The Evolution of Language-in-Education Policies in Brunei Darussalam

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Introduction

Negara Brunei Darussalam, to give the country its full title (henceforth Brunei) is a small sultanate on the north coast of Borneo. It has a coastline of 161 km along the South China Sea and a total land area of 5,765 sq km. The country is bounded by the much larger Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah. Part of Sarawak actually separates one Brunei district, Temburong, from the rest of the country. (See map 1.)

Map 1: Negara Brunei Darussalam
(http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/asia/lgcolor/bncolor.htm)
Brunei is the third largest oil producer in Southeast Asia, producing 163,000 barrels a day, and is the fourth largest producer of liquefied natural gas in the world. Thus the oil and gas industry is obviously of key importance to Brunei, playing by far the biggest role in the country’s economy. The country has a small garment manufacturing industry, as well as agricultural and fishing industries, but all other industries in the country are overshadowed by oil and gas. The government is the single biggest employer in the country, employing approximately one third of the labour force.

The 2004 census returned a population of 357,800 people. Of this number, 237,100 (66.2%) were recorded as coming from the majority Malay Indigenous community; 12,300 (3.4%) from other indigenous groups; people of Chinese origin numbered 40,200 (11.2%) and people from other none specified races 68,200 (19%). This census also showed a high proportion of young people in the population:

- The population by age grouping shows that about 148,300 (41.4%) persons are below 19 years, 201,500 persons (56.3%) at the working age group of between 19 and 64 years while 8,000 persons (2.2%) are over 65 years of age. (www.brunei.gov.bn)

Virtually all Malays, as well as many people from other ethnic groups within the country, are Muslims. Thus Islam is the most widely practiced religion in the country and is the Official Religion of Brunei, as stated in the country’s Constitution, with His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei as head of faith. Other faiths that are practiced in the State include Christianity and Buddhism.

**The People and their Languages**

For such a small country, Brunei has a diverse population and a number of speech communities. As a result of its geography, seven distinct Malay communities (Belait, Bisaya, Brunei Malay, Dusun, Kedayan, Murut and Tutong) as well as two other non-indigenous communities (Iban and Kelabit) call Brunei home. Historically these communities lived apart from each other, separated by rivers, forest and mountains. As a result of this isolation, these communities developed different dialects, languages and cultures. (Map 2 provides the geographical location of these language groups.) It was only in the last century that road and bridge building brought these communities into regular contact with each other. While most Bruneians still identify with one of these communities, intermarriage and relocation for purposes of work, education or family mean that the former ethnic divisions are now breaking down.
Until 1991 it was assumed that the seven Malay communities in Brunei all spoke dialects of the same language. However, research by Nothofer (1991) dispelled this notion. He showed that the principal dialects of Malay spoken in Brunei include only Brunei Malay, Kampong Ayer (meaning water village, a large stilted village next to the country’s capital) Kedayan and Standard Malay, but exclude the other five indigenous codes. Thus Belait, Bisaya, Dusun, Murut and Kedayan should not be considered dialects of Malay but as separate languages.

Locally, the most widely used local dialect of Malay is Brunei Malay, which is assumed to have its origins in the Kampong Ayer dialect. However, the dialect that is used in official correspondence and which is taught in schools is Standard Malay, which originated in West Malaysia.

Other significant language communities in the country are Iban and Kelabit. While indigenous to Borneo, these communities are not indigenous to Brunei, having crossed into the country from neighbouring Sarawak. Similarly, a small community of Penan people, perhaps numbering only 51 people (Martin & Sercombe, 1992) also resides in the country.

Apart from the Bornean people, the other significant ethnic group is the Chinese who, as stated earlier, make up 11.2% of the country’s population. Mandarin is the lingua franca of the Chinese community, with the two most dominant communities being Hokkien and Hakka (Niew, 1989,
However, it should be noted that many young Chinese now use English as their first language.

In addition to these local people, the remaining 19% of the country’s population is comprised of ‘other races’, referring to the country’s large expatriate foreign workforce. This consists of large numbers of construction and manual labourers from the Indian sub-continent, Indonesia and the Philippines. In addition, together with Malaysia and Singapore, these countries also provide many of the country’s doctors, engineers, nurses and middle managers. Many of the country’s teachers and other professionals come from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. As will be described, Brunei was formerly almost totally dependent on its foreign workforce, but increasingly most technical and professional positions are being localized.

All the languages described above are used in Brunei today. However, only three, Malay, in its various forms, Chinese and English, are likely to be encountered on a regular basis, especially in urban areas. Today, Bruneians from whichever background are familiar with and use Brunei Malay, except when they know that they are talking to someone from their own language community. Similarly, most Bruneians, particularly the young and better educated, know English and often switch codes between this language and whichever form of Malay they are using. Official notices and road signs throughout the country are written in either Standard Malay or English. Notices on shop fronts are written in Jawi script (a form of written Malay derived from Arabic) and English (as well as Chinese, if it is a Chinese business). Sign boards, official notices and advertisements are only presented in these languages, never in any of the country’s other languages. Thus, both publicly and privately, aside from Brunei and Standard Malay, the country’s other languages are not being promoted or widely used.

It is also very important to note here that while Standard Malay, Chinese and English have strong literary histories, the same is not true of the other languages. Brunei’s indigenous languages have an oral tradition but not a written one. Thus there are no texts, dictionaries, reference works or, therefore, teaching-learning materials that potential students could use.

The Development of a Language-in-Education Policy - The Early Years
Tracing the origins of Brunei’s present language-in-education policies is relatively easy because formal education is a recent phenomenon in the Sultanate and the history of the country’s educational development has been well documented.

Although Brunei was once an important regional power, by 1906 its political survival was in jeopardy and the country turned to Britain for protection from its avaricious neighbours (see Cleary & Eaton, 1992). Thus began a close relationship between Brunei and Britain that has continued to this day: a relationship that, among other things, has greatly shaped Brunei’s education system.

From 1906 Brunei became a British Protected State, with a British Resident who advised the Sultan, the ruler of the country, on all matters other than those pertaining to religion. For the most part Brunei continued to manage its own affairs, safe in the knowledge that it was protected from outside aggression by Britain. For his part the British Resident provided the same sort of advice to the Sultan and his government that was being given to rulers of the various Malay states that now constitute Malaysia. Initial advice concentrated on transport, communication and health care. By 1911, however, some attention was being given to education. Between 1914 and
1918 four vernacular schools for boys were established in the country, although no further schools were added till 1929.

In 1923 oil was discovered in Brunei and this was to transform the country from an economic backwater into a comparably wealthy state. The development and exploitation of the country’s oil and natural gas reserves did not have an immediate social or economic impact on the country. Rather, the change was slow, with a gradual appreciation of the benefits and problems that the oil industry could bring. Initially, of course, there was the revenue. In 1909 Brunei had enjoyed revenues of GBP27,640; in 1919 this figure was GBP132,300 and by 1929 GBP145,800. Throughout the 1930s, however, as oil fields were developed, so income improved. By 1939 state revenues had risen to GBP1,274,644, or almost ten times what they had been 10 years earlier. Brunei was on the path to becoming what it is probably most famous for being today – a small oil rich sultanate.

The oil and gas industry had a profound influence on life in Brunei. Long before the material benefits derived from its income could be appreciated there was the immediate change to Brunei’s landscape and the impact on its population. The seat of power in Brunei has always been around Kampong Ayer and Brunei Bay, then later Brunei Town (now known as Bandar Seri Begawan). However, the oil discoveries were made in the Belait district, one hundred miles from Brunei Town at the other end of the country. The quiet remote villages of Seria and Kuala Belait became centres of industrial activity. Men and machinery from different parts of the globe arrived transforming the landscape and the population. Coming from an industry that is predominantly English-speaking one of the first problems to be encountered by both the locals and newcomers was one of mutual comprehension. While many of the oil workers learned rudimentary Malay (and some, particularly those from China who chose to remain and live in Brunei, learned the language properly) it was clear that some Bruneians would need to learn English.

It was the Bruneians who initially came into contact with the oil workers who had the most pressing need to learn English. These included local officers who represented the government in negotiations as well as customs officers, clerks dealing with equipment and anyone else party to the myriad operations involved in setting up an industry.

One indication of the need to improve communications occurred in 1928 when “a start was made teaching elementary English at afternoon classes. These were attended by members of the Government Subordinate Staff and the Police” ((McKerron, 1929:19). These are the first recorded English classes in Brunei. Such classes, and adult education in general, proved popular and have continued up to the present in one form or another.

The need for an educated population was becoming increasingly apparent, and not just from the authorities. Many Bruneians realised that their sons (daughters were treated very differently at this time) could reap greater rewards through education and government or oil-related employment than they could as farmers or fishermen. As the British Resident observed in 1930, the inhabitants of the State “are at last waking up to the value of education for boys” (McKerron, 1930:21). With improved revenues and more demand the government planned to open at least one new school a year over the following ten years. This included a school for girls that was opened in 1930, but which, after a number of false starts, had to close in 1934. The Resident reported with regret that “the Girls School in Brunei was finally recognised as a failure and was closed at the end of August. The effort was premature” (Turnbull, 1935:16).
As the number of schools increased and as greater attention continued to be given to education, so, inevitably, did questions about the type of education and, in particular, the medium. In 1929 “an Enactment to provide for compulsory attendance at schools (Enactment No.3 of 1929) was passed giving the Resident power to declare from time to time the parts of the State in which compulsory attendance could be enforced” (McKerron, 1930:20). Given the transportation difficulties of the day, the Act only applied to boys speaking Malay as a first language. However, as a later Resident pointed out:

At least a quarter of the indigenous population of the state is composed of races whose mother tongue is not Malay, that criterion is hardly satisfactory. The provision of education in several languages is obviously impracticable, and it is inevitable that, linguistically at any rate, the other races must be assimilated to Malay. It is proposed, therefore, to amend the Enactment to make attendance at Malay schools compulsory for all children of Malaysian race alike.

(Graham Black, 1939:34)

This is a very important amendment and one that set at least one parameter for language education in Brunei. At no time has the question of teaching in a child’s first language (other than Malay) been raised since 1939. On the one hand this is not surprising given the subsequent greater integration of Brunei society and the more widespread use of Malay and, latterly, English, but it is at odds with language planning in many other communities. Although globally greater consideration is being given to minority languages than was done in the past, this is not the case in Brunei.

Brunei experienced Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1945. During this period educational development came to a halt, although the Japanese did conduct some classes, in their own language, and the most promising pupils continued their studies in Japan itself.

Post-War Development
After the War the British Resident returned to Brunei and the country embarked on a period of reconstruction. Schools were reopened, although one school that was vital to Brunei’s manpower requirements but which never reopened was the Government English School on Labuan.

Labuan is a small Malaysian island just 23 miles from Brunei. Due to its deep water harbour and coaling facilities it was considered an important outpost by the British and thus had a sizeable British community and supporting services, including the English School. From 1919 promising young Bruneians had attended this school and had thus provided a cadre of English-educated locals for Brunei itself. However, the failure of this school to reopen left a vacuum in the education needs of Brunei. With the continuing reconstruction throughout the 1940s and the increasing revenues from oil and gas the need for English-knowing Bruneians was becoming ever more apparent. Late in 1949 a professional Education Officer was appointed to the post of State Education Officer. From this point the infrastructure for Brunei’s present education system, including the resulting language-in-education policies, was laid.

Educational development in Brunei from the turn of the century till 1950 had been marked by a lack of ambition, limited funding (at least, initially) and no obvious purpose. As successive Residents repeated in their annual reports, pre-war education in Brunei was not meant to take Malays away from the land. As was the case in rural Malaysia, education was meant to maintain the status quo while enabling pupils to keep simple accounts, read and write, use suitable
husbandry and improve hygiene. This limited education agenda, however, was no longer appropriate for the quickly developing State.

As previously stated, government revenue in 1939 was GBP1,274,644. By 1951 the figure was GBP17,302,869, and by 1953 the figure had increased five-fold to GBP98,976,643, an enormous sum of money compared with twenty years earlier and an income that was to bring huge change to the country. In 1954, fuelled with the burgeoning revenues from the sale of oil, Brunei embarked on a five year Development Plan for Education. As the Resident reported two years later:

Relatively vast wealth has fallen to their hands, and instead of being able to use it directly, themselves, they must perforce employ others to provide for them the services they need and their money can buy.

(Gilbert, 1957:42)

The Plan would create the infrastructure for what would eventually become the Ministry of Education. New schools would be built, large numbers of teachers trained and more expatriates employed in schools. However, in addition to preparing the Plan, the State Education Officer had been taking steps to bring English medium education to the State.

Recognising the need to have English educated Bruneians, and realising that the Labuan school was not going to reopen, a Government English School was established in Brunei Town in October 1951. This school had two trained teachers, one from the United Kingdom and the other from Malaya. The decisions that these two teachers made, no doubt in collaboration with the State Education Officer, have had a profound and lasting impact on the present school system. Many of the practices that they introduced back then, due to the circumstances of the time, still remain today.

The Government English School may have had two teachers, but it did not start with any pupils – there was no formal English being taught in Brunei so there were no English medium pupils to send to it. As a result, four selected primary schools had been introducing English lessons at Primary 4, when the pupils were eight years old. The more able pupils were then given tuition in English by the State Education Officer himself before proceeding to the English School. What is so important about this procedure is that it was to determine at what age English medium education would be introduced to Bruneian pupils. Even today, fifty-seven years later, English medium education is introduced to pupils in Primary 4. However, unlike the early pupils who were selected for the English School and who had the benefit of individual attention from the State Education Officer, today’s pupils have no such support. Whether they are ready or have the aptitude, all pupils follow the same curriculum. Not surprisingly, given that the procedure was established to solve an immediate problem in 1951, and was designed anyway with gifted children in mind, this sudden transition creates problems for many children. (For a fuller account of the education system and some of the problems, particularly those associated with curriculum issues, see Jones, 1996a.)

An important statement about language and culture, related to the introduction of English in Primary IV, is included in the Resident’s Annual Report of 1951:

There are other matters, however, which must be considered with this type of school. One is the very important consideration as to the extent such schools should be made available; and again, what repercussions they would have in respect of the languages and cultures of the two main racial groups in Brunei, i.e. the indigenous races and Chinese. There is also the consideration of the impact upon the economy of the State if all children went direct to English schools. Again it is felt that the great majority of
parents are in favour of their children acquiring their first and early education throughout the medium of the child’s mother tongue in vernacular schools, with the study of English as a second language. This study ... begins in their third and fourth year. There is no reason, it may be said, providing the subject is taught by a qualified teacher, and providing also that sufficient time is devoted to it, why results should not be as good as those in recognised English schools?

(Barcroft, 1952:33-34)

This is the first recorded statement linking language and culture in Brunei, and raises an issue that has been current ever since. On the issue of the preferred medium of education, Barcroft would seem to be contradicting earlier (and subsequent) statements: this subject appears to have given rise to some confusion. The last question, about whether the results can be as good as those from English schools, is still open to debate. The assumed standard attained by graduates from such schools is also vague. While parity with English schools was the objective, this does not necessarily assume a particularly high level of attainment for all pupils. In 1952 the same author reports:

Thus, pupils who enter a Malay School at 6 years of age and make formal progress through the six Primary Classes would at the age of 12 be able to take up an Artisan Course where Primary V English is required as the basic qualification.

(Barcroft, 1953:40)

On the assumption that a sufficient command of English to undertake an Artisan Course translates to only a minimum competency in the language, then clearly the language proficiency expectations of graduates from the Malay medium was very limited, more so than the previous year’s statement might suggest.

It is also informative to note that the “great majority of parents” favoured the mother tongue. But which mother tongue? The writer is almost certainly assuming that this is Malay, which would have been far from the reality for many children at that time, and certainly not Standard Malay. This suggests a naïve appreciation of the country’s linguistic mosaic.

By the completion of the Development Plan, in 1959, there were 15,006 pupils enrolled in the State’s schools, 30% of whom were girls. There were 52 Malay primary schools; 3 English schools (including one exclusively for girls that had been completed in 1958); 7 mission schools; 8 Chinese primary schools and 3 Chinese secondary schools. (In 1957 the Government gave grants-in-aid to these Chinese schools. This meant that they could now be inspected and reported on, effectively bringing them under government control.) As earlier mentioned, there were 133 Bruneians at teacher training colleges and Brunei had established its own college in 1956. The State’s teachers were employed from Ceylon, India, Malaya, the Philippines, the United Kingdom and Australia.

Beginning in the late 1950s we really start to see the creation of the type of state that Brunei has become today. As well as being buoyed with the revenue from oil and gas, the country was also witness to the declining influence of the British in various parts of Asia, most notably India and Malaya. Bruneians themselves were becoming more assertive and the role and need of a British presence was being questioned. Malaya’s independence from Britain in 1957 to become Malaysia was followed in 1959 with Brunei gaining greater autonomy from Britain. The British Resident became the Resident and High Commissioner. Local Malay Muslims were appointed to the posts of Chief Minister and State Secretary and Executive and Legislative Councils were formed.
The changes affecting the country were also felt in education and language choice. Article 82(1) of the 1959 State Constitution states:

The official language of the State shall be the Malay language and shall be in such script as may by written law be provided.

The Article stipulates that English might be used with Malay for a further period of five years for all official purposes and thereafter until dictated by written law; the assumption being that Malay would eventually replace English, and quickly, for all official business. Sheik Adnan notes that:

A survey carried out to find out the wishes of the people before the drawing up of the State Constitution indicated that there was unanimous support for choosing Malay as the official language.

(Sheik Adnan, 1983:10)

The choice of Malay (Standard Malay, not Brunei Malay) as the national language was to have implications for the choice of language within any National System of Education. It draws attention to the perceived instrumental demand for English and that of Malay as an integrative language bound with the heritage and culture of the local population.

In 1959, a Central Advisory Committee on Education appointed two Malaysians, Aminuddin Baki and Paul Chang, to advise the Brunei Government on general policy and principles to be followed in education. Having spent only two weeks in Brunei, and using the Malaysian Tun Razak Education Report of 1956 as the source if their recommendations, Baki and Chang presented their report.

The recommendations of the Report were accepted by the Government and subsequently became the National Education Policy of 1962. This Report places “an emphasis on the need to foster a common loyalty to all the children of every race under a national education system and policies” (Report of the Education Commission of Brunei, 1972:3).

National unity is a recurring theme throughout both the Malaysian and Bruneian reports. The Razak Report states:

We believe further that the ultimate objective of the educational policy of this country must be to bring together the children of all races under a national education system in which the national language is the main medium of instruction though we recognise the progress towards this goal cannot be rushed and must be gradual.

(Razak Report on Education, 1956)

It is clear that in both Malaysia and Brunei, having established a need for an education system and having provided an infrastructure, both countries then gave greatest consideration to the political ramifications of education. Both countries are multilingual and multiethnic (although this is more immediately obvious in Malaysia than in Brunei). For both countries national unity and a clear sense of national identity was of great importance. Other issues such as syllabus design, teacher supply and so forth were still being considered and worked on, but at the macro level focus was on the integrity of these newly independent states and assurances were needed that the various peoples could work together for the common good.

Malaysia eventually went on to adopt key elements of the Razak Report, including Malay as the language medium for most subjects. The subsequent development of education in Malaysia, particularly with regard to language choice, can be followed in Asmah & Noor (1981), Ozog
(1993) and Hashim (1999) among others. It is interesting to note that having divested itself of imagined imperial vestiges, including the English language, world-wide events, particularly the development of English as a world language, meant that eventually Malaysia had to change its stance on the question of language medium and resume teaching some subjects through the medium of English in its schools.

Brunei, however, failed to implement the Baki-Chang Report or the National Education Policy that followed it. While preparations for its implementation were being made, an insurrection broke out in the country. Although the insurrection was quickly squashed, the normal routine of the country was severely affected, including plans that had yet to be implemented. Instead, after the trouble, the country and government tried to reestablish itself, going back to practices and procedures that had existed before the insurrection. In the milieu the proposed education changes seem to have been dropped.

Throughout the 1960s the Government continued to add to the number of schools, teachers and, of course, pupils attending school. Development was across the board at both primary and secondary level and included both Malay and English medium Government schools. The number of girls in schools had grown enormously so that by this time there were almost as many girls enrolled in schools as boys.

The question of language medium, however, had not been resolved. The Chinese community had its own schools and language medium, with books supplied from Taiwan; the religious authorities had a small number of pupils being taught through the medium of Arabic while the Government schools were divided between English and Malay medium, with books from Britain and Malaysia respectively. An Education Commission begun in 1970 subsequently presented the Report of the Education Commission, 1972, which called for the implementation of the 1962 Education Policy.

This Report provided the basic structure and procedures for the present Ministry of Education. What was not implemented, however, was the very first recommendation:

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\text{i. to make Malay as the main medium of instruction in National Primary and Secondary Schools as soon as possible in line with the requirements of the Constitution;}
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\[(\text{Education Report, 1972:9)}\]

The commissioners went on to quote the country’s constitution and national unity as well as providing sound educational reasons for adopting Malay. It also recommended that until such time as Brunei’s own system had been prepared the country should adopt the Malaysian system of education.

Once again, however, fate intervened to prevent the introduction of Malay medium education. In 1974 political and diplomatic relations between Brunei and Malaysia deteriorated, to the extent that Bruneians studying in Malaysia were recalled and the option of adopting the Malaysian system of education was cancelled. Further, Brunei had no diplomatic relations with Indonesia, the only other country with Malay medium universities, so it could not send its students there. There was no problem for English medium students, they had always gone to universities in the United Kingdom and to other English-speaking Commonwealth universities. The solution to resolve the problem for the Malay medium Bruneian students was to send them to English-speaking universities, but having first provided them with crash courses in the English language (up to two years) at private language schools in Britain.
**1984 – the Present**

The question of language medium was to remain unresolved for another ten years, until the introduction of the Education System of Negara Brunei Darussalam in 1984. This System, apart from fairly cosmetic changes, is still the one that is used in Brunei today. It has been well documented (Jones, Martin & Ozog, 1993 and Jones, 1996b, for instance) and needs little elaboration here. Briefly, the System attempts to weave the recommendations of the 1972 Report into a bilingual education system rather than a Malay-only model. The concept of solidarity and nation building is given great emphasis throughout the 1984 document. The System and explanations are something of a balancing act, trying to satisfy the Malay medium lobby while also recognising the need for English. Within the document the ‘Concept of Bilingualism’ is defined as:

3.1 The concept of a bilingual system is a means of ensuring the sovereignty of the Malay Language, while at the same time recognising the importance of the English Language. By means of the Education System of Negara Brunei Darussalam a high degree of proficiency in both languages should be achieved.

(Brunei Government Publication, 1984:4)

It is clear that once again planners were at the mercy of circumstances. Without a doubt it was the events of 1962 and 1974 that had a decisive influence on the adoption of a bilingual education system in Brunei. A decision that might appear to have been far-sighted, given the subsequent decisions of other countries, notably Malaysia, to adopt such systems themselves was made not for any pedagogic reasons but because of the circumstances of the day. How much the lack of Malay medium tertiary education was a factor is indicated by point 3.2 of the System:

3.2 This recognition of the importance of the English Language is partly based on an assumption of its importance for academic study, and thus its ability to facilitate the entry of students from Brunei Darussalam to institutions of higher education overseas where the medium of instruction is English. Such a perception may, of course, be subject to review should Brunei Darussalam itself be able, in the future, to provide its own facilities for higher education.

(ibid:4)

As it is, Brunei has been able to provide its own facilities for higher education, but the majority of programmes in these institutions are English medium, reflecting the actual demand from students and employers. Since 1984 there has been an enormous upsurge in the amount of English being used worldwide, thus the demand today from Bruneian students is mostly for English medium programmes. Once again, events have overtaken the planners.

As a result of circumstances, therefore, Brunei has adopted an education system that uses two languages, neither of which is indigenous to Brunei – Standard Malay and English. Of the two, English is clearly the most ‘foreign’, nevertheless, even Standard Malay has to be learned, it is not a language that children will acquire outside the classroom. Given much of the shared lexis and syntax, it might be assumed that learning Standard Malay is less of a problem for Bruneian children than learning English. However, colleagues in the Malay Language department at UBD often lament the poor quality of their students’ Standard Malay – and these are students who are majoring in the subject. Students reading other programmes regularly claim to be more proficient in English than Standard Malay. There is clearly a problem and it raises the question of whether pupils should use Brunei Malay rather than Standard in schools. Although muted, the suggestion has never been taken very far. As described earlier, Brunei’s original Malay medium teachers were all from Malaya and Brunei’s own teacher training college only opened in 1956, with the
Malay medium teacher trainers coming from Malaysia. It would therefore not have been possible to introduce Brunei Malay as a teaching medium in these circumstances. This is not to say that such a change will never take place, only that it is unlikely, certainly in the near future.

The Situation Today
In his 2005 PhD thesis, Noor Azam Haji-Othman provides a detailed account of *Changes in the Linguistic Diversity of Negara Brunei Darussalam*. Among other things, this provides an analysis of how and why Bruneians have moved from using one language medium to another. Perhaps most pertinent to this paper are his observations on the use and spread of English in Brunei, particularly since he had not intended to mention this language at all but to concentrate solely on Bruneian languages.

During his research, which he attempted to conduct solely in Brunei Malay, or the other local languages that he knows, Tutong and Dusun, the role of English in peoples’ lives was repeatedly brought up. Noor Azam remarks that “English was constantly being referred to by the informants throughout the discussions about indigenous languages as though it were an indigenous member of the language ecology” (Noor Azam, 2005:203). In fact, Noor Azam notes that some of Brunei’s new generation have shifted to English, especially among the elite and well educated. As Noor Azam explains, there are a number of possible explanations for this.

Historically, Britain played a far more benign role in Brunei than it did in countries that were colonized. The country appears to have helped Brunei’s development rather than hinder it and thus its actions were favourably received. In addition, Brunei’s royalty has close personal relations with Britain’s royalty, the armed forces of both countries cooperate closely and many Bruneians study in British schools and universities. And most important, the English language has always been associated in Brunei with education while over the last thirty years it has also become the dominant world language and one of the two languages used in the country’s bilingual education system. Thus the language and Britain have been seen in a positive way. Nowadays, however, the historical ties are far less important to the spread and use of English than its utilitarian value. Noor Azam goes so far as to suggest that a Bruneian “could now be defined as a Malay-English bilingual” (ibid: 239).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the role that both English and Malay play in the country, Noor Azam pursued the question of the role of Brunei’s indigenous languages in the school curriculum. The answers provided, a typical example is shown below, suggest very little faith in the usefulness of these languages in the country:

**Director of Curriculum Development, Ministry of Education**

1) Those languages cannot perform the formal and official function as a language of education, compared to Malay and English which have a complete corpus in terms of lexis, phonology, morphology and syntax.

2) The area of spread of these languages are limited and do not transcend the speakers’ geographical boundaries. They are spoken in informal situations. Malay is used as the main regional language in MABBIM member countries. English on the other hand is an international language.

3) The number of speakers of those languages is small and limited to each ethnic group. In the ASEAN region, Malay is spoken by roughly 250 million people while English is used by the global population.

[Translation]

(Translation: 195)
It is interesting to note that the Director referred to a lack of a proper standardized writing or code system for these languages. Some speakers of the languages also referred to this:

A bit difficult because we don’t have this written code for these different dialects … If I were to write in bahasa Belait, (first), I don’t think anybody can understand … the second reason is that it looks awkward to write in Belait …

… it wouldn’t look nice … when writing letters you don’t use Dusun, because it’s awkward … [Trans.] (ibid: 199)

Noor Azam goes on to argue that it probably would not be too difficult to develop the indigenous languages orthographically, but the will to do so is lacking.

Similarly, he witnessed very little support for these languages from the country’s Language and Literature Bureau (LLB) or from the state broadcasters, Radio Television Brunei (RTB). The respondent from the LLB reminded him that they are “entrusted to propagate the Malay language” (trans.) (ibid: 201), while RTB took the pragmatic line that broadcasting in minority languages would not be very cost effective in terms of audience size. Given the state functions of both the LLB and RTB, it is clear that linguistic diversity has no official support.

There is very little to suggest that the situation is going to get any better for the country’s indigenous languages. Bruneians have been and continue to shift towards Brunei Malay and English and to also learn Standard Malay. Noor Azam concludes that “the informants in this study have reported that some ethnic language speakers are abandoning their language altogether and that the younger generations of all these communities it seems are brought up speaking Malay as a first language” (ibid: 215).

**Conclusion**

As I hope this paper has demonstrated, while Brunei does have a language-in-education policy, it is one that promotes two languages that are non-indigenous to Brunei: Standard Malay and English. The reasons for this are both pragmatic and historical and it seems very unlikely that there will be any shift away from these languages in the near future, nor does it seem likely that any of the country’s indigenous languages will be introduced into the school curriculum.

It is not just in education that indigenous languages are being ignored. There is no apparent will on the part of the speakers of these languages to change matters, and no apparent state support either. Most Bruneians, it would appear, want to learn Standard Malay and English for instrumental purposes and Brunei Malay as a means of common communication.

While this may be a very bleak assessment of the future of Brunei’s indigenous languages, not just as education mediums but their very survival, there is, perhaps, the merest glimmer of hope. Indigenous language speakers like Noor Azam are asking questions and it is certainly not too late to record, document and eventually continue using and even teaching these languages. However, the various language communities themselves will have to show far more enthusiasm and support for their languages than has been the case till now.
References


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