

Chapter 2.1

Overview on the State of English Policy and Practice in Brunei Darussalam

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History of English Language Education in Brunei

Early English language education in Brunei Darussalam was provided by missionary or non-governmental schools, one of which was a primary school established in Seria (Brown and Haji Abdul Rahim 2013, 2). Another school was established in Labuan, an island located to the north of the country, which saw some 44 students enrolled in the school in 1940 (Gunn 1997, 79). Before the Second World War erupted, there were a total of three private English schools in Brunei (Ibp 2008, 150).

Once the war ended, Brunei experienced a rapid reconstruction and development phase, largely due to the country's revenue from the oil and gas industry. The education system underwent a massive transformation with the setting up of several schools, including a Brunei Town Government English School in the capital in 1951, and the establishment of the English-medium secondary education in 1953 (Ibp 2008, 150).

The National Education Policy of 1962 recommended the use of Malay as the main medium of instruction in both primary and secondary schools whereas English would be taught separately as a compulsory subject during the six years in government primary schools. The Report of the Education Commission in 1972 again stressed the importance of Malay as the sole language of education but ensuing events in the country, first in 1962, and then in 1974, led to a change in the final choice of a language medium for Brunei's national education policy (Ibp 2008, 150; Jones 1997, 18; Jones 2012).

The Bilingual Education System

Not long after its independence from Britain in January 1984, the Bilingual Education Policy, called *Dwibahasa*, was enacted in 1985. This system of education was aimed at producing Bruneians with a high level of proficiency in both English and Malay, who are able to switch effortlessly from Malay to English.

The recognition of the importance of the English language was partly based on the performance, or lack thereof, of Brunei students who had gone off to English-medium universities, including the United Kingdom. Despite having studied English for two years before pursuing their tertiary education, a number of the Brunei scholars came back to the country without attaining any qualifications. A

reason for this, it seemed, was their lack of competency in English. As stated by Jones (2007, 247), this was likely one of the reasons for the introduction of the bilingual education system in Brunei.

Initially, the bilingual system of education only applied to government schools and all followed a common national curriculum. It was, however, later extended to private schools. Under this system of education all subjects from pre-school up to Primary 3, with the exception of English, which is taught as a stand-alone subject, were delivered in Malay. A gradual shift would then take place once pupils enter Primary 4 (roughly when schoolchildren are nine years of age) where two mediums of instruction were used. Subjects such as mathematics, history, geography, science, and the English language were taught in English whereas *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay), Islamic religious knowledge, Arts and Crafts, Civics, and Physical Education were taught in Malay (Ibp 2008: 151; Jones, 1996: 127).

The implementation of this bilingual education policy resulted in the phasing out of the Malay medium stream education, as schools were no longer branched into the Malay and English streams. The significance of this is that all students are given an equal opportunity to progress. This is in contrast to the previous practice in which students from the Malay medium stream were markedly at a disadvantage.

Another achievement in Brunei's English Education Policy was the incorporation of English lessons for 3 hours a week into the pre-school curriculum beginning in January 1992. This strategy, implemented in all government and private primary schools, was employed with the aim of strengthening the foundation of English language skills among children in early education.

Center for British Teachers (CfBT)

The year the bilingual education system came into force also saw the arrival of the Center for British Teachers (CfBT) in Brunei. Now known as CfBT Education Trust, the role of the CFBT is to provide support to improved English language teaching and outcomes in Brunei through its involvement as an "external education provider and change agent" (Sammons et al. 2014, 2). CfBT teachers come from a variety of "native English speaking" countries, the majority of whom are from the UK, followed by New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. Currently, over 200 CfBT teachers are contracted at primary and secondary schools all over the country (CfBT 2013).

In addition to supplying teachers of English to Brunei schools, CfBT also collaborates with the Ministry of Education (MoE) in implementing projects and initiatives aimed at effective teaching practices and improved student achievement. Among the projects which have been or are being implemented by CfBT and MoE include:

1. The Success in Cambridge O Level Public Examinations (SCOPE)
The SCOPE project was first set up in 2006 and seeks to improve the performance and achievements of borderline "pass/credit"¹ students in the O-level exams. The approach is carried out through exam practicums and

roadshows and target participants are students with limited: (1) reading practice; (2) vocabulary range; (3) exposure to English outside of the classroom; (4) knowledge about the features of the written genre; and (5) support outside of school (Sammons et al. 2014, 59).

2. The Sharing Practice in Effective Language Teaching (SPELT). This program, which runs in parallel with SCOPE, works by assessing students' progression together with CfBT teachers' classroom performance. This is followed by the identification and sharing of best practices with other teachers.
3. The English Project for Pre-School (EPPS). Introduced in 2005, this initiative was piloted with students from 15 schools. Among its aims is to improve students' achievement in English by ensuring a strong framework in the language from pre-school level.
4. Lower Secondary Reading Project (LSERP). This project, introduced in 2009, has a core objective of improving English literacy standards in Lower Secondary school students with the longer term goal of improving the students' English performance during the Upper Secondary English public exams (i.e. GCE and IGCSE).
5. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). CLIL is "the use of a language which is not the dominant language of the surrounding community, generally by non-native speaker teachers, to teach content other than the language itself" (Sammons et al. 2014, 20). This project, which was first implemented in 2011, is a teacher-development initiative aimed at preparing the teachers in overcoming any possible difficulties stemming from students whose academic language proficiency (i.e. English) may impair their understanding of subject concepts.
6. Quality Improvement Learning Teams (QuiLTS). QuiLTS is another teacher-development program that was first introduced in 2012. A by-product of SCOPE and SPELT, this peer observation program is intended to encourage more experienced teachers to "reflect on and share best practices with colleagues in order to build capacity in the Brunei education system" (Elmi and Nargorcka 2012, 3).

Sistem Pendidikan Abad Ke-21 (National Education System for the Twenty-First Century)

The education system of Brunei Darussalam underwent a reform in 2009 with the implementation of the *Sistem Pendidikan Abad Ke-21* or the National Education System for the twenty-first century. Popularly referred to as SPN 21, MoE first drafted plans for this curriculum in its Strategic Plans in 2005 (CfBT 2013, 33), and it was implemented in stages beginning with Year 7² students in 2008 (MoE 2009), and by 2011, it was fully implemented for all primary-level students (Brunei Darussalam 2013, 175).

SPN 21, which runs in tandem with the country's National Vision or *Wawasan 2035*, aims to equip Bruneians with twenty-first century skills in order to meet the social and economic challenges of the new century. Its curriculum is

modeled in such a way that greater emphasis is placed on soft skills and character building, and more opportunities are provided for technical and vocational education at the tertiary level.

An apparent departure from the previous education system, apart from the assessment and public examination structure, is the early introduction of English in primary schools. Under SPN 21, English becomes the medium of instruction for mathematics and science from Year 1 onwards. This move indicates the Ministry's growing awareness of the importance of proficiency and competency in English as a must-have twenty-first century skill. However, the country still remains firmly committed to its policy of a bilingual education system and mastery of the Malay language is also stressed as one of the priorities of SPN 21 (UNESCO 2008).

Under this education system, several Ministry-led projects aimed at strengthening and enriching literacy skills have been implemented. Such projects include:

1. The Malay and English Language Literacy Program for Primary Schools. This initiative to improve literacy through phonics instruction was initiated at the pre-school level in 2009. It was then extended to Year 1 and 2 pupils in 2010.
2. Sustainability of the Reading and English Language Acquisition (RELA) approach in Teaching and Learning English. RELA was first implemented in Brunei in 1989 for lower primary classes, which was later applied to upper primary levels (Ho 2001). Under the new system of education, the RELA approach is incorporated into classroom teaching and learning based on the themes and language structures taught in the SPN 21 syllabus.
3. The Integrated Approach to Reading Acquisition (TIARA). TIARA is a literacy program that focuses on the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The idea behind this program is to assist learners in developing their oral communication skills in order for them to improve their reading understanding. This program was initially introduced to pre-school pupils in 2011, but has since been extended to those in Year 4 and 5. During the launch of MoE's reading campaign in 2013, the Minister of Education noted marked improvements and promising expectations following diagnostic evaluations on TIARA, which had been conducted earlier that year (Nabilah 2013).

The Ministry, through its Department of Schools, has also undertaken several initiatives in providing support to local teachers through workshops aimed at raising their level of competency in ELT. Most of the workshops are customized according to the Brunei education system, and some are run in collaboration with regional ELT organizations such as the Singapore-based SEAMEO-Regional English Language Center (RELC). Such workshops include the "Customized RELC Teaching-Reading Workshop for Secondary School Teachers," "Customized RELC Language Curriculum and Materials Development Workshop," "Drama Workshop," and "Customized RELC Teaching, Listening, and Oral Communication Skills" (Hjh Noor Ehsan and Hjh Lena 2012).

Brunei English Language Teachers Association (BELTA)

In addition to MoE and CfBT, another body that is also active in the strengthening of English language capacity through the promotion of English language teaching and learning is the Brunei English Language Teachers Association (BELTA).

BELTA is a voluntary, non-profit, non-governmental organization and members are mostly comprised of practicing teachers and educators of English from Brunei schools and institutions. Formed in December 2003, BELTA had its history rooted in the English Teachers' Association or BATEFL that was first established in 1973 (BELTA ONLINE 2008). One of its primary aims is to carry on the legacy of BATEFL in representing Brunei English language educators and to acquaint teachers with the current trends and perspectives in English Language Teaching (ELT).

Following its inception, BELTA has actively organized a number of educational events and activities in its bid to raise interest in English language teaching and learning at all levels. Such events include:

1. The BELTA International Conference. Targeting all whose interests lie in the field of English language teacher education and development, the annual BELTA Conference plays a crucial role in enabling teachers of English to stay updated on current matters and trends in the ELT industry. The 2012 BELTA Conference was co-organized with the Language Center of Universiti Brunei Darussalam with the theme "Effective Resources, Successful Learning" (Universiti Brunei Darussalam Language Center 2014).
2. Oratory Competition. Started in May 2007, in collaboration with the Information Department of the Prime Minister's Office (Seri Ainey and Tuty Hyrneita, 2007), this competition is open to Upper Secondary students (Years 9, 10, and 11) from both government and private schools. The aim of this competition is to promote public speaking among students with a view to instill confidence in their use of English.
3. Spelling Bee Competition. This competition was first held in 2005 and is open to Upper Primary students from government schools only. Intended to promote interest in learning the English language, the spelling bee competition is also aimed at expanding pupils' learning horizon beyond the classroom by encouraging them to strive for excellence in spelling skills and other educational activities.

In addition to the annual events listed above, BELTA also regularly hosts a mix of workshops, activities, and programs that aim to nurture interest and stimulate love of the English language. The Budding Writers' Workshop, held for two days in February 2012, was one such initiative. Presented by a leading children's literature writer from Malaysia, the aims of this workshop were to "introduce the process of creative writing for young readers; build capacity of emerging writers of children's literature; and to facilitate the networking of Brunei writers" (BELTA 2011).

Another successful BELTA-initiated event was the Readathon. Participated in by both government and private schools, this campaign's goal was to create a sustained culture of reading, and was held over a period of three months from April to June 2011.

Initiatives of Schools

Several individual schools in the country have also come up with their own initiatives in their bid to raise students' interest and performance in English. One school, which made headlines in July 2011, was the Pengiran Isteri Hajah Mariam Secondary School with its "Timetabled Blocking System" (Thien 2011). This project was initially introduced to tackle literacy issues in English among students. However, results showed that marked improvements occurred not only in the students' O-level English, but in other English-medium subjects as well. By incorporating different modes of delivery, grouping students according to their abilities, and handing out instructions according to their needs, student-centered outcomes were achieved. An assessment of the school's O-level results over three years showed an increase in the number of passes of the content subjects.

Results Thus Far

Data of students' performance during the O-level examinations showed increased attainment in the English subject, particularly from 2006 onwards (Figure 2.1-1).

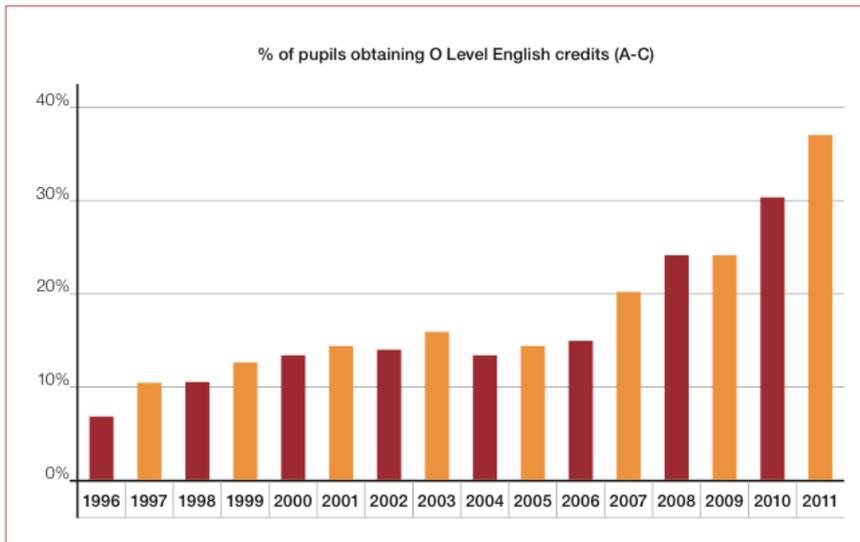


Figure 2.1-1. O-Level English credits from 1996-2011 (Sammons et al. 2014, 6).

The improved results in the O-level English can be attributed to the collaborative efforts of the various parties and agencies in implementing targeted interventions. Improvements were also observed in the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) for English as a Second Language with more than 95 percent of candidates passing the subject in 2010 (Noor 2010). The results are understandably encouraging, particularly since it was highlighted in 2005 by the then-Minister of Education that there had been a decline in the GCE O-Level English results since the introduction of the bilingual education in 1985 (Jones 2006).

Conclusion

Beginning with the enactment of the Bilingual Education System in 1985, Brunei continues to make great strides in its policy on English language education. An increasing number of Bruneians can now be confidently classified as “Malay-English bilingual(s)” (Noor Azam 2005, 239) with their population outnumbering the monolingual Malay speakers. Indeed, following the introduction of SPN 21, improvements have been observed in terms of students’ performance in public examinations for the English subject. Brunei, it seems, is at the forefront among its ASEAN neighbors in terms of the implementation of a bilingual education policy (Kirkpatrick 2010, 35). It remains to be seen how the current language policy shapes and influences the attainment of English among the Bruneians.

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Notes

¹ “Pass/credit” is equivalent to D/C grade boundary.

² Levels are now labeled “Years” with Primary 1 in the previous system being known as Year 1 under SPN 21.