
Writing English in the Context of the Language Policy in Malaysia

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The Language policy adopted by Malaysia places Malay as the national and official language and English as the most important second language.

With its designation as national and official language, Malay is the main language used in the education system, government administration and in the law courts.

As second most important language, English is still very much in use in various professions such as the medical, dental, and legal professions and in firms and business houses.

Even in the law courts, English is allowed in situations where the accused and the witnesses are not proficient in Malay.

The mainstream education system from the primary up to the tertiary level provides an important place for English though not as a medium of instruction. English is introduced to the Malaysian children from Year One of their school life up to their graduation from the university.

In fact the label "second most important language" that has been given to English has been taken in the spirit of "second language". The Chief Justice of Malaya (*New Sunday Times*, January 14, 1990: 6) has said that "members of the legal profession should remain bilingual in accordance with our national language policy - Bahasa Malaysia, and English as a second language".

The Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in his dialogue with academicians from the various universities in Malaysia which took place on the 9th of July 1992, emphasised the fact that every educated Malaysian should have proficiency in the national language and English. To him, skill in English is one of the prerequisites for achieving Vision 2020 which he

himself has authored - a vision which contains "thoughts on the future course of our nation and how we should go about to attain our objective of developing Malaysia into an industrialised country." (*Malaysia. The Way Forward*, henceforth abbreviated *MWF*).

Vision 2020 as given in *MWF* outlines the challenges that Malaysia will face and the goals she will have to attain. Emphasis has been given to every aspect of life which will help to develop Malaysia into a society that is mature and democratic, scientific and progressive, innovative and forward looking, with a robust economy and well respected by other nations of the world, a country that is not only a consumer of technology but also a contributor to the scientific and technological civilisation of the future.

Vision 2020 cannot be achieved through Malay alone. It has to be assisted by English

As mentioned earlier, the importance of English in the building of the Malaysian nation has always been part of the policy. And the University of Malaya's Language Centre since its establishment in 1972 has been translating this national policy into its ELT programmes. It started off with research and the production of materials for the teaching of reading - a project better known as the University of Malaya English for Special Purposes Project or UMESPP (1976 - 1979). This was followed by the University of Malaya Spoken English Project or UMSEP (1980 - 1983). The materials that were produced under these two projects are used in the training of undergraduates in the various faculties in these two skills.

This current CICHE project, which is divided into Professional Writing and Academic Writing is meant for people who have already graduated with their basic degrees. They may already be working in the public and private sectors as managers and executives who have to perform certain writing tasks in English, for example the writing of business letters and reports. At the same time, there are also those who have chosen to join the academic world, where they have to carry out research and publish their research results. "Publish or Perish" in Malay as well as in English is still the axiom adhered to by local universities.

Publication in English provides the academicians with a wider readership in international journals, and this gives a great boost for their promotion to associate professor and professor. At the same time there are government and quasi-government

bodies which are engaged in scientific research. These bodies have their own journals which publish their research work, and most of the articles are in English.

The Prime Minister has said that the Malaysia of his vision should not only be a consumer of technology but also a contributor to the scientific and technological civilisation of the future. To contribute, Malaysia will have to do it in a language known by most countries of the world.