

CHALLENGES FACING MALAY LANGUAGE STUDIES IN SINGAPORE TODAY

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1. Introduction

This paper serves to discuss the development of Malay Language and Literature studies in Singapore from the very beginning of the establishment of the Department of Malay Studies at the then University of Malaya in Singapore more than 70 years ago until the present time. There are currently three institutions of higher learning offering Malay Language and Literature or Malay Studies leading to an undergraduate degree and this paper will provide a quick snapshot of the content and curriculum therein with a background of the current challenges confronting the field with the current linguistic landscape in the Island republic. It will then propose a way forward as the Malay Language is experiencing a shrinking speaker base as evidenced in the latest 2020 census of population.

1.1 History of Malay Language studies in Singapore

Since the founding of modern Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819, the Malay Language and its culture has been an area of study by the colonial authorities. Singapore was the largest and most vibrant city in British Malaya and by virtue of this it was a center for Malay Language scholarship and publications. In fact, the congregation of Malay literati, trading class and publishing houses in the city spurred the growth of not only literary works in Malay but also a whole new industry of Malay publications for the masses. By the end of the 19th century education in the Malay Language was encouraged by the colonial authorities and with this zest for education by the Malay populace, there was a concomitant interest in higher education for teachers in the Malay Language and also in the teaching of the Malay Language. By 1877, there was a Straits and later Malayan branch of the Royal Asiatic Society which allowed an avenue for scholarly writings on the language and culture of Malays. The Raffles Museum and Library also spurred interest in the study of the Malay world as the premier center of all exhibition of things Malay.

However, it was only towards the end of the colonial period that a Department of Malay Studies was established by the University of Malaya, Singapore in 1953 (Lim, 2013: 40). The department was headed by Dr Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad or popularly known as Zaaba, the preeminent local scholar in the field. The department moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1959 when a branch campus was established in the newly independent Malaya (Lim 2013:69). As the 1960s wore on the differing political realities in Singapore and Malaya came sharply into focus and the University of Singapore was established in 1962. As Singapore achieved independence in 1965, a new department of Malay Studies was established in 1967, just two years after its separation from Malaysia. Interestingly, a department of Malay Studies was also established at

the privately funded Nanyang University in 1958. However, the department at Nanyang University ceased operations in 1970 and was eventually combined with the University of Singapore. The Teacher's Training College also started a department of Malay Language which is currently subsumed in the Asian Languages and Cultures Academic Group of the National Institute of Education. The latest addition is the Malay Language and Literature programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences which was started at its predecessor institution SIM University, in 2009.

Currently, there are three institutions of higher learning offering Malay or Malay Language studies at the tertiary level. Namely, the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore, The Asian Languages and Cultures Academic Group at the National Institute of Education and the Malay Language and Literature programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

2. The Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore

The Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore is the oldest offering Malay Studies in Singapore. In its 55 years of history, it has been helmed by famous professors in the field including Professors Roolvink and Syed Hussein Alatas who went on to be the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. The department currently specializes in courses on Malay Literature and Sociology. It aims to provide its graduates with a broad knowledge on developments and problems in the Malay World and beyond. The programme offers its students a focus on multi-disciplinary approaches in understanding the history, economics, politics, cultures and societies in the Malay Archipelago. Most of the courses are taught in English and at level 1000 there is an introductory course which provides students a grasp of the approaches in studying the issue of conflict, change and continuity in the Malay World.

At the 2000 level, the department offers 11 courses on the culture and history of the Malays. These courses comprehensively provide an understanding of a wide range of topics ranging from the law, family, socialization and religion of the Malays. Out of 11 modules, only one is taught in the Malay Language.

- MS2210 Malay Culture and Society
- MS2211 Criticism in Modern Malay Literature (taught in Malay)
- MS2212 Law and Malay Society
- MS2213 Families and Households Lived Experiences
- MS2215 The Malays in History
- MS2216 Fieldwork in Malay Society
- MS2217 Transcultural Histories and Heritage in the Malay World
- MS2218 Malay-Islamic Cultural Encounters: Arts and Aesthetics
- MS2219 Networks and the Malay World
- MS2220 Arts and Artists in the Nusantara
- MS2221 Sufism in Southeast Asia

(Department of Malay Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Module Description, 20 August 2022)

At the 3000 level, the courses provide deeper insights into topics related to the Malays of Singapore and the region. It provides a grounding for students to investigate the life of the Malays be it literary, religious or political. The courses cover the entire spectrum of traditions, ideology and modernization of the Malays and their society.

MS3209 The Malays of Singapore
MS3210 Modern Indonesian Literature (taught in Malay)
MS 3211 Political Culture of the Malays
MS3212 Text and Ideology in the Malay World (taught in Malay)
MS3213 Ideology and Ideas on Malay Development
MS3214 Asian Traditions and Modernisation
MS3215 Malays and Modernisation
MS3216 Gender and Islam
MS3217 Political Economy, Ethnicity, Religion
MS3218 The Religious Life of the Malays
MS3550 Malay Studies Internship

(Department of Malay Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Module Description, 20 August 2022)

At the highest level which is the 4000 level, 13 courses are offered which enables the students to further investigate modern Malay society and the changes that have taken place since the 19th century. Contemporary topics like Malay films, Malay art forms, culture, identity and the impact of globalization on the Malays are also investigated. Similar to level 3000, a couple of courses on the position of Islam in Malay society further reinforces the students' understanding of the Malay society wholistically. The courses are as follows:

MS4101 Theory and Practice in Malay Studies
MS4201 Social Change in the Malay World 1900-1965
MS4202 Malay Society in the 19th Century
MS4203 The Religious Life of the Malays
MS4204 The Malay Middle Class
MS4207 Reading the Malay Film
MS4208 Syariah Law in Southeast Asia
MS4401 Honours Thesis
MS4660 Independent Study Module
MS4880 Topics in Malay Studies
MS4880A Orientations in Muslim Resurgence Movements
MS4880B Malays Encountering Globalization: Culture and Identity
MS4880C Topics in Malay Art Forms

(Department of Malay Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Module Description, 20 August 2022)

3. Malay Language and Literature at the Asian Languages and Cultures Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

The National Institute of Education is the sole teacher preparation institute of Singapore and consequently the Malay Language and Literature programme at the Asian Languages and Cultures Academic Group has been the principal training ground for all Malay teachers in the Republic since its inception in the 1970s.

The courses offered by the programme are geared to producing graduates in the field Malay Language pedagogy and are focused on the needs of the primary and secondary school teacher via curriculum studies based on their areas of specialization. Students are given a comprehensive exposure to Malay linguistics, literature, pedagogical studies, character and citizenship education and graduates from the programme obtain a BA (Education).

The programme offerings include Core, Prescribed and General Electives. This paper will not go into the intricacies of the categories and structure for graduation but will present an overview of the fields of studies. In general, students are given a good grounding not just in their academic area of Malay Language but also that of education and curriculum studies. These will expose students to key concepts and principles of education whilst curriculum studies will prepare students to teach the Malay Language subject in Singapore schools. In essence, the curriculum is aimed at not just producing a graduate competent in the Malay Language but serves a professional purpose in initial teacher preparation.

The courses offered below for the teaching of the Malay Language (Secondary) and include teaching and assessing reading, writing and grammar of Malay:

CS 1 Malay Language Structure

ACD22A Foundations to Malay Language Teaching at the Secondary Level

ACD32A Teaching and Assessing Reading in Malay

ACD42A Teaching and Assessing Writing in Malay

ACD42B Teaching and Assessing Malay Grammar

(BA (Ed) & B Sc (Ed) Programme Handbook, 20 August 2022: 201-202)

The courses offered below are for the teaching of the Malay Language (Primary) and include teaching and assessing reading, writing and grammar of Malay:

ACD20A Foundations to Malay Language Teaching at Primary Level

ACD20B Teaching Oral Communication in Malay at Primary Level

ACD 30A Teaching Reading and Writing in Malay (Lower Primary)

ACD 40A Teaching Reading and Writing in Malay (Higher Primary)

ACD 40B Teaching Malay Grammar at the Primary Level

ACD 40C Assessment in Malay Language Teaching

(BA (Ed) & B Sc (Ed) Programme Handbook, 20 August 2022: 133-137)

Courses to prepare aspiring teachers in teaching literature provide an exposure in both traditional and modern Malay Literature. They also provide students with hands on ability to design and assess the teaching of Malay Literature:

ACF22A Teaching of Modern Malay Literature
ACF22B Teaching of Traditional Malay Literature
ACF42A Designing Programmes and Assessments in the teaching of Malay Literature
(BA (Ed) & B Sc (Ed) Programme Handbook, 20 August 2022: 203-204)

As the programme trains school teachers, an important feature is to ensure that teachers understand the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes of character and citizenship education. The three courses detailed below provide an overview of character and citizenship education:

ACV20A Teaching of Character and Citizenship Education (Malay) (Lower Primary)
ACV20B Teaching Character and Citizenship Education (Malay) (Upper Primary)
ACV40A Assessment in Character and Citizenship Education (Malay)
(BA (Ed) & B Sc (Ed) Programme Handbook, 20 August 2022: 138-139)

Academic subjects in Malay Language for primary and secondary track students are numerous and they include studies in Malay Linguistics covering such diverse areas as Bilingualism, Discourse Analysis, Syntax, Sociolinguistics, Language Planning to Phonetics and Phonology. Courses that cover Malay culture and practices are also included in this extensive offering:

AAD10A Language Refinement and Malay Culture
AAD10B Malay in Context
AAD10G The Study of Malay Language
AAD10D Malay Phonetics and Phonology
AAD10E Jawi and the Malay Language
AAD20A Malay Morphology
AAD20B Malay Syntax
AAD20C Origin and Development of Malay Language
AAD20D Cultural Life and Practices of The Malays
AAD20E Sociolinguistics of the Malay Language
AAD20G Malay Semantics and Pragmatics
AAD30A Discourse Analysis in Malay
AAD30B Malay Arts and Civilization
AAD30D Readings in Language Education
AAD40A Language Planning and Policy
AAD40B Bilingual Learners and Bilingual Education
AAD40D Academic Exercise - Malay Language
(BA (Ed) & B Sc (Ed) Programme Handbook, 20 August 2022: 365-374)

Courses in Malay Literature for both primary and secondary track teachers on the other hand, appear to be more limited and cover areas of traditional, children's and regional literatures namely that of the Malay speaking world and Indonesia.

AAF10A Traditional Malay Literature
AAF10B Modern Malay/Indonesian Literature
AAF10C Singapore Malay Literature
AAF10D Children's and Adolescents' Literature
(BA (Ed) & B Sc (Ed) Programme Handbook, 20 August 2022: 375-376)

Finally, students are offered seven elective courses which cater to deepening students' interest in Malay philology, linguistics culture and literature. Overall, these elective courses are interesting to say the least:

AAD08A Malay in Context
AAD08B Introduction to Basic Jawi and Calligraphy
AAD28B Education of the Malays
AAF28C Islam and Malay Society
AAF08A Malay Performing Arts
AAF08B Appreciating Multiculturalism through Story
AAF28C Appreciation of Literary Texts
(BA (Ed) & B Sc (Ed) Programme Handbook, 20 August 2022: 501-503)

4. The Malay Language and Literature Programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (BAML, SUSS)

The BAML programme was established in 2009 at the then SIM University (UniSIM) a private university in Singapore, to offer part-time studies in Malay Language and Literature to adult learners. The programme is taught in the evenings to part-time learners who study on campus in the evenings after a full day at work. It is the youngest of the three undergraduate degree programmes in Malay Language and Literature and is into its thirteenth year at present. There is a large content of online learning in the programme making it possible to switch to a zoom platform of delivery during the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

The programme offers many of its courses in Malay but there are four courses that are taught in English. Courses cover a range of interest ranging from Malay Linguistics to Literature, Pedagogy and Sociology. The main focus on Malay linguistics is to prepare students in understanding and explaining the Malay Language from a linguistic perspective. Amongst these courses are:

MLL101 Introduction to Malay Linguistics
MLL107 Structure of the Malay Language
MLL201 Malay Grammar
MLL207 Comparative Study of Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Indonesia
MLL301 Malay Phonetics and Phonology
(BAML programme brochure 2022)

Other courses in Malay literature are aimed at providing an adequate exposure to Malay prose and poetry, film, classical literature and other contemporary literature in Singapore and Indonesia. Among the courses are:

MLL103 Introduction to Malay Literature
MLL209 Teaching of Language in Malay Literature
MLL213 Modern Indonesian Literature
MLL215 Malay Prose and Poetry
MLL217 Malay Films
MLL257 Literature for Children
MLL261 Contemporary Singapore Malay Theatre (taught in English)
MLL311 Jawi and Malay Literature
MLL317 Singapore Malay Literature
MLL352 Classical Malay Literature
(BAML programme brochure 2022)

There are two courses in the field of Sociology and they provide students with an insight to understanding Malay society and its civilization:

MLL109 Malay Civilisation, Philosophy and Thought
MLL219 Islam and the Malays (taught in English)
(BAML programme brochure 2022)

Courses in the field of Malay language pedagogy were initiated to give students an exposure to the field and amongst the courses are:

MLL111 Pedagogical Approaches to Language Teaching
MLL303 Materials development in the Malay Language Classroom
MLL305 Testing and Assessment in Language Teaching
(BAML programme brochure 2022)

BAML has identified its niche as offering courses in Malay translation and interpretation with the view that these courses would be useful to working adult. It is the only Malay language programme in Singapore that offers courses in Malay translation and interpretation. Half of the courses offered below are in English:

MLL105 Introduction to Translation
MLL307 Two way Translation
MLL313 Topics in Interpretation (taught in English)
MLL315 Malay Consecutive Interpretation (taught in English)
(BAML programme brochure 2022)

5. Challenges facing Malay Language Studies in Singapore

The Malay Language has a unique position in Singapore. It is the National Language of the country but the principal language of administration, education and business is English. By and

large the use of Malay is ceremonial and the segment of population conversant in Malay is mainly the ethnic Malay population which comprises about 14% of the population (Lim 2010). The Malay Language is taught in schools to ethnic Malay students and as a third language to others but essentially its reach is limited. In terms of language use, English has the widest reach in Singapore and its position as the most important language for Singapore is unshakeable (Asmah 2003). The reach and growth of English has been phenomenal since the 1980s and in the latest census of the Population Report 2021, it is stated that English is now the most frequently used language at home for 48.3% of the resident population with Mandarin Chinese second trailing at 29.9%, whilst Malay is at only 9.2% (Department of Statistics, Singapore 2021). In fact, Low (2014) has claimed that the success of Singapore in trade and business is to some extent due to the proficiency of English of its population. In short, English is seen as the language that offers its speakers the most economic opportunity.

English is also seen as a key to success in education and proficiency in English is regarded as essential to success in the education system which is in the English medium. In fact, a Learning Support Programme has been in place since 1998 to help students who are weak in English to master the language (Tek, 2014:78), the aim of which is to help students perform better in their education as they improve their proficiency in English. By and large tertiary education is conducted in the English medium except for selected language programmes like the Malay Language programmes.

In view of the entrenched primacy of English in education, administration and business in Singapore as well as the growing reach of English in inter and intra-ethnic communication in Singapore, it is not an overstatement that the singularly predominant language in Singapore is English.

For the Malay community, the latest census of Population 2020 has revealed a big drop in the use of Malay as the most frequently used language of communication at home from 91.6% in 2000 to 82.7% in 2010 and 60.7% in 2020 (Department of Statistics 2011 and 2021). Correspondingly, the proportion of use of English at home amongst the younger generation Malays are the highest since independence with 63% amongst those 5-14 years; 48.5% amongst those 15-24 years; 44.9% amongst those 25-34 years and 45.5% amongst those 35-44 years.

As education levels improve amongst the Malays, the inroads made by English as the most frequently used home language has also correspondingly increased. Over a period of 10 years from 2010 to 2020 13.5% of those with below secondary education now use English compared to 4.4% in 2010; 30% for those with secondary education compared to 14.6% in 2010; 34.9% for those with post-secondary education compared with 16.1% in 2010; 47.9% amongst those with professional / diploma qualification compared to 27.3% in 2010 and 61.4% for those with university education compared to 46.7% in 2010. It is pertinent to note that it is not that just the trend that higher education households tend to use English but that the increase over a ten year period from 2010 to 2020 is substantial across all segments of Malay households (Department of Statistics 2021).

With an obviously shrinking pool of students conversant or comfortable in Malay, the future looks bleak for the Malay Language Studies programmes in Singapore as the ever declining number of younger generation of Malay speakers come of age. It stands to reason that the demand for Malay Language programmes will consequently decline. However, this paper takes a contrarian view. We propose that the decline in use of Malay by the young should be seen as an opportunity for the growth of demand in Malay Language Programmes as the concern that the younger population is losing its competence in its mother tongue is gaining currency in Singapore. The reach of English which is overarching has been observed with alarm by local linguists as its impact on the other languages including Malay has been noted since the early 2000s (Kamsiah, 2010). The threat of poor competence in the mother tongue is now a genuine concern since the decline in the use of the mother tongue in the home domain hitherto considered the last preserve of Malay usage is now evident. This development will eventually threaten the basis of the official language education policy of English knowing bilingualism in Singapore (Low 2014). In short, since English is now predominant in almost all domains where does that leave the mother tongues in general and Malay in particular? It is not beyond the bounds of imagination that mother tongue language education will be considered a tool to improve Malay language competence.

Therefore, it falls on the Malay Language Programmes to ensure that they meet the needs of the workforce as the demand for Malay Language Studies is to a large extent determined by its relevance to the current workforce needs. It is an inconvenient truth facing the Malay Language programmes that the principal career path for graduates from these programmes is the education service. The main source of students for the Malay Language programme at the Asian Languages and Cultures, NIE are student teachers aspiring to be Malay Language teachers in Singapore schools. The intake of students for the above programme is very much determined by the number of student teachers offered sponsored places by the Ministry of Education.

A career as a Malay Language teacher within the education service is also a driver for the popularity of the BAML programme at SUSS as the programme was initially set up to enable Malay Language teachers in the education service who were looking to upgrade their qualification to a BA (BAML Programme Brochure 2009). In fact, a large proportion of applicants to BAML, SUSS comprised of in-service teachers up until 2018. Traditionally, a career as a teacher is seen as a desirable career path in the Malay community and a degree is a stepping stone to this career.

Even though, it is argued that the need for Malay Language teachers in the education service will increase as language education can and will be used as a tool to stem the decline of Malay proficiency amongst young Singaporeans, it would be short sighted for the Malay Language Studies programmes to depend on churning out language teachers as their *raison d'être*.

6. Conclusion

Therefore, it is contingent upon the Malay Language programmes in Singapore to explore and even create new ecosystems of knowledge, need and products in the field of Malay Language,

Literature and Sociology if they wish to prosper. We see examples of this in the offerings of the Malay Studies Department at NUS. The courses at the department pitch themselves as a window to the Malay Malay to an international audience. It allows its students to understand the whole spectrum of Malay life from politics to religion to its society today in English. The programme not only caters to Singaporeans but is aimed at the international market, ostensibly those without a command of the Malay Language.

At the Malay Language and Literature programme (BAML) SUSS the programme aims to attract not just those who are aspiring teachers but also those who are keen to be language professionals like editors, interpreters and translators. This pivots the BAML programme into a hitherto new area of providing Malay Language graduates trained in translating and interpreting for Singapore. It aims to build on the proficiency of its students in English and Malay.

In summary, even though the three Malay Language Programmes in Singapore are offered by public institutions of higher learning and are therefore funded by the government, the demand and consequently, intake numbers are important to these programmes and their viability. It is therefore prudent for Malay Language programmes to look beyond teacher preparation as their primary purpose of being not least because the number of Malay Language teachers needed in Singapore Education Service is finite.

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