malay before the shift to Malay occurred for the Science subjects. In fact, for a short period of time during this transitional phase some schools ran the same course in science subjects in two streams, namely, Malay and English. In 1976, all English medium primary schools were completely converted into schools where Malay was used as the medium of instruction and by 1982 all the former English medium secondary schools were converted to National Schools in Peninsular Malaysia (Solomon, 1988: 46). The Education Act was extended to Sarawak in 1977 and the change of the medium of instruction to Malay throughout the entire school system was completed in Sabah and Sarawak three years later i.e. in 1985.

To redress the imbalance, education was chosen as the primary mode for instituting changes. The language policy changes that came into effect in the country in the 70s included Malay replacing English as the medium of instruction in all English medium primary and secondary schools. This task was completed in 1978 and Malay was used in all university education. This exercise was to be completed in 1983 but in reality it took longer because of teething problems; the Higher School Certificate (A- level) and School Certificate (O-level) examinations (which were conducted by the Cambridge University) as well as other national examinations being offered in Malay. The A- and O-level examinations were replaced by the STPM and SPM, respectively and most importantly, students had to obtain a credit in Malay to be awarded the SPM certificate, the prerequisite to obtaining a tertiary education, government jobs, teacher training opportunities, etc.

The implementation of Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction for many years resulted in the deterioration of English proficiency in Malaysia (as compared to the proficiency of those who graduated from English medium schools during the British era) and despite the language being declared the second most important language in Malaysia, more and more local graduates found it difficult to get jobs. Twenty years after the implementation of

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Malay-medium education throughout the school and tertiary system, due to the emergence of globalization, the country's leaders realized that the fortification of the Malay language at the expense of the development of English was to the detriment of its people. In early 2002, it was reported in major newspapers that there were 24,000 unemployed graduates from the Malay community (The Star, May 6, 2002). It was also reported that many were unable to procure jobs because of their limited English language skills. The Malaysian Employers Federation Executive Director, Shamsuddin Bardan, explained, "employers were reluctant to hire local graduates because they were not able to communicate well in English…This is one of the reasons for the many unemployed Bumiputra graduates" (The Star, 2002b: 4).

Consequently, such demand for English in schools, colleges and universities has transformed the view of English language teaching in Malaysia. The emergence of information technology in the 21st century has greatly influenced innovations in the English language teaching in the country. We will now discuss the advantages of integrating technology in language teaching before discussing the research on innovations of using such technology in Malaysia.

English Language Teaching and Integration of Technology

Teaching English as a second language in Malaysia is becoming more challenging due to the decreasing motivation of young learners to learn the language when taught in more conventional or traditional approaches. The emergence of modern technology in the 21st century has resulted in learners wanting a more sophisticated approach which integrated several materials or techniques in the teaching of the English language.

As a result, teachers of English need to be more innovative in their teaching methods because today's students are no longer interested in old approaches in learning. Teachers must be aware of their students' needs. Since the notion of literacy has changed, the teaching approaches and materials must change accordingly. In fact, at present, both the students and teachers must have access to the "English language digital content" (Shariman, Abdul Razak, & Noor, 2014).

Technology helps to restructure and improve the classrooms with authentic activities that will enhance collaboration. It is also an effective tool for interpretative skills, information

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management and open inquiry. Consequently, it provides an excellent avenue for students' motivation, exploration and instruction in a multi-sensory diverse world. However, it must be emphasized that using technology for the teaching must be complemented with teachers who have the appropriate pedagogical skills as technology is only a tool. The challenge rests with the educators to effectively integrate such tools in appropriate places through out the curriculum (Wright, Wilson, Gordon, & Stallworth 2002; Barron & Orwig, 1995).

Before integrating technology in teaching, it is essential for educators to examine first the students' needs. This will help teachers to use strategies and think of ideas as to how technology can be integrated in their teaching. Studies show that sending English teachers to seminars, workshops and to pursue post graduate degrees help to enhance their competence in teaching the subject (Dumanig, 2005).

Traynor (2003) argues that using electronic communication technology helps students develop and enhance their knowledge and discover new things they might have not thought of without the aid of technology. Students can come to understand technology while technological tools help them tap into real experiences, fantasies and visions. Min Jung Jee (2011) explains that the use of technology enhances instruction specifically in the field of language instruction. However, the exploration of new technologies for teaching and learning requires time as well as a change in attitude of teachers and students so that they are able to properly use and apply these tools in teaching. Currently, some teachers who are not computer literate find it difficult to use computers in their respective classes. Although computers and multimedia instructional technology are now available in many campuses, the percentage of teachers using them remains low (Cuban, 2003). It is therefore necessary to equip teachers with skills in using technology to facilitate classroom learning efficiently and effectively.

Studies on the use of Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) have identified effective learning outcomes among college students and adult learners (Rouse, 2007; Dumanig, David & Jubilado, 2011). It is believed that CAI appeals to varied learning modalities and consequently meets the diverse needs of every student. With CAI students can learn at a comfortable pace and interact directly and continually with computers that provide immediate feedback and positive learning effects (Mustafa, Ashhan, and Turgay, 2011). As a result, many educational institutions today are investing much in technology to enhance students' learning.

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In addition, CAI helps students learn many specific skills at various levels, such as; elementary, secondary, college and adult education. CAI has positive effects on the achievement and development of students in different skills (Liao, 2007). In fact, the use of any computer software helps to enhance language teaching and learning (Sawhill, 2008). Computers play a valuable role in focusing students' attention, presenting content and facilitating students' understanding in a lecture (Rap, 2006). Computer programs designed to present information on a screen to students using an electronic blackboard allows an instructor to present similar kind of information as when he uses handouts or overhead transparencies. This shows that using CAI does not really deviate from the traditional approach of teaching, rather it modernizes traditional method using modern technology, and this makes learning easier The use of technology in teaching could be adapted to the type of form or function to be learned.

Research in Innovations in English Language Teaching in Malaysia

Undoubtedly, changes in the syllabi have to some extent influenced the use of technological innovations in ELT. Such innovations of English language teaching in Malaysia can be traced chronologically. In 1983, the structural approach of teaching English was introduced in three different approaches. In the primary level, the use of structural- situational approach was introduced, in the lower secondary school, the use of contextual based approach in teaching English was used and the final two years in secondary school, the communicative approach in teaching was used (Pandian, 2006). The structural approach is a teacher-centered approach where teachers tend to focus more in teaching the grammar rules rather than the learners' communication skills. Consequently, learners have a hard time using the English language in the actual communication context.

With the aim of enhancing the teaching of English in Malaysia, the use of communicative language teaching was introduced in 1980 which started in the upper secondary. The implementation of the communicative language teaching was to address the issues of the learners' inability to speak English in the actual context. However, the change created additional problems particularly to English language teachers who did not have training in the communicative language teaching approach.

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The development using this approach was planned carefully particularly the progress of teaching and learning the English language from the primary to the secondary. During the first six years, the concentration was more into the structure, vocabulary and the sounds of English but in the next three years the focus was on the structural patterns in context (Rajaretnam & Nalliah, 1999).

One major development of the communicative language teaching was the introduction of the New Primary Schools Curriculum or KurikulumBaru Sekolah Rendah (KBSR) and the Integrated Secondary Schools Curriculum or Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah menengah (KBSM). The emphasis of KBSR was to develop the learners' three R's such as reading, writing and arithmetic while the KBSM emphasized the integration of moral and spiritual values in English classes: reading, listening, speaking and writing (Pandian, 2006).

In the 1990s, Self- access leaning (SAL) approach in teaching English was introduced which emphasized that learners must develop the sense of responsibility for their own learning. According to Pandian (2006), the concept of SAL was that, every learner varies in their rates of learning; they also vary in their needs, interests, attitudes and aptitudes; they are responsible for their own learning; and teachers are creators of conducive classroom environment.

In the latter part of the 90s, class readers and literature in English language teaching was introduced. This means that the use of literature serves as the springboard in teaching the English language. In 1999, the implementation of the literature program was started in the secondary school. In 2000 it was introduced to Form One and Form Four learners, in 2001 it was introduced in Form Two and Form Five and in 2002 it was introduced to Form Three.

While introducing the literature program, the Ministry of Education started to conceptualize the Malaysian Smart School. The idea was to advance the teaching of English in line with the development of Information technology. Improvements in learning technologies have influenced all aspects of life of today's students (Ming, Sim, Mahmud, Kee, Zabidi & Ismail, 2014). Majid, Ali, Rahim & Khamis (2012) stated that in Malaysia, the integration of technologies in daily teaching and learning processes started with the introduction of Multimedia Super Corridor in 1996 where one of its flagships was the implementation of Smart

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Schools. Advances in learning technologies have resulted in a ceaseless search for more effective and applicable methods of instruction.

As a result, new teaching methods such as digital story-telling DST (Heo, 2009; Ming, Sim, Mahmud, Kee, Zabidi & Ismail, 2014; Sadik, 2008) are required for today's teachers to be equipped with for teaching today's students. An example is blogging; writing in a blog (Kuteeva, 2011) is a new trend which has changed the definition of writing, text, reader and author. Each member of the blog is both author and reader of the produced text. Having the role of reader-writer is a new trend in writing. Previously, author(s) used to write for reader(s) and there could not be any immediate feedback on the text from the side of reader(s). Today, through the new developments in cyberspace/digital world, such as WhatsApp, Wikis, and blogs (DeWitt, Alias, & Siraj, 2014; Kuteeva, 2011), writers get immediate feedback from their readers. Text is no longer a silent or passive product. Multimodal (Shariman, Abdul Razak, & Noor, 2014) texts include text, pictures, videos, and other interactive forms.

Facebook, a vastly known social site among the youth as FB is almost the best example of integration of new technology and English language use. Facebook can play an influential role in teaching/learning of English. In a study of FB usage among university students at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang, 300 students believed that Facebook provided an "on-line environment" for them that facilitated learning of English to a great extent (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Zainol Abidin, 2010).

Ustati & Ismail (2013) looked at another innovative effort for enhancing the teaching of English in Malaysia, in which all Malaysia's polytechnics installed a "Digital Language Lab" (DLL) so as to enhance the "students' English language learning experience". The feedback on the usage of DLL, from teachers and students, were both positive and negative. They reported four main challenges faced by students and lecturers who used DLL. Challenges included laboratory facilities, teaching practices, students' challenges, and lecturers' integration of digital language laboratory into their lesson plans (2013).

On the other hand, mobile phones, the pocket-sized handheld devices, have been found to be very effective in Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). Soleimani, Ismail, and Mustaffa (2014) administered a questionnaire to 25 ESL Malaysian postgraduates at Universiti

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Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and received positive response to the use of MALL. Mobile phones are useful for doing various activities and students use English as the language of interaction with their peers and lecturers. To add to positive points of using mobiles for teaching/learning English, it should be highlighted that these devices are also used outside the classroom context where students do not have similar level of stress and anxiety that they may face within the physical space of the classroom. They do not have to worry about the time and place of learning. Researchers (Soleimani, Ismail, and Mustaffa, (2014) suggested that English teaching materials must be designed in a way that they best fit into the strengths and weaknesses of mobile phones in order to achieve the best results.

Compared to the four main language skills namely writing, reading, speaking, and listening, English language literature has been almost ignored or less focused in Malaysian secondary school curriculum. Since literature is always perceived by students as boring and the teachers of literature have to follow the same old text-based methods, there was a need for studying a creatively designed on-line system for teaching English literature. In a study conducted by Taha & Ming (2014), they examined the secondary school students' motivation for learning English literature by using a Literature Online Support System (LitOSS). After using LitOSS, this group of Form 4 students displayed enhanced motivation for learning literature. They called the LitOSS as a good, interactive, and interesting teaching design. The role of online teaching in triggering students' motivation is not limited only to the learning of literature; it also enhances the students' motivation for learning the four basic skills of English in general (Marimuthu, Chone, Heng, Nah & Fen, 2013; Krish & Wong, 2009).

In such a fast-moving world of technologies, English language teachers must be equipped with the newest methods to be able to have something new and creative for their students. It is not easy for teachers today to attract the students' attention. Students come to class with more types of background knowledge compared to the past. Teachers' innovation and creativity must be enriched with a variety of materials from "texts, audio and visuals" to supply teaching methods for students who come to class in "different packages" (Ling, 2007).

One innovative tool for English language teaching and testing is a board game called "SMARTies" (Simple, Meaningful and Rewarding Test: I am an English Specialist). This assessment tool has been "evaluated by a panel of education officers from the [Malaysia] Labuan state Education Department and the Curriculum Development Centre" (Lee, 2012).

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Students are assessed in the process of learning which is enhanced by playing games. In this method provides students the opportunity to learn in a more fun and natural way.

The importance of ICT literacy and the doors it can open to the new world of knowledge, technology, and information made the Malaysian government initiate "1Malaysia Netbook" program in 2010 by distributing 1 million Netbooks for low-income families. Although 1Malaysia Netbook has resulted in much progress in English language learning and digital literacy among low-income families who are marginalized (Shariman, Abdul Razak, & Noor, 2014), it is important to realize that suitable after-sale services such as trainings; technical and teachers' support; and most importantly internet access can ensure the success of such programs (Mohamad & Abdul Razak, 2014).

With no exception, all studies on the use of creative and innovative methods for English language teaching in Malaysia encourage and support using of computer and internet as prerequisites for the teaching and learning of English in digitalized world of pedagogy (Mohamad & Abdul Razak, 2014; Shariman, Abdul Razak, & Noor, 2014; Kabilan, Ahmad, & Zainol Abidin, 2010; Ustati & Ismail, 2013). Meanwhile, researchers report language learners' challenges and moderate attitudes (Afshari et al., 2013) towards using computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and the inefficiencies of these methods due to the lack of steady access to internet, insufficient maintenance of the software or hardware, and the lack of suitable trainings for the new improvements in technology (Adnan & Zamari, 2012; Mohamad & Abdul Razak, 2014; Ustati & Ismail, 2013).

Conclusion

The innovations in English language teaching in Malaysia can be considered as the products of the country's English language policy and technological development. It is evident that the changes in language policy have greatly influenced the development of English in the education system. In the 21st century coupled with technological development, the demand of English has resulted in the changes in the teaching of English in schools, colleges and universities. The exposure of the younger generation of students to technology may have encouraged the integration of technology in the teaching of English in Malaysia. It is therefore evident in the studies conducted that the use of facebook, blogs, whatsapp and other technologically driven approaches in teaching English have become popular methodologies in

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teaching English. More exposure and training for English language teachers is required to help them to cope with the rapid demand for pedagogy that incorporates IT so as to fulfill the needs of technologically advanced learners.

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