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English as a Second Language in Malay-Speaking Countries: Similarities and Differences

Pairote Bennui

E-mail: bpairote@tsu.ac.th

Associat Professor, Dr., Department of Western Languages,
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Thaksin University, Songkhla

Abstract

English is used as a second language (ESL) in Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, the so-called Malay-speaking countries. Dimensions of the ESL use in these former British colonies share outstanding features and provide some dissimilar aspects. To understand these ESL varieties, this paper aims to describe their similarities and differences by discussing through three roles of English – administration or official language, intra-national communicative use, and educational language policy. This comparison is vital for comprehending the importance of English in Malaysia and Brunei in relation to English in Thailand. Some implications grounded in Malaysian English and Brunei English can be useful for Thai users and learners of English.

Keywords: English as a Second Language; English in Malaysia and Brunei, English in Thailand

1. Introduction:

Malay-speaking countries consist of Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, and Indonesia. In Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia is the national and dominant language according to the language policy and the majority of the population, namely 69.6% of Malay ethnic speakers (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). In Brunei, the majority of the population belong to 66 percent of Brunei Malays (McLellan, 2020). In Singapore, there are 14 percent of Malay-speaking Singaporeans (Cavallaro et al., 2020). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the Indonesian version of Malay or ‘Bahasa Indonesia’ is the national language. These four countries were colonized by England. However, Indonesia had been ruled by the UK for a short period of time, so it is known as a former Dutch colony. This made Indonesia use English a foreign language (EFL). Among these countries, only Singapore is different in terms of language policy in which English goes higher than a second language. According to Cavallaro et al. (2020), English in Singapore has moved forward into the first language in the 21st century because it is the domain language in administration, education, communication, and business, etc. It is



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used more than other vernaculars – Chinese, Malay, and Indian. English in Singapore can be considered a mother tongue or first language because of its heritage language from generation to generation, a high percentage of those with expertise in English, extensive functions, and English for identity. Hence, only two Malay-speaking countries in Southeast Asia – Malaysia and Brunei - are the focus of this paper. This paper aims to comparatively discuss the status roles of English as a second language (ESL) in these two countries through administrative status, intra-national communicative use, and education language policy. This will lead to an awareness of how ESL English is similarly and differently used in the Malay-speaking states. Moreover, this discussion can be implied for Thailand, her neighbors – whether ESL in Malaysia and Brunei can be modelled for English in Thai society.

2. Aspects of English as a Second Language

To understand the term ‘ESL’ clearly, the notion of English as a mother tongue or a first language and EFL come across for their differentiation. English as a mother tongue means the way English is used, acquired, and taught by members in a linguistic environment with either parents, communities, or societies of native English speakers with Anglophone cultures – UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. This also covers the use of English in all functional domains – official language for administration and government, educational language, and mass media, among others. Here, English linguistic forms can be considered a native variety of English. It can also be Standard varieties of English such as BBC English (British English) and CNN English (General American). Meanwhile, ESL means a condition of the language that is used, acquired, and taught in a bilingual or multilingual society. Here, speakers with different mother tongues communicate in English to each other. This is called intra-national communicative function of English use. Here, English plays extensively many vital roles in wider communication for official language or associate official language, educational language, working language in commerce, business and finance, and mass media, among others. After the national language, English is the second most important language for the majority of the population of a country. In this regard, English is linguistically developed into a local variety due to part of their intra-national communication. Hence, beyond ENL (English as a native language) and ESL, EFL concerns the way English refers to an international language rather than intra-national language. The people in this circle use their mother tongue in almost functional domains extensively. They speak English to foreigners. Further, they have lower proficiency than ESL speakers. EFL has not been regarded as another non-native variety of



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English as ESL is. That is, EFL speakers do not show their local forms of English that represent their distinctive varieties of English because they follow native English norms and models (National Open University of Nigeria, 2006). Hence, ESL is distinct in that non-native English can develop into localized forms of English due to the acculturation process in which indigenous language and culture influence English. Further, it had a long history of English as a colonial language. In this paper, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam are thus full of linguistic environments and conditions of English that fit the mentioned features of ESL implanted by England.

3. English as an Administrative/Official Status

English is neither a national nor official language in both Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. However, the two countries share some common status of the administrative language.

After independence from a British colony in 1957, Malaysia had two equal status of official language – Malay and English. This lasted in 1967 when only Malay or Bahasa Malaysia has become an official language according to the nationalization policy (Asmah, 2000, as cited in Thirusanku & Melor, 2012). This makes English become the second most important language until the present day (Azirah, 2020). In light of administration, Malay is used in government, official sectors, and law courts. However, the use of English also emerges in court rooms through code-switching from Malay to English. Outstandingly, English becomes the working language in arbitrations that concern both international and local parties (Noorashikin, 2008, as cited in Azirah, 2020). In this regard, Azirah (2020) adds that the majority of arbitrators in Malaysia are oversea-educated persons, so they seem to use English for this function.

After independence from a British protectorate in 1984, Brunei Darussalam has Brunei Malay as the official language (O'hara-davies, 2010) in governmental sections and law courts. The status of Malay language is thus for the Malay Islamic Monarchy because the major ethnicity is Malay. Nevertheless, the amendment of the language of the Supreme Court in 2004 indicates that the use of English can be permitted for the interest of justice, especially regarding a witness' provision of evidence. English is accepted in Brunei court rooms because majority of judges who are oversea-educated can use English proficiently. English use can also be recorded in the courtroom in this country (Powel, 2009, as cited in Hjh Masmahirah, 2016).

Overall, English used in the Malaysian and Bruneian legal system and government section is similar. The use of English in proceedings and recordings can be permitted because



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of the judges' English education background. As a legal register of language is solid, they use English as the major language choice to proceed spoken and written texts of law.

4. English as an Intra-National Communicative Use

Both Malaysians and Bruneians have similar ethnicity. In Malaysia Peninsular and East Malaysia (Borneo island), the majority is Malay (69.1%), followed by Chinese (23%), Indians (6.9%), and others (Siamese and Eurasians, 1%) (Azirah, 2020). In Brunei Darussalam, the major ethnic is Brunei Malay (66%), Chinese (11%), and others (indigenous people and expats, 3%) (Noor Azam & McLellan, 2014). The two countries are thus considered multilingual and multiethnic societies. In Malaysia, there are three main mother tongues of the local people – Malay, Chinese (Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, etc), Indian (Tamil, Gujarati, Malayalam, Panjabi, Sindh, Telugu, etc) (MM2H, 2020). In Brunei, the major languages are Brunei Malay and Chinese (Min Nan, Mandarin, Hakka, etc) (Minority Rights Group International, 2021).

Due to the multilingual society of the two countries, English has been a part of the local people as a language for intra-national communication since the British colonial era.

In Malaysia, Malay has been used as the dominant language in administration and education since 1967, but English has still been used among people in urban areas, especially in private organizations, higher education, and private schools (Azirah, 2020). English becomes a choice of language used in this country through many functional domains – business and workplace, media and entertainment, as well as interpersonal and intercultural communication. This leads to an emergence of a local variety of English called 'Malaysian English' (MalE) which started during the British colony. This non-native variety of English with the basis on three major ethnic languages of the country – Malay, Chinese, and Indians - occurs as informal lingua franca among Malaysians who want to use English to suit their needs in an English-speaking environment (Normazla & Mariatul Kibtiyah, 2007). Some examples of Malaysian English in newspapers and magazines as well as in oral communication are given.

- (i) Malay MalE words are "*langsar, longtong, bumiputera, datuk, bomoh, sarung, beef rendang, batik cloth, and pondok school, etc*" (Tan, 2009).
- (ii) Chinese MalE words are "*Hokkien mee, kailn, pau, wantan noodles, koay teow soup, popiah skin, beef ball, chicken rice, and mooncake*" (Tan, 2009).
- (iii) Indian (Tamil) Malaysian English words are "*Beriyani rice, Saree cloth, roti, mamak, dhoti, dhal*" (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012).



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Malaysians like simplify and reduce grammatical forms in their oral English to present colloquial MalE (Manglish). Some examples are “She can come or not?”, “He’s always late, isn’t?”, and “What book you want to read?” Further, the particles ‘lah’ and ‘what’ are widely used such as “I told you *what*, you didn’t believe me” and “Don’t be lazy *lah*...” (Baskaran, 2005). These expressions seem to be used by all ethnic speakers of MalE.

Like many other former British/American colonies in Southeast Asia, Bruneian society also faces the phenomenon of English as an intranational communicative language. This is seen in education, media, as well as business and commerce domains in which Brunei English has developed with an influence of the Bruneian people’s indigenous language and culture (McLellan, 2020). This is evident in the new generation of the country, particularly the elite and well-educated Bruneians, the so-called ‘Brunei Malay’—English bilinguals, who have shifted to English (Noor Azam, 2005, as cited in Jones, 2008).

An emergence of Brunei English is because English is used as a lingua franca in the oil and gas industry administered by Brunei Shell Petroleum Company which is a collaboration between Royal Dutch Shell, the Brunei government. The working language of this industry is English as a lingua franca between Bruneians and other foreign workers (McLellan, 2020).

Some lexicons of Brunei English from media reports are mainly based on Islamic contexts which are lexical borrowing from Arabic and Malay. For example, there are ‘zikir’ (purity in adherence to Islamic ideals), ‘dakwah’ (Islamic propagation), ‘fardhu’ (religious duty), and ‘puasa’ (fasting). Other words of cloth items are ‘kueh lapis’ (layer cake), ‘nasi katok’ (knock rice), ‘songkok’ (Malay headgear for males), and ‘baju kurung’ (long-loose-fitting Malay women’s dress) (Deterding & Salbrina Haji Sharbawi, 2013, as cited in McLellan, 2020).

Like many other ESL users, Bruneian English speakers like to simplify English expressions. There appears to be an omission of definite articles such as “in UK, from USA” and the use of ‘piece of’ and ‘unit of’ as numerical classifiers such as “12 pieces of \$100 notes”, and “three units of computers” (Deterding & Salbrina Haji Sharbawi, 2013, as cited in McLellan, 2020). Moreover, Bruneians like to use the discourse particle ‘bah’ in English expressions such as “Bah. Please sit down’ and “It’s so difficult bah” (McLellan, 2020, p. 406).

Both Malaysians and Bruneians use English for intra-national communication. They create local English words by borrowing from their L1, and they similarly use Malay discourse particles in English expressions. However, Malaysian English also has an English particle ‘what’ that is not found in Brunei English. Moreover, MalE is more obvious for multilingual identities as there are Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian. The higher population and more diverse



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cultural formation belongs to Malaysia. Sub-ethnolectal varieties of MalE is more obvious – Chinese MalE, Malay MalE, and Indian MalE. However, Brunei English is more based on Brunei Malay English. The picture of Brunei Chinese English is not clear due to a few studies done.

5. English as an Educational Language

Although Malaysia and Brunei point out Malay as the educational language, the two countries have placed the significance of English education differently. English education in Malaysia has continually changed according to the ethnic and political policy and movement. Meanwhile, English education in Brunei seems to be more stable. This is discussed below.

The role of English as an educational language in Malaysia has changed since 1967 when English was replaced by Malay for all educational levels. The use of Malay as a medium of instruction from primary to tertiary levels was implemented by 1980 for Peninsular Malaysia and by 1982 in Sabah and by 1985 in Sarawak (Asmah, 1982, as cited in Azirah, 2020). This made English become only a compulsory subject. This educational language policy led to the limited use of English in this country, especially among those in rural areas. However, people in urban areas still use English informally. However, English plays more roles in higher education in this country in the late twentieth century because of the need by stakeholders and the global status of the language. Another change occurred in 2003, the time for teaching English in Mathematics and Sciences in primary and secondary schools. This policy was implemented by 2012. It was then abolished because of many problems, especially regarding those teachers and learners in rural areas. Many Mathematics and Science teachers could not teach English, and many students did not have mastery of Mathematics and Science contents. Since 2012, these two courses have been taught in Bahasa Malaysia. However, this policy does not make the English language become less important in Malaysian schools. That is, the MBMMBI policy (Malay for Upholding the Malay language and strengthening the English language). This new policy is aimed at ensuring that Bahasa Malaysia is used as a medium of instruction in all schools, and at enriching students' proficiency of Malay and English. This reflects a contact between Malay and English for students. This also affects students of other ethnics like Chinese and Indians who are also required to study Bahasa Malaysia and their vernacular languages (Ministry of Education, 2015, as cited in Radzuwan et al., 2016). From this policy, English becomes only a compulsory subject in schools. This is contrary to higher education where English is more vital. Many Science-based programs and business-commerce-economics programs in state universities are conducted in English because it is a language of



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academia in Malaysian higher education. Due to the world ranking status of Malaysian universities, English is an academic language in journal publication as well as an increasing number of foreign students in this country (Azirah, 2020). Thus, the growth of English as an educational language is more obvious in Malaysian universities and colleges than in schools.

After a full independence in 1984, Brunei has adopted the policy of Malay-English bilingual programs in all educational levels. From 1985-2009, the bilingual program had been implemented, so the use of English among Bruneians increased. Students were required to study all subjects through Malay for primary years 1-3. This excluded English, studying through English as a medium of instruction. Then, they were required to study Mathematics, Science, and Geography in English for primary years 4-6. The rest of the subjects were taught in Malay (Noor Azam, 2005, as cited in McLellan, 2020). However, this bilingual program is criticized because English is a more important than Malay. Since 2009, the policy 'National System of Education for the 21st century' has been implemented. However, the importance of Brunei Malay appears in subjects of soft-skills in arts and Islamic religious education. Since this time, English has still been more intensified as a medium of instruction in Science and Mathematics from primary year 1 (Jones, 2012, as cited in McLellan, 2016).

In light of higher education, English is taught in the majority of programs in the national university, Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), which was founded in 1985. Only some programs are conducted in Malay, such as History (a combination of English and Malay), Malay language and literature, as well as Islamic studies (Malay and Arabic). Further, the Institut Teknologi Brunei (ITB) offers programs in Computer Science as well as Electrical and Electronic Engineering through the use of English as a medium of instruction (McLellan et al., 2016).

Malaysia did not employ the bilingual education policy since 1967. This did not give rise to English because of the nationalization policy. Hence, a range and depth of English proficiency among Malaysians fall into those in town or urban areas rather than in the rural ones. On the contrary, the Malay-English bilingual program in Brunei has made new generations of Bruneians become more English literate. This does not mean that Malaysian people have lower English proficiency than Brunei people. It is merely a comparison that language education policy that stresses English in Brunei is more stable than in Malaysia.

6. Discussion and Implications for English as a Foreign Language in Thailand

Malaysia and Brunei are Thailand's neighbors. The roles of English in these Malay-speaking countries indicate some implications for understanding English in Thailand.



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What Thailand is similar to Malaysia and Brunei is seen in the Malay and Chinese ethnics. Chinese Thais are populated throughout Thailand while the majority of Malay or Muslim Thais are mainly in South and some in the Central region. A number of Chinese and Malay words nativized into Malaysian English and Brunei English can be used in Thai society such as *Kuayteow*, *dim sum*, *mooncake*, *tawkae*, *sarung*, *durian*, *langsat*, and *paddy field*. Some Malay words in Malaysian and Brunei Englishes mentioned are used in the Deep South. In terms of local varieties of English, a number of southern Thai entrepreneurs are working in collaboration with Malaysians. Hatyai, Songkhla is a commercial hub in the Deep South where many Malaysians come to visit. Many Thai workers and people in the area experience an oral interaction in English with Malaysian visitors. They may need to understand features of Malaysian English (Malay, Chinese, and Indian sub-varieties). This is also similar to those Thais who work in Penang, Kuala Lumpur, and other states need to converse in English and Malay, and they have to be aware of Malaysian English communicatively.

Although Brunei is not bordered by Thailand, it is a workplace for many Thai expats because of Brunei's stable economics and high currency unit, namely Ringgit Brunei. Many Thai workers in Brunei need to converse in Malay and English, and they also need to perceive what Bruneians speak in English. Hence, Brunei English can be understood by them.

Around 1,930 Thai students choose to study at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in many public and private universities in Malaysia, especially in Kedah, Penang, Kuala Lumpur, and Selangor because of quality English education, world class standard education level, and the low tuition fee (Alami Media, n.d.). They experience in using English with Malaysians, and they are taught by Malaysian lecturers of English. They understand Malaysian English. Likewise, although in 2020 over 40 Thai students have been studying in three universities in Brunei, namely Universiti Perguruan Ugama Seri Begawan, Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali, and Universiti Brunei Darussalam (The Star, 2021), they also encounter using Brunei English daily.

English is used as a foreign language in Thailand. This does not mean that Thai people should learn and use only native English, namely British English and American English by studying in the UK and USA and communicating with British and American people. Indeed, the ESL varieties like Malaysian English and Brunei English can be choices. As English is a lingua franca around the world, Malaysian English and Brunei English can be modelled by Thais in light of linguistic development, educational language policy, and communicative use. Thai people should give rise to Thai English and use it in some functions. Besides, the Thai Ministry



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of Education can study how Malaysian and Bruneian education can be growing because of English language policy. This is the way to promote local varieties of English in Southeast Asia.

7. Conclusion

This paper has revealed that Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam point out ESL in many functions in the postcolonial era. The administrative, official, and legal domains of English in the two countries are similar in that the roles of English in law courts are increasing. However, communicative and educational domains of English are quite different. Malaysian English seems to meet its diversity or varieties of English according to three main ethnic speakers – Malay, Chinese, and Indians. Meanwhile, Brunei English is confined to mainly Malays but slightly Chinese. English in Brunei is based on bilingual education at all levels while English is only a required course in Malaysian primary and secondary schools. English education in Malaysia is more intensive and used at the university level. Overall, these three aspects for the comparison and contrast are significant for English in Thailand, especially those Thais who work and study in the two countries. All in all, English use in Malaysia and Brunei is still considered a second language because of a wider range of functional use and language policy than that in Thailand, the so-called EFL country.

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