# THE ROLE OF LANGUAGES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

Choi Kim Yok
Jagdish Kaur
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics
University of Malaya

#### Abstract

The Malaysian Education Policy accords the status of main medium of instruction to Malay and the status of second most important language to English. While a formalized bilingual policy is not yet in place, English is used as a medium of instruction for various academic disciplines at the tertiary level. At the University of Malaya, various courses at the undergraduate level at the Faculties of Medicine, Dentistry, Engineering and Law are taught in English. The use of English as a medium of instruction at the postgraduate level is widespread and dissertations at the Masters and PhD levels are allowed to the written in Malay or English.

This paper reports the outcome of a survey conducted on the use of languages, especially Malay and English, as mediums of instruction across the 17 faculties, academies and centres of the University of Malaya. The role of these languages in research and administration is also discussed. Questionnaires and interviews with Deans and the teaching staff from the various institutions provided the necessary data to support the contention that bilingualism is practiced to a greater or lesser degree at the University of Malaya. The paper also traces the background to the change in policy that now places greater emphasis on the use of English in Malaysian universities.

#### Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multilingual country with a population of about 23.27 million people, according to figures released by the Statistics Department (based on the 2000 census). Of the total population of Malaysia, 94.1% are Malaysian citizens while the remaining 5.9% comprise foreign nationals. Of the total Malaysian citizens, 65.1% are Bumiputera which mainly comprises Malays and other minority indigenous groups. 26% are Chinese, 7.7% are Indians and the remaining 1.2% comprises 'Others' who do not fall within the earlier-mentioned ethnic groups.

In Malaysia, language is very much an integral part of ethnicity and given the multi-ethnic nature of the population, linguistic pluralism is still very much the dominant linguistic state of the country. To understand better the role and the use of the different languages in higher education today, it is necessary to first understand the development of the language situation in modern Malaysian history

# The Language Scenery of Post-Colonial Malaysia

Throughout the English colonial rule of Malaya, the English language was the national language and the only official language recognised. At independence in 1957, a quadrilingual education system existed: English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil schools had been set up resulting in the Malays, Chinese and Indians being educated in their own language and the urban-elite of the 3 groups, in English. Divisions, thus, had been created in Malayan society as a result of the establishment of these vernacular schools which reinforced the group identity of each of the three major ethnic groups.

Language policy and language planning in a multi-ethnic and multilingual country like Malaysia is extremely important. Linguistic unity is often considered the basis for national identity and with independence, Malaysia sought to establish one language as the national language. Malay, the language of the majority, was to be the national language of the newly independent country which, until that time, had no common language among its very diverse population.

The first educational report, known as the Razak Report (1956) and subsequently the Rahman Talib Report (1960) emphasised the learning of Malay and the use of the Malay language as a means of uniting the various ethnic groups. While the Government sought to gradually introduce Malay as the national language, it continued to maintain other local languages as a means of ensuring that every child was able to function in more than one language. At the primary school level, Chinese and Tamil schools continued to exist alongside

Malay and English schools. English and Malay, however, were made compulsory subjects in the curriculum of all schools. Education at the secondary level was conducted mainly in the medium of one of the two official languages, Malay and English, with the intention of ultimately using the national language as the main medium of instruction.

In 1969, a period of radical Malay nationalism began; various Malay groups began demanding the enforcement of the national language policy as English was seen as a threat to Malay This marked the beginning of a gradual process to make Malay the sole medium of instruction in all secondary schools up to tertiary level. Chinese and Tamil schools, however, continued to be retained at primary level. While Malay is accorded the status of main medium of instruction, the Malaysian Education Policy accords the status of second language to English, that is, the second most important language after the national language. English, thus, is a compulsory subject to be taught in all primary and secondary schools. This is not due to Malaysia's colonial past but because of the importance of English as a language of wider communication, a language of advanced science and technology and a language for international trade and commerce.

# Language in Tertiary Education

The passing of the Education Enactment Bill 1971 paved the way for a common education system for all, using Malay as the medium of instruction up to university level. 1983 witnessed the entry of the first batch of undergraduate students into local universities who had undergone secondary education in the Malay medium. While the national language policy also applies to education at tertiary level, the practice is somewhat different. In many of the Malaysian universities, English has always been and still is the medium of instruction for various academic disciplines. English is still widely used in lectures, tutorials and seminars at the advanced levels and for research purposes. Regulations however, require that universities obtain the permission of the King for the use of English at the undergraduate level and permission has always been granted.

In December 1993, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad announced a policy which allowed greater use of English in universities and colleges for the teaching of the sciences. The Prime Minister's vision for the country by 2020, namely industrialised nation status, as well as the major role English plays in the field of science and technology may have prompted the introduction of this policy

In August 1995, a guideline on the use of English was issued by the Minister of Education to universities and institutions of higher learning. Universities could determine the percentage of their courses to be taught in

English in accordance with the relevance and needs of the use of the language. In addition, total use of English is permitted in the case of courses taught by foreign academic staff or in the case of postgraduate courses attended by foreign students. Universities were also encouraged to increase the use of English in tutorials, seminars and assignments.

In the light of the above-mentioned developments, this study was undertaken to investigate the role and the use of languages, especially English and Malay, at tertiary level, namely at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur.

## The University of Malaya

The University of Malaya, the first University of Malaysia, was initially established in Singapore on 8 October 1949 as a national institution to serve the higher education needs of the then Federation of Malaya and Singapore. As a result of very rapid growth during the first decade of its establishment, a decision was made to set up two autonomous Divisions is 1959, one located in Singapore and the other in Kuala Lumpur. In 1960, the government of the two territories initiated the move to change the status of the Divisions into that of a national university Legislation was passed in 1961 founding the University of Malaya on 1st January 1962.

Currently, the University comprises 12 faculties, 2 academies and 3 centres. They are as follows.

- Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Faculty of Built Environment, Faculty
  of Business and Accountancy, Faculty of Computer Science and
  Information Technology, Faculty of Dentistry, Faculty of Economics
  and Administration, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty
  of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Medicine,
  Faculty of Science,
- Academy of Islamic Studies, Academy of Malay Studies
- Cultural Centre, Centre for Foundation Studies in Science, Sports Centre

The student enrolment stands at 28,618 students as of the 2004/2005 academic session. The majority, that is, 19,442 are attending undergraduate programmes. Of this number, 12,972 are female students and 6,470 are male students.

While Malay is the official language of the University and the main medium of instruction in most faculties, English is the second most important language used.

## The Role and the Use of the Various Languages

In order to ascertain the extent to which English and/or other languages are used alongside Malay for purposes of teaching both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels as well as for purposes of administration and research, a questionnaire was designed by the authors and administered to all faculties, academies and centres. The respondents of this survey are the Deans and Directors of the various institutions as well as their Heads of Departments. With regard to the medium of instruction, the questionnaire sought to obtain information concerning the programmes and the courses offered, the language or languages used for the teaching of the various courses and the proportion of the programme conducted in a language other than Malay Reasons for using a language other than Malay also needed to be established.

## (a) Instruction at Undergraduate Level

Of the 17 faculties, academies and centres, only 3 conduct their undergraduate programmes in Malay only, namely the Academy of Malay Studies, the Faculty of Economics and Administration and the Cultural Centre. While the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences also conducts all its courses in Malay, an exception is made with regard to 3 specific programmes: English Literature, Chinese Studies and Indian Studies whereby 70% of the these programmes are conducted in English, Mandarin and Tamil respectively

4 faculties conduct about 90% of their undergraduate courses in Malay and the remaining 10% in English or another language. At the Academy of Islamic Studies, for instance, 8.5% of the courses are conducted in Arabic. At the Faculty of Science, the remaining 10% of the courses are conducted in English. This is also the case at the Faculty of Education with the exception of 3 specific programmes, the Teaching of English as a Second Language, the Teaching of Tamil and the Teaching of Chinese where 70% of these courses are conducted in English, Tamil and Mandarin respectively

2 other faculties which use Malay to a large extent as the medium of instruction include the Sports Centre and the Faculty of Engineering. At the Sports Centre, 70% of its degree programme is conducted in Malay with the remaining 30% in English. At the Engineering Faculty, 65% of the programmes are conducted in Malay and the remaining 35% in English. At the Faculty of Dentistry,

50% of its programmes are conducted in Malay and the remaining 50% in English.

The remaining faculties are inclined towards using English or other languages to a greater extent as the language of instruction of its undergraduate programmes. At the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, only 23% of the courses in the Bachelor of Languages and Linguistics programme are conducted in Malay while the remaining 77% are conducted in one of the following 9 languages: Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, Spanish or Tamil, depending on the language stream the students have opted for. The Faculty also offers an undergraduate degree programme in Languages and Linguistics with Education (Chinese language). 70% of the courses are conducted in Chinese. At the Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology, 60% of its courses are conducted in English and the remaining 40% in Malay. At the Faculty of Built Environment, 65% of its courses are conducted in English and only 35% in Malay.

The following 3 faculties have determined the language to be used during lectures and tutorials or in particular years of the undergraduate programme. At the Faculty of Law, all lectures are conducted in Malay while all tutorials are conducted in English in all 3 years of the programme. At the Faculty of Business and Accountancy, all lectures are conducted in Malay and all intorials in English in the first year. In the second year while all tutorials are still conducted in English, 50% of the lectures are now conducted in English as well. In the final year, all lectures and tutorials are conducted in English. At the Faculty of Medicine, 80% of the programme is conducted in Malay and 20% in English in the first year. In the second year, 50% is in English and the remaining 50% is in Malay. In the clinical years, that is, from the third to the fifth year, the courses are conducted in English.

#### (b) Instruction at Postgraduate Level

At postgraduate level, the use of English is definitely more prevalent. In almost all cases, with a few exceptions, students have the option of writing their thesis in English or in Malay. At the Academy of Islamic Studies and the Academy of Malay Studies, Malay is still,

understandably, the language of instruction for the taught portion of the programme and theses are written in Malay as well.

At the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, with the exception of the Master of English as a Second Language, about half of the postgraduate courses are taught in English. At the Cultural Centre as well as at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, approximately 50% of the taught portion is conducted in English and the remaining 50% in Malay, depending on the programme in question. At the Faculty of Education, approximately 80% of the taught portion is conducted in English and 20% in Malay.

In all other faculties, ie the faculties of Economics and Administration, Business and Accountancy, Science, Computer Science and Information Technology, Law, Dentistry and Medicine, the taught portion of the postgraduate programme is conducted in English. At the Faculty of Built Environment as well as at the Faculty of Engineering, postgraduate programmes are conducted only by research and theses are written mainly in English.

#### (c) Research and Publication

The questionnaire also sought to obtain information regarding the language used by academics for purposes of their own research and publication. The trend is similar to that of instruction; where the use of English is widespread for purposes of instruction, almost all research and publication by the teaching staff is in English. Again the exception is the case of Malay Studies, Islamic Studies and the Arts and Social Sciences where the use of Malay is more prevalent. At the Academy of Islamic Studies, Arabic is also used while at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, foreign languages may be used by the lecturers in their research for the purpose of international conferences and publications overseas.

#### (d) Administration

However, with regard to the language used for purposes of administration, that is for purposes of correspondence, meetings, communication with students etc, Malay is more widely used as it is the official language of the University. In almost all cases, Malay was listed as the main language for administration. However, many

faculties indicated that meetings were conducted in both Malay and English as code-switching was common.

#### Discussion

What is obvious from the figures presented is that faculties offering professional degrees in areas like medicine, law, architecture, business and accounting, dentistry, information technology and engineering are inclined towards using English as the main language of instruction while faculties that offer general degrees in areas such as the sciences, the humanities, education and administration use Malay to a greater degree.

One reason cited for this is that the use of English in the former would allow these professional courses and the degrees conferred to be recognised by international certifying bodies. Many other reasons were cited for the widespread use of English in the above-mentioned faculties Textbooks, reference materials and journals that students are required to use or refer to are mainly in English. Another reason given is that employers, especially in the private sector, are inclined towards employing graduates who are proficient in English and who have undergone a major portion of their programme in English. In certain faculties like in the Faculties of Medicine, Dentistry, Built Environment and Engineering, the employment of several expatriate lecturers on contractual basis make it necessary for the courses they taught to be conducted in English as they are only well-versed in English. The Faculty of Law cited 'tradition' as a reason for conducting all tutorials in English.

In the case of postgraduate programmes, in addition to the reasons mentioned above, 2 other reasons were cited for the wide-spread use of English as the language of instruction and research. One reason is due to the fact that external examiners appointed for most postgraduate programmes are foreign academics who are only proficient in English. The other reason is the presence of foreign students in these programmes. One of the aims of the University of Malaya is to become the regional centre of academic excellence and in achieving this aim, steps have been taken to attract more foreign students to enroll in the postgraduate course offered which necessitates the use of English, an international language, as the language of instruction and research.

An interesting phenomenon that requires mention here is that of codeswitching, a practice common among many lecturers, not only in an informal context, but also in the classroom, with the exception of language instruction. While some lecturers profess to teaching in the national language, Malay, it is not uncommon during the course of a lecture to switch to English to clarify a point, to explain terminology or to answer a question and then to switch back to Malay. The reason for this is that many senior lecturers who were trained abroad are more at ease in English than in Malay

The use of English for purposes of research and publication is fairly obvious; refereed journals in the fields of medicine and dentistry, engineering, law, architecture, science, business and economics are in English. Similarly, the language of most international conferences, seminars and workshops held in and outside Malaysia is English. Naturally, academics wishing to report findings of their research in journals or at conferences have to do so in English.

The use of Malay for purposes of administration is in line with the national language policy whereby Malay is used for all official purposes by virtue of the fact that it is the national language. Although all official correspondence within the University and with government agencies is in Malay, correspondence with the private sector is very often in English.

# Conclusion

The University of Malaya is undeniably bilingual. Both Malay and English are used for purposes of instruction, research and publication, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the programme in question. In spite of the national language policy that places the Malay language in a dominant position, English continues to play a major role in higher education.

This trend is likely to continue. In fact, it is possible that English may be given greater prominence in time to come. This is in view of the fact that as of I<sup>st</sup> January 2003, as a result of a decision taken by the Malaysian Government, English is once again the medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science in all primary and secondary schools beginning with Primary 1, Secondary 1 and Lower Six in 2003. The decision to implement the use of English as the language of instruction for Math and Science stems from the realisation that if Malaysia is to remain competitive at the international level in all areas and sectors, especially in the field of science and technology, it must be able to access the vast amounts of information and knowledge currently available in English.

This decision will have long term consequences on the language situation in higher education in Malaysia. A case in point: the Centre for Foundation Studies in Science at the University of Malaya, a pre-undergraduate science centre, which currently conducts all its courses in Malay is already making plans to gradually switch to English so that by 2008, when the first batch of students learning Math and Science in English at Secondary 1 enter the programme, all courses offered at this centre will be in English. Faculties are also encouraged to introduce more courses in English to enable students to be

exposed to the language. However, it is envisaged that Malay will continue to maintain its stronghold in the humanities.

#### References

- Akta Pendidikan dan Peraturan-Peraturan, 2004. Kuala Lumpur: MIDC Publishers.
- Asmah Hj Omar. 1991 "English in Public Policy and Community Use: A Question of Status and Goals." In *Collected Papers from the Conference on Bilingualism and National Development*, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 9-12 December 1991, Vol. 1(A), 70-102.
- Gaudart, H. 1987. "A Typology of Bilingual Education in Malaysia." In *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 8(6), 529-551
- Gaudart, H. 1992. Bilingual Education in Malaysia. Townsville: Centre for South East-Asian Studies, James Cook University Education Act 1996 (ACT 550) & Selected Regulations, 2004. Petaling Jaya: International Law Book Services.

# 1. Instruction at Undergraduate Level

No.	Faculty/Academy/Centre	Main Language of Instruction (in%)		
		Malay	English	Others
	Academy of Malay Studies	100	-	
2.	Faculty of Economics and Administration	100		
3.	Cultural Centre	100		
4.	Centre for Foundation Studies in Science	100	-	-
5	Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences	100		_
	English Literature	30	70	
	Chinese Studies	30		70 [Mandarin]
	Indian Studies	30	-	70 [Tamil]
6.	Academy of Islamic Studies	91.5	-	8 5 [Arabic]
7	Faculty of Science	90	10	
8.	Faculty of Education	90	10	
	T.ESL	30	70	
	Teaching of Tamil	30		70 [Tamil]
	Teaching of Chinese	30		70 [Mandarin]
9	Sports Contre	70	30	- 12
10.	Faculty of Engineering	65	3.5	F
11	Faculty of Dentistry	50	50	
12.	Faculty of Languages and Linguistics  Teaching of Chinese	23		77 [Arabic] [English] [French] [German] [Italian] [Japanese] [Mandarin] [Spanish] [Tamil] 70 [Chinese]
13	Faculty of Computer Science & Information Technology	40	60	
14.	Faculty of Built Environment	35	65	
15	Faculty of Law	100 (1.)	100 (T)	
16	Faculty of Business and Accountancy  1st Year  2nd Year  3nd Year	100 (L) 50 (L)	50 (T) 100 (T) 100	
17	Faculty of Medicine  1 <sup>rd</sup> Year  2 <sup>rd</sup> Year  3 <sup>rd</sup> - 5 <sup>th</sup> Years	80 50	20 50 100	14

# 1. Instruction at Postgraduate Level

No.	Faculty/Academy/Centre	Main Language of Instruction for Taught Portion (in%)		
		Maiay	English	Others
1	Academy of Malay Studies	100		
2.	Academy of Islamic Studies	100		
3	Cultural Centre	50	50	-
4	Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences	50	50	
5	Faculty of Languages and Linguistics	50	50	
6	Faculty of Education	20	80	
7	Faculty of Economics and Administration		100	
8	Faculty of Business and Accountancy		100	
9	Faculty of Science		100	
10	Faculty of Computer Science & Information Technology	-	100	
11	Faculty of Law		100	
12.	Faculty of Dentistry		100	
13	Faculty of Medicine		100	
14.	Faculty of Built Environment (By research only)			
15	Faculty of Engineering (By research only)			

# QUESTIONNAIRE

# Bilingualism and Multilingualism at the University of Malaya

Faci	ılty.			
Dep	artment:			
Prog	gramme(s) of study offered.			
(a)	Undergraduate Programme:	(i)		
		(ii)		
		(iii)		
(b)	Postgraduate Programme:	(i)		
		(ii)		
	n language of instruction for the percentage of the courses with Undergraduate Programme:			
and	percentage of the courses with Undergraduate Programme:	ie programi	gramme taught i	n this la
and (a)	percentage of the courses with	ie programi		
and (a) (i)	percentage of the courses with Undergraduate Programme:	ie programi	gramme taught i	n this la
and (a)	percentage of the courses with Undergraduate Programme:	ie programi	gramme taught i	n this la
and (a) (i) (ii)	percentage of the courses with Undergraduate Programme:	ie programi	gramme taught i	n this la
and (a) (i) (ii) (iii)	Undergraduate Programme:  Language	ie programi	gramme taught i	n this la
and (a) (i) (ii) (iii)	Undergraduate Programme:  Language  Postgraduate Programme:	ie programi	gramme taught i	n this la
(a) (i) (ii) (iii) (b)	Undergraduate Programme:  Language  Postgraduate Programme:	ie programi	gramme taught i	n this la

language:

	(a)	Undergraduate Programme:		
	(i) (ii) (iii)	Language	No.	%
	(b)	Postgraduate Programme:		
	(i) (ii) (iii)	Language	No.	%
6.		language other than Bahasa Melayu is use explain reason(s) for using the langu		e of instruction,
	(i)			
	(ii)			
	(iii) (iv)			
	(v)			
7	anno	the languages used for purposes of admouncements, meetings etc.) within your uency of use:		
	(i)			
	(ii)			
	(iii)			
8.		ne languages used for purposes of resear or faculty/department in order of frequen		n by members
	(i)			
	(ii)			
	(iii)			3-11-

We would be grateful if you could attach the list of courses offered under the various undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at your faculty/department, highlighting those courses taught in a language other than Bahasa Melayu.

# Multilingualism at the University of Malaya

Please answer all questions.	
Please answer all questions.	
I. Faculty:	
2. Department:	
3. Programme(s) of study offered:	
(a) Undergraduate Programme:	
Name of Programme	No. of courses offered under programme
(i)	
(ii)	
(iii)	
(iv)	
(b) Postgraduate Programme:	
Name of Programme	No. of courses offered under programme
(i)	
(ii)	
(iii)	
(iv)	

- 4. Main language of instruction for the programme(s) listed in (3) above, number and percentage of the courses within the programme taught in this language:
  - (a) Undergraduate Programme:

Main language of instruction for the programme listed in (3)	No. of courses taught in this language	% of courses taught in this language
(i)		
(ii)		
(iii)		
(iv)		

# (b) Postgraduate Programme:

Main language of instruction for the programme listed in (3)	No. of courses taught in this language	% of courses taught in this language
(i)		
(ii)	100000	Wat is
(iii)		
(iv)		

- 5. Other languages(s) of instruction used for the programme(s) listed in (3) above, number and percentage of the courses within the programme taught in this language:
  - (a) Undergraduate Programme:

Main language of instruction for the programme listed in (3)	No. of courses taught in this language	% of courses taught in this language
(i)		
(ii)		
(iii)		
(iv)		

### (b) Postgraduate Programme:

Main language of instruction for the programme listed in (3)	No. of courses taught in this language	% of courses taught in this language
(i)		
(ii)		
(iii)	The same	
(iv)		

	(i)
	(ii)
	(iii)
	(iv)
	(v)
7	List the languages used for purposes of administration (e.g. correspondence, announcements, meetings etc.) within your faculty/department in order of frequency of use:
	(i)
	(ii)
	(iii)
S.	List the languages used for purposes of research and publication by members
	of your faculty/department in order of frequency of use:
	(i)
	(ii)
	(iii)

We would be grateful if you could attach the list of courses offered under the various undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at your faculty/ department, highlighting those courses taught in a language other than Bahasa Melayu.

Please return the completed questionaire to:

Dean

Faculty of Languages and Linguistics University of Malaya

at the latest by 7 May 2003

We thank you for your cooperation.