



English: Language of opportunity

English in Malaysia

NARRATOR

In the eighties and nineties, Malaysia enjoyed spectacular economic growth but there was a growing concern that the choice of Malay as the national language might hamper Malaysia's future growth. Its neighbour Singapore was thriving with English as an official national language.

SARAN

If you're talking about attracting FDIs, foreign direct investment into your country and you're wanting to attract multi nationals to come and set up bases in your country you needed to provide them with a workforce that is fluent in an international language and that had to be English. So there were complaints and there were messages being sent around that we're developing a generation that's not fluent and you've got to do something about it.

NARRATOR

As a result of these pressures, the government softened its stand and allowed foreign and private universities to be set up, teaching in English.

SUBRAMARIAM

So now you have a dichotomy in this country. Public universities use Malay and private universities English and over the years what's happening is more affluent families are able to afford to send their kids to private universities or abroad to get English education. The poorer Malaysians have to send their kids to public universities because they are subsidised, the fees are lower so they end up learning in Malay so the gap is growing wider, you know in terms of mobility for children of poorer families, their ability to move up in the social economic ladder is actually being, there's a big barrier now because of this language and it's a sad thing you know.

NARRATOR

The government also changed its schools policy and reintroduced English as a medium of instruction though only for two subjects, maths and science.

TEACHER

When they have high metabolism, they will not gain weight no matter how much they eat. Ya, some people are like that. You eat so much you don't gain weight.

NARRATOR

The new policy was successful in urban schools like this one but did not work in rural areas where many teachers are not fluent in English.

SARAN

There were serious challenges of teaching science and maths in English in the rural areas, especially in situations where the teachers themselves were not competent and were not committed. There were teachers maybe who felt that let's wait, the policy might change so why should we invest so much of effort into trying to do this in English. So if they are not committed and they do it in a language for which they have not much competency and have no aspirations to want to improve, then it's a recipe for disaster.

HUGH

The problem of course was that there were huge numbers of maths and science teachers who didn't have a good level of English and it was extremely demotivating for them. I think the other thing it's been demotivating for, for, is for the pupils who don't speak English as a mother tongue which is perhaps eighty per cent of the population or maybe more. Because not only now do they find that they find English difficult but they now had difficulty understanding and doing well in maths and science and were blaming English for their not liking and not understanding maths and science.