

Malaysia Promotes Excellence in English

BY VINODINI MURUGESAN

English is one legacy of more than a century's worth of British colonial rule in Malaysia. It is the most important foreign language in Malaysia and is used extensively in practically all aspects of daily life, from conducting business transactions to labeling products to writing jingles for television advertisements. English and the official language of Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia, both play a vital role in binding together a multicultural nation made up largely of three separate and distinct races—the Malay, the Chinese and the Indians. These groups differ in both appearance and mother tongue and rely on one or both of these shared languages to communicate outside their ethnic groups (in some cases even within them). English and Bahasa Malaysia help unite people and create a unique national consciousness.

The Role of English in Malaysia

The importance of the English language as a global lingua franca has always been a major motivating factor in the learning and use of the language in Malaysia, especially as a vehicle to gain information in science and technology. Also, as a member of the world order increasingly embracing globalization via the Internet and the Information Age, Malaysia is aware of the vital need to be literate in English in order to access the wealth of data available and achieve a reasonable measure of success and stature in trade and industry.

Despite its history, Malaysia has recently seen a sharp decline in English language proficiency, which has provoked the implementation of certain measures calculated to check this and prevent its recurrence. The decline is largely due to a backwash effect from a change implemented in the early 1960s and 1970s when Bahasa Malaysia replaced English as the medium of instruction in schools and as the language used for official matters. In the early days of Malaysia's independence, it was necessary for this fledgling multiracial and multicultural nation to establish an official language to manifest and reinforce its sovereignty.

Today, however, Bahasa Malaysia is solidly and irrevocably established as the official language of Malaysia, thus clearing the way for a new emphasis on the importance of English without posing a threat to the status of the official language in any way. The government has issued a nationwide exhortation to the people to achieve a high standard of proficiency in English, providing incentives and encouragement in various forms.

As the primary foreign language in Malaysia (often labeled "second language" due to its importance and not always from a strictly pedagogic perspective), English is evident everywhere. Most people use it-or

Malaysian public.

English in Education

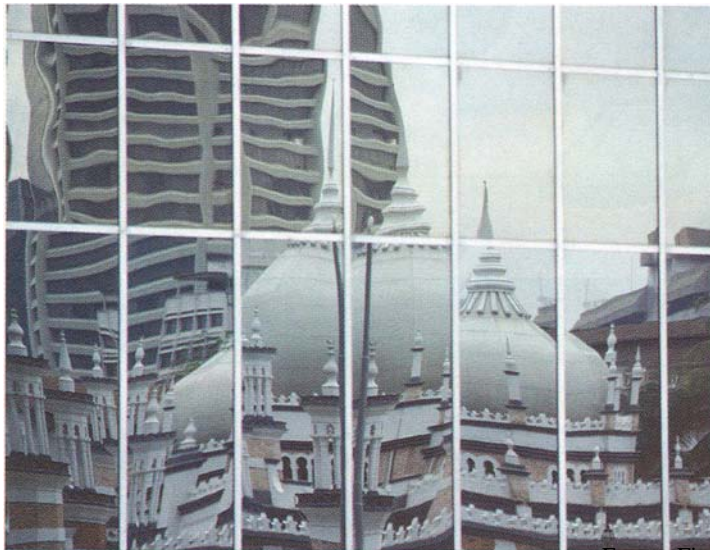
Malaysian students usually receive English instruction in two distinct ways. Most of them attend the public English language education system in government schools during the day, and depending on need, background and preference, receive instruction from either private language centers or qualified freelance teachers in the evenings. Of course, some students exclusively attend private schools where English is the language of instruction.

English is a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary school, and is generally taught in mainstream public schools from the first year of school until the last (eleven years in all). There are usually five periods of English in a week, totaling up to 200 minutes or roughly three and a half hours.

There are three major examinations throughout the school years, all of which feature English as a core paper. The first is at the end of primary school in Year Six (UPSR or Primary School Evaluation Certificate), the second at the end of lower secondary in Form Three (PMR or Lower Secondary School Certificate), and the third at the end of upper secondary in Form Five (SPM or Malaysian School Certificate). After taking this last exam, students may choose to enter Form Six, which is comprised of two years' work and leads to the STPM examination (the Higher Malaysian School Certificate), and thenceforward on to university. Other options include continuing education at private colleges or entering one of the many post-school matriculation programs available according to interest.

Competence in English is highly prized whatever the field of interest, and students are aware that getting a good grade in English greatly increases the chances of acceptance at both local and foreign universities as well as providing a coveted edge in the workplace.

In addition to mainstream public prima



a uniquely Malaysian colloquial form of it called Malaysian English or "Manglish"—to hold ordinary conversations, give ordinary directions or make ordinary remarks.

Local television channels screen a wide variety of English cartoons, serials, dramas and films in the original language, often subtitled in Bahasa Malaysia, while cinemas usually add Chinese and Tamil subtitles to English movie releases as well. A few English language films and sitcoms have also been written and produced locally, featuring local actors, and these have been quite successful. No English language entertainment import is ever dubbed; this treatment is usually reserved for Japanese, Korean or Latin American soap operas. A good proportion of local radio stations broadcast exclusively in English, and these are very popular with the

ry schools, Malaysia has a substantial number of vernacular primary schools in which lessons are conducted using either Chinese or Tamil as the medium of instruction. In these schools, one hour of English must be taught per week at the very minimum, beginning in Year Four through to Year Six. (From 2003 onwards, however, English lessons will begin in Year One.) Schools are given autonomy to decide if they will only fulfill this minimum or allot more time to English. There are no vernacular secondary schools, however, and students must fulfill an extra year of school focusing on an intensive study of both Bahasa Malaysia and English before they are integrated into a mainstream secondary school. This year of transition between primary and secondary education is called the Remove Form and is compulsory for all students of vernacular primary schools.

Some years ago, basic requirements for a passing grade in both the PMR and SPM were upgraded, as were the papers themselves, in an effort to redress the plummeting standards of English. The SPM 322 examination was conjoined with the Cambridge 1119 "0" Level paper to produce a hybrid which was altogether far more challenging than the old model. A few years later, a literature component was added to both papers, including a carefully selected range of poetry and prose to further jumpstart student interest in the language. The SPM English examination incorporating this component made its debut in 2000 while the PMR paper did so in 2002. Students were, of course, given two years to prepare themselves for the new element in the language paper. Teachers attended in-service courses organized by the Education Ministry to help them cope with the change in examination format and to ground them in the basics of understanding and teaching literature.

Up to 2002, the SPM examination had an oral examination component which was graded based on the candidate's comprehension of a dialogue and ability to respond to pictorial stimuli. However, this test was found to be woefully inadequate since students' proficiency in speaking English continued to drop to the point where prospective employers in both government and private sectors complained about the inability of graduates to converse in even the most rudimentary situations. This year, a new oral exam was designed and implemented, aimed at truly improving students' verbal skills by continuous assessment over a period of two years rather than a single test, in which the examiners are the students' English teachers at their own schools. Students are given a choice of what form their oral test takes (i.e., individual presentation, group discussion, dialogue, etc.) and they are allowed to take the tests as often as they wish to in order to gain a better score. It is hoped that this will prove more practical than the previous oral exam and provide a growing Malaysian workforce with at least basic English

speaking skills.

Recently, the Ministry of Education announced its intention to implement a radical step to improve the standard of English in Malaysia-i.e., shifting the medium of instruction for the subjects of science and mathematics back to English. The change is to take place gradually over the next few years, implemented in a carefully planned "staggered" way to allow time for students and teachers to fully adjust to the change before the national examinations are officially held in English for these two core subjects. The rationale behind this rather controversial (but potentially extremely effective) method is that students will learn English while gaining knowledge in science and mathematics, thus providing a much greater exposure to English as a language as compared to merely learning it as one subject with limited class time. This will also prevent students from compartmentalizing English as an unnecessary or too-difficult subject (which often happens in rural schools with limited exposure to the language) as well as prevent students from taking English lightly since their academic performance will be severely jeopardized if they do not master the actual science and mathematics subject matter. Also, the creation of a new generation of graduates who are fluent in English not only as a communicative device but as a technical and scientific tool will greatly facilitate Malaysia's aim of becoming a fully industrialized nation by the year 2020.

The Students

By the time English lessons are formally taught in public schools, most pupils are reasonably proficient in their first languages, which influences their learning of English in either a positive or a negative way. First language interference is to be expected in such a melting pot of languages and cultures, and teachers must be prepared to select and utilize the best teaching approaches to negate or counteract it.

In general, location and background play an important part in determining students' attitudes towards English. Urban pupils have more exposure to the language as well as more opportunities to use it. In fact, there are a growing number of children whose first language is English and who may be termed native speakers since their parents have chosen to use only English in the home instead of their ethnic languages. Children living in rural areas tend to have little exposure to English except whatever is available through the radio or television, and so tend to be more negative towards learning the language.

These differences in background result in mixed-ability groups in the English language classroom, with students ranging from highly proficient to complete beginners. Classes are not streamed according to levels of English proficiency, so teachers have to deal with the range of abilities as best they can. Class sizes average 40 students per

class, although the figure can drop to as low as 35 or rise to as high as 45.

The Teachers

Most of the English teachers in the Malaysian public school system are graduates of government universities or teacher training institutes, which offer a wide range of courses from English language and linguistics to TESL (Teaching of English as a Second Language) to English literature degrees. Many university graduates from other fields like science and geography as well as English language graduates with B.A.s instead of B.Ed.s enter the teaching profession after completing a post-degree teaching certificate in a teacher-training college. The government has also conducted scholarship programs for twin degrees between local teacher training institutes and foreign universities in Britain and New Zealand in an effort to maintain an adequate number of fully qualified ESL teachers with a correspondingly high standard of the language.

English language teaching methodology is exhaustively covered as part of B.Ed. degree requirements, together with a plethora of related skills like educational theory, linguistics, phonetics and teaching techniques. Although short practical teaching stints are interspersed regularly throughout the course, a final three-month teaching practicum is conducted at the end of the academic session, and a reasonably high grade in this component is essential before the degree can be awarded. This provides the student-teacher with an invaluable hands-on experience with English language teaching, so that both pedagogic theory and practical teaching guidelines can be optimally merged in the language classroom.

The Classroom and Syllabus

Malaysian public school students usually stay in a classroom, and subject teachers move between the classes, except in certain subjects like science or living skills which may require laboratory facilities. Most classrooms have notice boards along the walls where the language teacher can put up any charts or visual aids, and the students can display their work.

English is generally taught using government issued textbooks which have been prepared according to the national English language syllabus guidelines set out by the Ministry of Education, although teachers are encouraged to diversify their materials and use sources other than the textbook alone as long as they achieve the language teaching objectives for each language lesson. Schools set out the annual scope of work at the beginning of each academic year to synchronize what is taught so that examinations may be set fairly. Nevertheless, teachers must still decide on the level of language work given for each individual class within a particular topic and within a particular skill, depending on students' language proficiency in a partic

ular class. Students usually have their own dictionaries, and most language teachers use some form of workbook for classwork or homework. Schools usually have their own libraries and language laboratories. Some schools have special self-access learning centers where students can go to improve their linguistic skills whenever they are free.

The syllabus is based on a communicative model of teaching English according to a skill-based approach. The four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) are specifically targeted by sequenced activities, although lately, a new system based on "multiple intelligences" instead of the four skills is being used to increase language competence among Malaysian students. These "multiple intelligences" are roughly divided into three domains: informational use of the language, aesthetic appreciation of the language, and language for interpersonal communication. In this way, students are expected to gain a holistic knowledge of the language as well as the ability to employ it towards any purpose.

Inservice Support

Teachers receive a great deal of support from the Ministry of Education, which regularly conducts inservice training courses, seminars, conferences and workshops on various topics of pedagogic interest when the need arises. The Ministry of Education has recently established the English Language Teaching Center specifically to provide inservice training programs to update and upgrade English language classroom teachers' skills and expertise.

Private English Language Education

Apart from being a compulsory subject in government public schools, private English language centers found in all major cities and most towns in Malaysia offer English language courses tailored to meet the individual needs of people, whether personal or professional. Private primary and secondary schools that use English as the medium of instruction in all subjects are open to all who can afford the fees. These schools are usually attended by students whose parents feel that they would prefer an English-medium instruction for their children instead of the public school system which generally employs Bahasa Malaysia as the language of instruction. Private schools like Garden International School are popular with both Malaysians as well as expatriates.

There are language centers offering English courses for specific purposes, usually patronized by those eager to improve their command of the language for advancement in a specific career or in a specific field (i.e., communicative English or CEP, business communication, company contract training, etc). For instance, employers who want to evaluate their staff's level of language proficiency for any purpose can register them for the English Language Skills Assessment (ELSA) conducted by the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry Examinations

Board, based on competence levels in the four linguistic skills.

Other centers offer English for academic purposes, usually attended by foreign students who find it difficult to keep up with academic courses due to a lack of proficiency in English. Examples of these courses are the intensive English program (IEP) and the semi-intensive English program offered at most centers. Most language centers also offer the basic English language tests needed for entrance into both local and foreign universities-the TOEFL, IELTS or Cambridge 1119 English. Basically, it is the private language centers' ability to prepare students for these internationally recognized language examinations that ensures their status in the eyes of the public.

Concurrently, teachers in private English language centers are reputed to be more highly specialized than those in the public sector, some holding post-graduate degrees in ESL or EFL. Many expatriates work as language teachers in private schools, and since most are native speakers of English from developed nations, this provides much of the impetus which prompts locals to send their children to these centers for English lessons. Any parent would prefer his child to learn English from a native speaker rather than someone who has acquired it as a second language, despite paper qualifications which bear witness to an equal level of English language proficiency.

English and Tertiary Education

With sixteen fully funded government universities offering a wide range of courses in English (linguistics as well as education degrees), there is no shortage of English degrees available to the public. The oldest and largest university, the University of Malaya, has the largest English department and a separate English literature degree offered under the arts and social sciences department. Post-graduate degrees in English are also available at many government universities.

In 1999, the Malaysian government introduced the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) as a prerequisite for students planning to study at local universities in order to establish and maintain a high standard of English language pro

iciency among graduates. Malaysia has high numbers of foreign students taking local degrees since Malaysian education is recognized worldwide and is comparatively more affordable. The government aspires to make Malaysia "The Regional Centre for Educational Excellence" in accordance with its Vision 2020.

There are a number of off-shore campuses of foreign universities in Malaysia offering degree courses in English studies. Monash University of Australia is one of these, as well as the University of Nottingham (U.K.) and Curtin University of Technology in Sarawak. All these universities offer degree courses and selected postgraduate degrees in English.

Opportunities for Teachers in Malaysia

Malaysia remains one of the most open places in the world when it comes to job opportunities. While the public school system is only open to those with an excellent command of Bahasa Malaysia, since that is the medium of instruction, the private school system as well as the colleges, language centers and universities welcome any qualified teacher into their ranks.

Vinodini Murugesan has been an English language teacher in a rural public secondary school in Malaysia for the past four years. Her classes include Form Three (15 year olds) and Form Five (17 year olds). Her special interests include literature and drama.