Malaysian Education

—by Hasnah Ibrahim

An address given to The Teachers' Guild of N.S.W. 1966.

I MUST admit, that being an Asian, facing a group of teachers, is a very awe-inspiring experience indeed. I hope what I have to say will be of interest to you, will satisfy some of your queries on the educational aspects of Malaysia, but, more important still, I hope it will help you to understand us, and our problems, better—to enable you to give a more biased, perhaps, but kinder assessment of our policies.

The main problem influencing our political and educational system stems from the fact that ours is a multi-racial society. This may seem strange to you, for yours is a multi-racial society, too. But you cannot view our problems in perspective, unless you understand our subjective feelings concerning this. I shall give the facts but please remember that my interpretation will be highly subjective.

As a nation, you are united, with one national language. Though foreign languages are taught, few schools, if any, have a foreign language as the medium of instruction. The distribution of political and economic power lies within the British-descended community. The migrants come in with the intention of being naturalised, of adopting Australian nationality. Our problem, in one sentence, is to achieve what you already possess—National Unity.

First, let us trace the development of education in Malaysia. As the new States of Sabah and Sarawak are still in the early stages of educational process, I shall confine myself to the development of education in Malaya.

Before the advent of the Europeans, Malaya did not have a modern system of education. However, some form of formal education did exist. Facilities were available for Chinese boys to learn the Chinese ideographic writing and the sacred lore of their sages. For advanced work they were sent to China.

The Malay boys gained their education by a system of apprenticeship, to those able to teach them the Qur'an (the Muslim equivalent of the Bible); letter writing; and rudiments of the Malay language. Education for girls, however, was unheard of then.

When the East India Company came it paid little attention to education in Malaya, which is understandable since it was really a commercial enterprise. However, English education was introduced to Malaya through private schools founded by missionary societies.

In 1867, the Straits Settlement was transferred to Colonial Office rule. The first Government English schools were set up and government aid was granted to private schools. Vernacular education, though not particularly favoured by the British administrators, developed through the existence of the Religious schools. These were gradually secularised, taken

over by the Government and Malay schools were established.

Without aid from the Government, the Chinese community established and maintained its own schools. These followed the traditional pattern of schools in China. When the reforms of 1911 (after the revolution) were also followed, registration and inspection of Chinese schools were necessary, to prevent the preaching of subversive political doctrines by text-books and teachers from China.

The Indian Vernacular Schools sprang up in the 1870's when the new rubber estates brought Indian immigration. The Labour code of 1912 required rubber estate owners to provide schools with the aid of a small per capita grant from the government.

All schools suffered from a shortage of teachers, and the non-Malay schools had the further disadvantage of having a curriculum not suitable for local education.

The communities in Malaya, at this stage, lived peacefully, but as separate entities.

Post World War II awakened the national consciousness of the people. Perhaps the well-deserved Independence of a much-admired neighbour, Indonesia, did have a bearing on this. Public response towards education was tremendous, though the aim then was mainly to get into the white-collared jobs of the Public Service.

A new plan for national schools, designed eventually to provide free, compulsory education, was adopted in 1952. To solve the problem of languages, the schools were to be of two types. In the first type, Malay is the language of instruction and English is a compulsory subject, and in the second, English the language of instruction, and Malay a compulsory subject. The 1952 Act also included the provision that education provided in all schools will have a Malayan orientation. These national schools are Government-financed, but, remember, the Chinese and Indian schools were making simultaneous progress, too.

By 1957, when Malaya became self-governing, the new government gave free rein to improvements deemed necessary in the education system.

Many people would blame the British for their lack of foresight in not providing adequate preparations to enable their ex-colony to survive the 20th century. However, I will not do that. The Malaya of pre-World War II was too far removed from that of post-Independence, for the British to have envisaged the need for such preparations. By these preparations I mean: guided participation in administration and a basic technical education for the Malayans. The education provided then seemed to enhance the regrettable hierarchical nature of Malayan society, so that to establish the dignity of labour became one of the major aims of later education reformers.

Indonesia's hard-earned independence, her bid for national unity, was infectious The Malays were awakened from their conventional servility to whoever is at the helm. The earliest Malays to be English-educated were from the upper classes. Some very public-spirited ones, like our Prime Minister, gathered enough following to make a peaceful bid for self-government. I do not like the term "independence", for ours was merely the independence given to a child by benevolent, if patronising, parents.

To survive economically, to catch up with technical advancement, Malaya needed skilled labour. Specialised education was necessary. The almost immediate step taken by the government was to open up, simultaneously, teachers' colleges with specialised training courses, and technical schools and colleges.

The aim of the new government can be summarised by the Royal Address at

the opening of Parliament in 1964: "The plain object of the new system will be to give a child the kind of education for which its natural abilities and aptitudes are best suited. This will be done by giving them a general and pre-vocational education and by careful observation and guidance, into fields which suit and interest them most." All this—with national unity as the major goal.

Distinctions were drawn between Academic, Vocational, and Technical educations. Automatic promotions with three major examinations in the secondary and post-secondary schools filter off only the cream for University education. Those caught by any of these hurdles branch off into suitable professional or vocational or technical training.

In my time, the emphasis on English was greatly felt. Passes in English were made intensive for grades of passes in the School Certificate and the Higher School Certificate examinations. Considering the importance of these passes for the Malaysian candidates, this bias towards English is rather unfair, so the Malaysian School Certificate was introduced of equal status with the Cambridge Certificate, but with the grades determined by actual academic capacity, plus a comparatively little compulsory knowledge of the National language.

The foreign-descended Malaysians came to Malaysia peacefully, in commercial ventures. They possess their distinctive traits and cultures. They were not refugees, so it is only natural for them to preserve these traits. Until of late, there was no necessity for them to face the ultimatum of choosing their nationality. Even the Malays, though essentially united by language and religion, originated from different parts of Malaya, Sumatra, Java and other islands, with their respective dialects and local customs. We are surrounded by neighbours with strongly-united nations. To survive we need a more rationally, national conscious people who will jump the barriers of racial segregation for the sake of national unity. Malay was the chosen lingua franca so it is only natural that it should be the National language.

Perhaps you may wonder how this would benefit the unfortunate non-Malays who seem to be victimised one way or the other.

This was to encourage the learning and use of the National language by the peoples of Malaysia, who have grudgingly or otherwise accepted Malay as the National language.

Having been educated in English for all but three years of my school life, it will be very difficult for me to teach in Malay. Personally, I am not looking forward to an all-Malay educational system, but as a Malaysian I think it is essential. As a national student, however, I find many irritating objections to the means employed to make the National language a success. These are personal and petty objections, and very domestic.

The main objection is the questionable dedication of the so-called promoters of the National language. The members of the present administrative body naturally bear traces of colonial thinking. Despite their dogmatic and sometimes irrational schemes, they must still consider English the language—for whilst they are urging others to take up Malay, their children are abroad studying in English.

Another point I find very unsettling is the too sudden, enforced usage of Malay. The main effect of the recent changes has been mainly to arouse resentment, resentment arising from fear of loss of racial identity and personal security. We are aware of these sacrifices to be made and we are sympathetic, but a more delicate handling of the situation, I feel, would be more effective in the long run.

It is strange, but being away from home one tends to look at the problems in perspective. I sometimes wonder if

we have wasted too much time polishing our knowledge of English instead of badly-needed technical education. Perhaps I am biased here, by close friendships with the Indonesians. We all know the precarious economic position that country is in, but what you may not be aware of is the very high standard of technical education in Indonesia. This is easily verified by the fact that those Indonesian students abroad who can get over language difficulties do brilliantly in the technical courses. With favourable and suitable administration, that country has no difficulty of shortage of technical skill, which we in Malaysia are facing.

Indonesia too would be a very good example of the unity a common language can bring. Despite the unfortunate recent political misadventures, the Indonesians are undeniably united, and racial distinction has for long been overcome.

Another thing that turns me towards the National language is our lack of a concrete reason to have English as the main language. True, we need to have a certain amount of knowledge of English to keep up with world affairs. But—aren't we leaning too much to the west? When are we to be really self-supporting? Would it not be better for us to establish solidarity amongst our peoples first before trying to present a sophisticated front to the world?

Is it worthwhile for us to be copying our betters, when our best is not as yet good enough for the leading nations in the Commonwealth? Forgive me if I puzzle you here—but I am referring to the interpretation of the terms "Student-Exchange Schemes" by the many people I have met. So far, the majority of those I have met think of the Student-Exchange Scheme as a one-way traffic of young Malaysians with sufficient intellectual potential staying temporarily in the more advanced countries to acquaint themselves with the better life and to broaden their outlook. I love it in Australia and I have no objection to this, but I object to the lack of attempts by the advanced countries to understand us.

I know we cannot afford to give scholarships for foreign students, such as other countries provide via the Colombo Plan Scheme, but would it not be better for these schemes to provide a reciprocal exchange as well? It was encouraged by the Rotary Scholarships provided for Australian graduates to stay in Asian countries for a year of teaching or other academic pursuits. But a year of limited acquaintance is sufficient only for a critical assessment of our ways. It is not sufficient to understand us.

We like to understand but, being humans, we like to be understood too. We know we are not up to par, but we have our pride and we do not like being patronised. What discouraged me was that Malaysian secondary and University education, despite the parallel standard to British secondary schools and universities, is not recognised by the advanced countries. Theoretically, it is recognised, in the sense that our high-school and university graduates can further their studies abroad without loss of seniority.

But no move has been made to encourage undergrads and students from these advanced countries to study in Malaysia. Having questioned a few such people, I know that they would be willing to participate in such a scheme provided they are assured that their qualifications would be recognised on returning home. It would be most unfair of us to expect them to sacrifice their futures, even for international good-will.

Short of trying to keep up with our betters I see no reason why English is to be preferred to Malay as our national language, if other countries can survive using their national languages.

I am sorry I have not given you a broader outline of Malaysian education, but I guess you can get that from references. Just to satisfy myself, how-

ever, I must let you know that we have a junior equivalent to Duntroon—the Federal Military College—catering for military, moral and intellectual pursuits. We also have very advanced Audio-Visual aid courses, a flourishing Adult Education System, and teachers' training colleges of which we can be proud.

Educational Administration In New Guinea

—by J. A. Rhodes

THE education system of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea is governed by an Education Ordinance and the Education Regulations. Thus the control and direction of secular education are the responsibility of the Administration. Under these regulations, the Administrator provides schools, pre-school centres and other educational activities.

Grants are made by the Administration to the missions and other educational agencies and schools are conducted by native authorities subject to the approval of the Director of Education. The regulations enforce compulsory attendance of children in specified areas. They also determine the language or languages to be used in schools (English has been adopted in all schools but pidgin English is often used in the first year as a medium of communication).

To advise on educational matters an Education Advisory Board has been established, consisting of the Director of Education, four members appointed by the Administrator to represent the missions and other voluntary educational agencies in the Territory, and such other members as the Administrator appoints. District education committees are appointed also, consisting of no more than five members, one of whom represents the missions.

The general policy of the system embraces the political, economic and social advancement of the people with a blending of the cultures and the voluntary acceptance of Christianity by the indigenous people.

To attain these objectives it is necessary to achieve mass literacy; to awaken the interest of the people in, and assist their progress towards, a higher material standard of living; to teach the community what is necessary to enable it to cope with the political, economic and social changes that are occurring; and to provide within the Territory a full range of primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and adult education for both sexes and for all classes of the community.

As has been stated already, the use of English is now taught widely in all schools in the Territory and it is intended that it will eventually become the common language. This, then, is the first step towards the progress of the people.

In addition to teaching reading and