

22/01/2001

## New insights into language debate

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As a linguist and historian, I have been following the on-going discussions on Malaysians' proficiency in English and on current problems in teaching English with great interest.

Seemingly everything important has already been said yet I feel there is still another perspective that needs to be explored before decisions are taken.

In spite of all the problems highlighted by many New Straits Times readers, the acceptance of and proficiency in English among Malaysians is still far greater than most other countries, be it Thailand, Vietnam, Korea or Japan, Italy or my own country, the Czech Republic, for that matter.

This is one of the few positive legacies of Malaysia's colonial past preserved through the smooth transition from colonialism to independence, and because of the multi-racial composition of Malaysian society.

Most old independent countries have not experienced the process of exposing substantial numbers of their people to in-depth English language education.

The perennial dilemma posed by the choice of a language as medium of instruction is whether it is meant to serve the ends of general education or the imperatives of international relations.

General education of people, however, is always the priority of independent democratic societies.

Worldwide experience shows that general education of large masses of monolingual populations is possible only if their mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction.

You cannot learn fine distinctions of complicated meanings in a language that you do not understand properly. Hence, general education systems in independent countries are usually based on the mother tongue as a medium of instruction.

To meet the requirements of international communication, foreign language teaching is then, at some point, added to the curriculum.

Experience also shows that in social environments with more or less large concentrations of monolingual populations, any attempts at teaching children a foreign language is a frustrating experience.

In fact, it is impossible to achieve satisfactory results because of the children's unavoidably limited exposure to natural communication in the foreign language.

Another limiting factor is the understandable oscillation in the student's motivation, the levels which fluctuate between reasonably high and nil. In general, returns on the investment fall far below expectations.

The current problem of teaching English in Malaysia is one of transition from the colonial past to a society of an independent country with similar challenges as those old independent countries have had to face.

As long as there are compact masses of monolingual populations and as long as these have to be given education at all, it must be done first in their mother tongue. This is especially true for the Malays, for obvious demographic reasons.

The inevitable result is a real or perceived decline of proficiency in English as compared to the standards of the past.

Maybe in Malaysia the bottom has already been reached. Maybe the free

fall will continue. For in language acquisition the law of compact monolingual populations that governs their access to language communication is as compelling as the law of gravitation.

However, as with any natural law that man has learned to make use of, the sooner this fact is understood and recognised, the softer will be the landing.

If this is the case, then nostalgic reminiscences will hardly help. Partial changes of curriculum by the education authorities may eventually end up adding to the existing frustration.

Then perhaps an alternative strategy should be tried, similar to those used successfully by some old independent countries.

In other words, the coveted improvement is not likely to take place unless some key elements of an alternative language policy, better adapted to the changing social context, are thought of and implemented at the national level, beyond the mere scope of education, though education will be the centre stage of any reform.

The underlying notions of such a reform are quite simple.

First, the current woes of English teaching in Malaysia should be seen as part of a larger picture, as suggested above.

Second, it should be recognised that teaching the basics of English to as many people as possible is not the only and most effective way of accessing the world of the sciences, technology and arts. The alternative way is translation.

Whatever knowledge there is to be communicated to most citizens, translation is the only alternative. It is also the only alternative for the full appreciation of literary works. For this reason translation should not be seen as unnecessary waste of national resources.

On the contrary, excellent works of translation, whether in the arts or sciences, should be regarded as a matter of national pride, as they in fact are in some other nations.

Together with this, reading should be encouraged, and would become a habit and one of the most important sources of knowledge as well as of precise, discriminative thought and of longing for higher education.

This, in turn, will help in raising the motivation of young people to learn English and other languages.

Thirdly, just as construction needs highly trained architects and engineers and the national health service cannot be thought of without good physicians, surgeons and nurses, dealing with language requires many highly professional language teachers, translators and interpreters.

Moreover, while architects are vital for architecture and physicians for medicine, good language teachers and translators are needed to service not only education and the arts, but virtually every branch of human activity.

Fourth, the effort to create such a work force should be spearheaded by educating excellent foreign language teachers, equally trained in their mother tongue and English (or any other foreign language that may be required).

Enhanced training and retaining of the existing teachers, as suggested by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, would be a good start.

Fifth, though in theory teaching a foreign language at an early age is very good, it can only work where family or other social environments can make the acquired skills sustainable.

Therefore, English as a foreign language should only be taught wherever students (enhanced by their parents) have sufficient motivation to learn and where the skills acquired are sustainable.

The courses offered should then be reasonably intensive. Whatever changes may be envisaged for the general education system, they should make it a well-conceived and balanced system where mother tongue, national

language and foreign language education are assigned their proper and irreplaceable roles.

As a multi-racial and multi-cultural country with Bahasa Malaysia as national language and with some sectors of society using English as their first language, Malaysia has rich linguistic resources for the future.

Nevertheless, the current debate shows clearly that there are some real concerns and contradictions that have to be addressed.