

The evolution of Brunei's approach to bilingual education

Anna Riggall

During the period 2012–13, academics from the Department of Education at the University of Oxford were commissioned by the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) Education Trust to conduct an independent evaluation of the CfBT Brunei English Teaching programme. The evaluation sought to document the various processes of change and improvement within the Bruneian education system between 1996 and 2012, in particular looking at the teaching of English as an additional language in the bilingual system, and the involvement of CfBT as an external education provider and change agent.

Brunei in a nutshell

Brunei Darussalam is an ethno-linguistically diverse country on the north-western coast of Borneo (Saxena, 2008: p. 249). The wealthy sultanate, with a land mass of about 5,765 sq km, borders the Malaysian state of Sarawak and the South China Sea (BMHA, 2009: p. 9). Brunei is made up of two districts, Temburong on the east and Brunei-Muara to the west, where the capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, is situated. 'Darussalam' means 'abode of peace' and Brunei is both tranquil and prosperous: the small but oil-rich state is able to fund a generous welfare system that furnishes citizens with free housing, education and medical care, without the need for income tax. The World Bank estimates the population at 405,938, with Malays forming about two-thirds of the local population, followed by Chinese at 11 per cent (BMHA, 2009: p. 9). About six per cent comprise indigenous peoples who form nine other ethno-linguistic groups of Belait, Bisaya, Dusun, Kedayan, Murut, Tutong, Mukah, Iban and Penan (Saxena, 2008: p. 249). The remaining population generally consists of a mix of nationalities primarily from India, the Philippines and the native English-speaking expatriate groups (BMHA, 2009: p. 9).

Bahasa Melayu, or Standard Malay, is the official language and English is viewed as the 'principal language of business' (ibid.) and one of the media of instruction in the education system. There is also a local version of Malay called Brunei Malay, which is spoken by most of the population as a first or second language (Saxena, 2008: p. 249). There are variations in Malay dialects; four other varieties have been reported in different regions (in addition to Brunei). There are also different types of script: Malay may be written in either Jawi¹ or Roman script, while the various Chinese languages and dialects use Chinese characters.

The relationship between Brunei and CfBT

Brunei achieved full independence from the British in 1984, but both countries continue to share a close relationship. There have been numerous changes applied to Bruneian education policy since the country's independence in 1984. Naturally, ministers have come



© Commonwealth Secretariat

Group study session in an English language lesson

and gone, with educational frameworks introduced and revised. Brunei's Strategic Plan for Education, for example, was drafted by the MoE in 2005 and scheduled to be put in place between 2007 and 2011. This was followed by the near-simultaneous commissioning of the current National Education System for the 21st Century (known also as SPN21; BMoE, 2008: p. 4). The area of external examinations has shown strong consistency, with reliance on the O-level gold standard and a preference for the internationally-recognised Cambridge brand. However, evidence of the impact of debates and developments in education has seen the introduction of School Based Assessment into the curriculum. In 2008, in line with these new approaches to assessing student attainment, the lower secondary examination previously taken in Year 9 was moved forward to Year 8 and replaced by a combination of formative and summative assessment and a national exam (the Student Progress Assessment and Student Progress Examination; SEAMEO, 2008). Examinations at upper secondary have also undergone change; for instance, documents show that the IGCSE in English as a Second Language – an alternative to the O-level examination – was initially offered to a selection of students as early as 1999 (Nicol, 2005–04) but was removed in 2003 and subsequently reintroduced in 2010 (CfBT Brunei, 2011).

One significant course of action appears unchanged, however: the Bruneian government's longstanding and firm commitment to its bilingual education policy since its launch in 1985 (Saxena, 2008) –

the same year that marked CfBT's arrival in Brunei (CfBT Brunei, 2011). An important aspect of Brunei's bilingual education policy that has remained relatively constant is the Ministry of Education's (MoE) collaboration with CfBT in matters concerning English language education. Even in the face of great external pressures, debate and relatively frequent changes in policy in surrounding countries in relation to English language education², Brunei has stayed committed to its bilingual education policy and, in tandem, its relationship with CfBT which has strengthened and widened in scope from being a key recruiter of high quality teachers to a capacity enhancer over recent years. During this time, as documented in Figure 1, O-level attainment in English improved dramatically.

Six evolutionary paths to bilingual education

The Oxford University evaluation led by Professor Pam Sammons identified six themes, or 'evolutionary paths,' that have created the potential for system-wide improvement. Collectively these have helped Brunei move to being 'a generation ahead' of its near neighbours in terms of its approach to bilingual education and achieving the improvement in students' attainment in English that are needed to support economic development in the 21st century.

Commitment to bilingual policy

Education policy in Brunei demonstrated a consistent focus on promoting bilingual education. This has been a strength, encouraging stability and consistency in the priority accorded to promoting competencies in both English and standard Malay. Three central features have contributed to Brunei's ability to manage its bilingual policy effectively. These are summarised in Figure 2, which highlights consistency in the commitment to bilingual education policy, a drive towards proficiency in both languages and collaboration with CfBT. The evaluation concluded that the consistent focus on promoting bilingual education has proved a strength, encouraging stability and consistency in the priority accorded to promoting competencies in both English and Standard Malay. This has supported recognition of Brunei's contribution and

ability to offer leadership from the lessons learned in the teaching and learning of English in the ASEAN region.

Raising English attainment

There has been strong consensus in Brunei on the need to encourage higher levels of English attainment to promote economic competitiveness, recognising English as a crucial 'tool' for the 21st century. This has changed the relationship with CfBT, leading to greater demands and higher expectations for the delivery of ongoing improvements in student attainment. The Bruneian MoE has adopted the concept of linking targets in terms of performance to the CfBT contract, wanting a tangible return on its investment that goes beyond recruitment of good CfBT teachers to enhance its capacity to embed CfBT English language teachers in all schools. CfBT's ongoing ability to deliver measurable outcomes across short- and medium-term time-scales has strengthened the relationship.

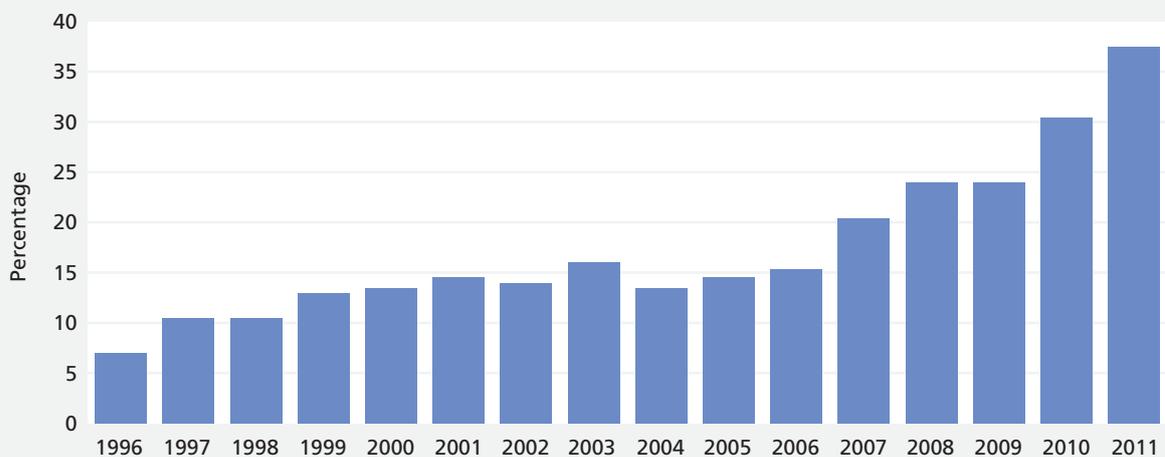
An evolving relationship

The relationship between the Bruneian MoE and CfBT has changed from a recruitment link to bilingual education partnership. CfBT has become a deliverer of improved attainment and taken on a capacity-enhancing role that has led to a strong and productive view of successful bilingual partnership. This has seen an increase in O-level English attainment from 15.4 per cent A–C grades in 2006 to 37.5 per cent in 2011. The dialogue and partnership between MoE, CfBT and the Cambridge Examination Board has better contextualised O-levels and brought about the introduction of the IGCSE for a larger group of students.

Spreading good practice

Programmes targeting student outcomes and attitudes have moved from pockets of good practice to national-level reach. CfBT has drawn on education reform experiences elsewhere to support context specific improvements in the quality of teaching and learning, promoting more active student learning in schools, with a focus on enhancing study skills and improved attainment. Key features of programmes and interventions for students by CfBT and

Figure 1: O-level credits between 1996 and 2011



Source: CfBT, based on MoE examination data

the MoE, and their interlinkages are: the phonetics programme at Pra, interlinking English and Malay from an early age; engaging lessons that offer opportunities to speak English; the ability to target students at grade thresholds; improved exam preparation; and the collection and use of data. These different strategies fit together to promote improvement, showing that the whole is more than the sum of the individual constituent parts. CfBT interviewees drew attention to the growing importance of capacity-building and argued that working collaboratively with Brunei participants, promoting both individual teacher, organisational and joint learning, was central to this process.

Capacity-building

Programmes targeting teaching practice, professional development and capacity-building for both CfBT and Bruneian Language teachers have been fundamental to developing a collaborative working relationship between CfBT and the Bruneian government. SPN21 is the new national education system and curriculum for the 21st century. This has helped to facilitate change and the opportunity has been capitalised upon by CfBT through its emphasis on professional development. The result of this focus on professional development has been to build capacity within the teaching force of CfBT, as well as to change the nature of the partnership between CfBT and the Bruneian government, with the remit of CfBT broadening to encompass greater responsibility for

improvements and increased collaboration between the two partners. In many ways these developments have created opportunities for greater collaboration and capacity-building.

System-wide improvement

Building the infrastructure and the potential for school- and system-wide improvement – the relationship has evolved into one where CfBT expertise is focused on capacity-building, as well as capacity providing. CfBT has come to be seen as a valued education improvement partner rather than just an effective recruitment agency – an organisation that helps to support MoE aims and one that promotes positive educational change and improved practice in schools as well as improved outcomes for students.

Recommendations

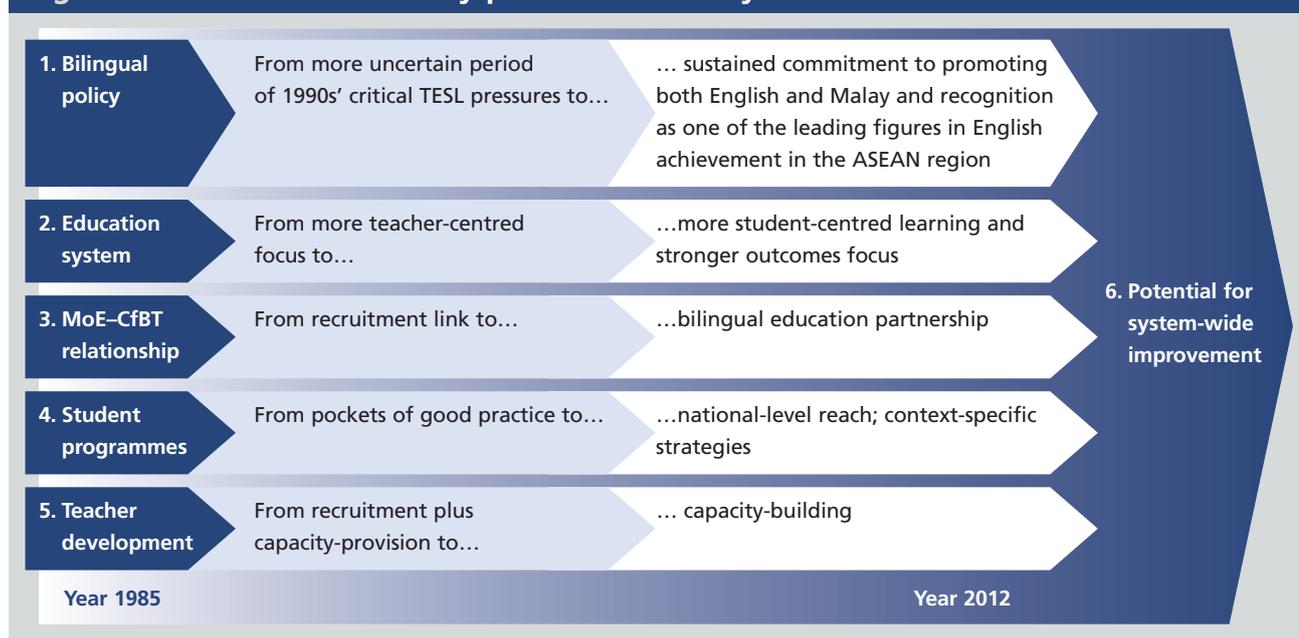
The University of Oxford evaluation made a number of recommendations that could support continued improvement in student attainment and teacher professional development:

- Greater focus on, and awareness of, the challenges posed by speaking, writing and literacy skills in both Malay and English could underpin pupils’ capacity to learn
- Increasing CfBT activities into upper primary years could help ease the transition between phases

Figure 2: Characteristics of bilingual context and the MoE–CfBT relationship

Consistency	Towards proficiency	Collaboration
Brunei’s commitment towards bilingual education policy amidst early external pressures	Opportunities to develop mastery of two languages; shift in perceived status of English as a key competency of the 21st century	Increased awareness of the potential ‘synergy’ between English and Malay languages

Figure 3: The six evolutionary paths – A bird’s eye view



About the CfBT Education Trust

CfBT Education Trust is a top 30 UK charity providing education services for public benefit in the UK and internationally. Established more than 40 years ago, CfBT Education Trust has a particular interest in school effectiveness. Its work involves school improvement through inspection, school workforce development and curriculum design for the UK's Department for Education, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), local authorities and an increasing number of independent and state schools, free schools and academies. Internationally it has successfully implemented education programmes for governments in the Middle East, North Africa and South East Asia and work on projects funded by donors such as the Department for International Development, the European Commission, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the World Bank and the US Agency for International Development, in low- and middle-income countries. Surpluses generated by its operations are reinvested in our educational research programme.

- Greater consideration could be given to special educational needs diagnostics, the role of technology, promoting and supporting the role of the home as a learning environment and tracking pupils over a longer term
- Professional development could focus on: combined professional development programmes for Bruneian teachers and CfBT teachers to progress pedagogic skills; ways to manage the demand of English medium teachers of maths, science and ICT; ways to expand the co-operative teachers model allowing greater collaboration; the creation of an educational/training hub; offering 'core' (compulsory) and elective modules

For more information and to download the summary and full reports see: www.cfbt.com/en-GB/Research/Research-library/2014/r-bilingual-education-in-brunei-2014

Endnotes

- 1 Jawi is the Arabic-derived alphabet in which Malay was written until the 19th century, when the Roman script began to take over.
- 2 Examples include Indonesia's SBI scheme, its decision to scrap the teaching of English in primary schools and subsequent U-turn, and Malaysia's PPSMI, that ran 2003–12 and has been replaced by the MBMMBI along with the introduction of English literature as a compulsory subject in secondary schools.

References

- BMHA (Brunei Ministry of Home Affairs), 2009. *The report: Brunei Darussalam 2009*. Oxford Business Group.
- BMoE (Brunei Ministry of Education), 2008. *The development of education: National report*. Brunei Darussalam: Ministry of Education.
- CfBT Brunei, 2011. *Education department performance report: Academic year 2011*. Brunei: CfBT Brunei Darussalam.
- Nicol, M. F., 2005/04. 'Some problems experienced by Bruneian students with the Cambridge O-level English language reading comprehension paper'. *Southeast Asia*, 5(1–2), pp. 47–70.
- RTB News, 2012. *ASEAN chairmanship handover ceremony* [online] RTB News. Available at: www.rtbnews.rtb.gov.bn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5935:asean-chairmanship-handoverceremony&catid=72:chairman-asean-2013&Itemid=107 [Accessed 19 May 2013].
- Saxena, M., 2008. 'Ideology, policy and practice in bilingual classrooms: Brunei Darussalam'. In: Creese, A., Martin, P. and Hornberger, N. H., eds. *Encyclopedia of language and education, Volume 9: Ecology of Language*. 2nd ed. Springer Science and Business Media LLC, pp. 249–261.
- SEAMEO, 2008. *The new 21st-century national curriculum Brunei Darussalam*. SEAMEO Council Conference Report.
- WB (World Bank), 2013. *Data Catalog* [online] WB. Available at: <http://datacatalog.worldbank.org/> [Accessed 1 May 2013].

ANNA RIGGALL is the research manager at the CfBT Education Trust. She is responsible for delivering CfBT's programme of public domain research and overseeing research activity in the business. Riggall has a background in teaching and educational research. Before joining CfBT she worked at NFER as a senior research officer. She has a master's in education and development studies, and is nearing completion of a PhD in education.