

Language policy and national development: the cases of Malaysia and Japan

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Abstract

This paper will develop a comparative study of two Asian countries, Japan and Malaysia, in terms of language policy and national development. Firstly, it will examine the purpose of a national language policy and the educational reasons for teaching a second language in Malaysia in relation to their national goals. Next, it will consider the equivalent issues of national language policy and foreign language education in Japan. It will then discuss the concerns and issues of each country that have influenced the national and foreign language policies, by contrasting the two countries.

National language policy and English language education in Malaysia

Malaysia is one of the most important emerging countries in south-east Asia, which has diverse ethnic groups. As Hashim (2002) puts it, it is a multiracial country where different ethnic groups, each with their own identity, come together to form a nation. There are three dominant ethnic groups in Malaysia; Malays, Chinese, and Indians, and thus, the national language policy of Malaysia has its own reasons for addressing this cultural and racial complex. As several researchers (Jenkins, 2003; Lowenberg, 1991) go into details about the formative period of this ethnical diversity, historically Malaya had been fairly homogeneous in terms of ethnic group until they witnessed an influx of Chinese immigrants, which was also followed by a certain amount of Indian settlement. Hashim (2002) points out the difficulty that Malaysia was faced with on its independence from Britain in 1957 – the place of the Chinese and Indians and their language as well as that of English language. The result of the nation's language policy at that time was that the Malay tongue was adopted as the national language, medium for education, with

English as the compulsory second language. Saito (2005) explains that this decision was made in order to realize nation unity in such a multiracial nation as Malaysia, and specifically, it was intended to preserve the status of Malays, which was the political majority, but yet not necessarily the economic majority.

One of the problematic issues arisen from this policy, however, was that while Malay succeeded in establishing itself as the official language, it incurred the decline in levels of English language proficiency among the people. After gaining independence, Malaysia adopted four imperative policies such as national unification and economic development. In these circumstances, the importance of English language education has been reconsidered in order to develop human resources of good quality for the future development of nation's industry. Therefore, as Azman (2002) puts it, in Malaysia, Malay – as the national language – is vital for sustaining national unity and identity, while the English language is necessary to promote national economic development – e.g. to better adapt to globalization in commerce and industry. It should be noted that the use of English, which used to be a product of colonial influence, is now increasingly promoted for the development of industry and human resources in the country. In the following part, this paper will look at Japan's geographical condition and historical background which shaped its language policy.

Policy for the English language education in Japan

A line of research (Sergeant, 2005; Saito, 2004; Bailey, 1997) acknowledges that historically Japan has experienced difficult relations with the rest of the world. The country, for example, has a history of regulating contact with the West. Surrounded by the ocean, Japan shares no land borders with other countries. This distinctive geographical feature and its historical context along with diplomatic relations are probably worth noting in discussing Japan's language policy.

It is widely known that Japan experienced two major diplomatic and political turning points in the modern period. One is Meiji Restoration in 1868, which signaled the end of Japan's policy of isolation over 200 years. The other is the end of the Pacific War in 1945, when Japan was defeated and democratized. Then, through the post-war period, the English language has been promoted to be taught as the compulsory first foreign language at the secondary education in Japan. This means that an average Japanese student can take 10-years of English language education through her or his secondary and tertiary education – 6 years at secondary school, 4

years at university. Nevertheless, there has been strong criticism against the English language education in Japan that despite this 10-year education, there are few individuals who can use English proficiently.

In 2003, in response to growing demands for more pragmatic English education and with an increasing worldwide recognition as English as the global language (Crystal, 1997), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan submitted the draft of a report for fostering “Japanese with a better command of English” (MEXT). The report was intended to show the necessity for improvement of the English language education, shifting toward teaching more communicative English that works in order to boost Japanese communication skills in English, and then to develop human resources, who is able to associate on equal terms with fluent English speakers in international community (MEXT).

Most recently, in 2011, MEXT announced that it will implement English education as a compulsory subject in elementary school for 5th and 6th grade students.

MEXT posts as follows:

From 2011, the Course of Study for Elementary Schools, which has been generally implemented, introduces foreign language activities once a week to students in the 5th and 6th grades. (MEXT)

MEXT also posts the overall objective for foreign language as follows:

To develop student’s basic communication abilities such as listening and speaking, reading and writing, deepening their understanding of language and culture and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages. (MEXT)

While this implementation can be a positive force for the improvement of English education in Japan, it could be pointed out that the overall objective leaves something to be desired: it does not clearly show the nation’s philosophical ideas for foreign language education in relation to the prospect and strategies for national development, thus does not allow teachers, researchers or anyone involved to get a clear idea of what the nation aims to achieve by foreign language education.

It seems that both countries’ approach to promoting the English language education is similar in that English education is promoted for national development. However, as Miura (2002) points out, one of the

differences between the two countries is that English language education is expected to serve more for the formation of character through acquiring communication skill for Japanese people, while in Malaysia English is more considered a piece of useful discourse for science and technology, a prerequisite for further learning, and a key skill for many occupations (Azman, 2002).

The latest national language policy in Japan

While the necessity of English language education has been increasingly discussed in Japan, it has also been a matter of concern among experts and the people that inappropriate use of the Japanese language especially among younger generation has become intolerable. In light of this, in 2003 Kokugo Shingikai (the national language council), which is an expert subcommittee concerned with the national language policy of Japan within MEXT, presented the report on the national language policy. The reports placed strong emphasis on the significant role of the national language in terms of maintaining their own culture. Kokugo Shingikai (the national language council) (2003) reconfirmed that the national language is essential in that it has been the foundation and accumulation of their own culture and it will continue to be an indispensable tool with which Japanese culture is inherited and developed to the next generation. The report also discussed the significance of the national language in relation to the trend toward globalization. The council advocated that in times when globalization is accelerating, it is increasingly critical for each individual to have a good understanding of and affection for the Japanese language as the national language.

It is interesting to note that, unlike the national language policy in Malaysia, the one in Japan does not seem to include the purpose of sustaining nation unity. It could be stressed that while the national language policy of Japan sees the necessity of maintaining the national language on which their culture is based, it is not likely to be seriously concerned about the status of Japanese as the national language. One of the assumptions is that because Japan is an island country and a highly homogeneous society, and the people have never felt a threat to ethnic identity, they never doubt the absolute status of the Japanese language, even though they may think their mother tongue can be affected to some extent by outside forces. This is in marked contrast with the Malays, which need to be given favorable treatment in order to create national unity between different ethnic groups (Saito, 2005; Hashim, 2002). It can be said that this comparison clearly illustrates how the ethnic composition

of a country has an influence on a national language policy. Lastly, some issues and concerns affecting national language policy, with examples from Malaysia and Japan, will be touched on in the following part.

Issues and concerns around the national language policy

As Newbrook (1997) points out, although Malaysia is considered to be a relatively successful multiracial society, achieving greater dominance of Malay as the first language and substratum in Malaysia, one of the issues around its language policy is how to care about different ethnic identities while maintaining Malay as the national identity. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, promotion of Malay led to the relative decline in the levels of English proficiency. As Saito (2005) stresses, it is predicted that the Malaysian government will continue to need to attend to keeping national and educational unity by employing Malay and catering to different cultural identities such as Chinese and Indians. The country will also be destined to be experiencing an on-going swing of a pendulum in terms of dominance between two languages, Malay as a medium for nation unity, and English as a tool for nation development.

One of the challenges for Japan's national language policy will be how to foster and maintain the respect for and understanding of the aesthetic of the Japanese language especially among younger generations, while the country is fated to continue to assimilate loan words because of its geographical condition. As Kokugo Shingikai (the national language council) (2003) argues, the significance of the national language policy is increasingly reconsidered in international perspectives. This has been clearly shown by the comment in the report on the national language policy:

It is only when individuals establish the self-awareness of being Japanese that they are able to have a true understanding of and respect for other cultures. (Kokugo Shingikai, 2003)

In fact, the action plan for English education includes the importance of the national language for acquiring foreign languages. Given the fact that the Japanese language has been fairly affected by an influx of English and thus it consists of thousands of borrowed words from English, considering both the status of the national language and English language teaching are inseparable from each other. Furthermore, as Seargeant (2005) emphasizes, it may be that Japan's language policy is discussed and shaped in light of international and intercultural perspectives which is more

concerned with interacting with the international community rather than merely absorbing foreign influence.

Conclusion

As discussed above, a national language policy is strongly influenced by cultural, historical, or geographical context where a country is involved. It has been shown that particularly in the case of Malaysia where multi-ethnic groups are involved, the national language is meant to create national unity between different groups, while in Japan emphasis was placed in the language policy more on maintaining their culture which accompanies the language. In the case of Japan, it remains to be seen what impact the recent implementation of English education in primary schools nationwide will have on the improvement of Japanese English ability. Therefore further studies will be needed in the future that reveals the consequence of the current education reform. On the other hand, it seems as far as the two countries are concerned, the English language is regarded as a means for national development keeping pace with the trend towards globalization which many other countries also face.

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