

BOOK REVIEW

Languages in the Malaysian Education System: Monolingual Strands in Multilingual Settings. By Asmah Haji Omar (Ed.) (2015), 184pp. ISBN: 9781138948754, London: Routledge

Malaysia is ethnolinguistically diverse. According to *Ethnologue*, for a population of over 30 million, 134 languages are spoken within its territory, of which 112 are indigenous and 22 non-indigenous. Against this backdrop of ethnolinguistic vitality, only some of these languages figure in the formal education system either as the medium of instruction (as in the case of Malay and, for some time, English) or as a subject within the school curriculum (as in the case of Iban, Kadazandusun, Tamil, Chinese and Arabic). This edited volume, which is published under the Routledge Critical Studies in Asian Education series, provides an overview of the “positioning of these languages” within the education system, “for the purpose of integration of the Malaysian peoples” (p.1). In this regard, the “positioning” of languages within the education system is ostensibly political in nature, and is tied closely to Malaysia’s postcolonial responses to the project of nation-building, of developing national unity with a population that is linguistically and also culturally and socially diverse. The book is organized in 10 chapters, each authored or co-authored by key researchers in the area.

Chapter 1 of the book, entitled ‘Positioning languages in the Malaysian education system’ sets out to frame the central arguments of the book. It maps out the linguistic landscape of the country and describes the historical and linguistic forces that contributed to the positioning of the Malay language as the national language. The chapter provides an overview of the different school systems in Malaysia, each with its own medium of instruction, namely Malay medium national schools and vernacular schools in which Chinese and Tamil are media of instruction, which were established in colonial Malaya in light of the migration of Chinese and Tamils into the mining and plantation sectors. The chapter also highlights the shifts in status of English medium schools, established in the colonial period but which were discontinued beginning in the 1970s. The position of English as a “strong second language” within the school system and programmes to address this are also discussed here and taken up further in chapter 3.

Chapter 2 picks up on the case for the choice of Malay as the national language and highlights key issues in the implementation of the National Language Policy. In arguing for the case of Malay as national language, the chapter offers an historical overview of the shift involved when Malay vernacular schools in the colonial period became National schools in the post-independence era. This shift, in principle at least, indicated a shift from an ethnic focus to a national focus, where Malay served as the lingua franca for the multilingual, multiethnic polity. Even as Malay replaced English as the medium of instruction at university level, the chapter draws attention to the rise of Malay-English bilingualism not just in tertiary level education, but throughout the school system under the MBMMBI slogan. MBMMBI was an acronym for “To uphold Malay and strengthen English,” indicative of the contemporary postcolonial relationship between the languages.

Chapter 3 examines the three levels which drive English usage in Malaysia: national, regional and global. At the national level the chapter traces the changes in the role of English within the education system over time; some of the policy flip-flops in recent years regarding the role of English as medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science subjects; and some of the challenges the country faces vis-à-vis English proficiency levels of graduates; some 44,000 graduate remain unemployed and their proficiency has been cited as a reason for employability. At the regional level, English has been adopted as the ‘working language’ within ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. And at a global level, the continuing large numbers of Malaysian students who seek tertiary education in Anglophone countries or the branch campuses of foreign universities in Malaysia as well as the

private universities, has contributed to the demand for English. The chapter ends with a note on the linguistic responses to the ongoing debates on globalization and local identities.

The next three chapters are devoted to Arabic (Chapter 4), Chinese (Chapter 5), and Tamil (Chapter 6). The status of Arabic is closely tied to its use in Islamic religious education. While there is not a native speaker community for Arabic in Malaysia, its spread has been propagated through the *madrasah* in the colonial period, and in the post-independence era it was taught in *Sekolah Agama* (religious schools), privately run *tahfiz* schools and well as in National schools where Arabic is taught as a subject. Invariably the teaching of Arabic is tied closely to Islamic religious instruction.

The Chinese language is used as a medium of instruction in Chinese vernacular schools at the primary level and in Chinese Independent schools at the secondary level, and as a subject in national schools. Its place in the education system is basically as a heritage language, though in recent years there has been an increase in non-Chinese in Chinese vernacular schools, though the numbers are relatively small. Tamil is used as a medium of instruction at the primary level and as a subject in National schools. Both Chinese and Tamil as majors at the university level and the Institutes for Teacher education prepare Chinese and Tamil teachers for the national and vernacular school systems.

The next two chapters cover Iban (Chapter 7) and Kadandusun (Chapter 8), the dominant languages in Sarawak and Sabah respectively. The chapters, taken together, present a portrait of the position and role of these indigenous languages as heritage languages, taught as POLs (pupils' own languages) within the school system. The chapters trace efforts to use the oral traditions of these languages and their folklore as curriculum content in the language classes, as well as attempts to provide a writing system for the languages and the teaching of these languages at the University level.

Chapter 9 looks at the role of translation in Malaysian education, especially crucial as Malay is the national language within the school system. The chapter examines the roles of two key agencies tasked with translating key works to and from Malay, namely the National Institute of Translation and Production of Books (known by its Malay acronym ITBN) and *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*. *Dewan Bahasa* was an agency that was accorded official authority to formulate policies and programmes to propagate the Malay language, as well to translate key works and to produce lexicons and dictionaries. The role of non-governmental publishing houses in producing translated works is also discussed here.

The book concludes with a discussion in Chapter 10 of the role of Malay as a supranational or regional language in maritime Southeast Asia. Efforts at harmonizing and modernizing the spelling systems of the Malay and Indonesian languages and standardization of terminology in the two languages are discussed at length.

Taken as a whole, the book provides a valuable encyclopedic overview of the languages in Malaysia, and their presence in the education system. The various chapters flesh out the subtitle of the book: monolingual strands in multilingual settings. Invariably, the languages are seen as existing separately as distinct strands in the linguistic landscape. What is not seen in these chapters is the fluidity of the plurilingual landscape that is Malaysia, in terms of code-switching, code-mixing, the use loan words and other forms of hybridization, through crosslinguistic, cross-cultural and intercultural aspects of language use in a dynamic plurilinguistic polity. While the formal school system may tend to keep the languages as "separate strands," at least officially, there are spaces, as recent research has shown, where speakers draw on the plurilingual milieu to communicate both in the informal spaces outside classrooms but also formal classroom spaces when the language of instruction may not be readily comprehensible to some, and teachers may draw on students linguistic resources in the teaching and learning processes.

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