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## **The Relevance of ‘EFL’, ‘ESL’ and Other Such Terms in Contemporary Contexts: The Case of Malaysian English**

**Azirah Hashim\***

University of Malaya, Malaysia

**Gerhard Leitner**

Free University Berlin, Germany

### **Abstract**

English in Malaysia has undergone several phases since it entered the country during the colonial period in the early nineteenth century. During the colonial period, English was used mainly for communicating between the colonialists and traders. English was the official language together with Malay when the country attained independence in 1957. However, it lost its status as an official language after ten years, in 1967, when Malay was made the sole official language. The medium of instruction which had been English gradually changed to Malay during the 1970s and 1980s with a deliberate reduction of the role of English in schools. In later years, nevertheless, there was official promotion of English arising from Malay being already firmly established as the national language and the need to keep abreast with global and regional changes. The status of English has, thus, shifted several times throughout the country’s post-colonial period. While it became the “second most important language” nationally and politically, there emerged some variation in its status in some domains, in speech vs writing and, of course, among individuals. Dynamic changes in Malaysian English have also taken place. This paper examines the developments in terms of the status of English in Malaysia, including terms like ‘EFL’ and ‘ESL’ which have been used, and discusses if they are still adequate. We will show how the status of English and the contexts of its uses have changed and why a single term, say ‘second language’, is of little use and has been throughout its history. We will conclude with tentative propositions of what might happen in the future.

### **Keywords**

Malaysia, English, status, role, second language, colonial

## **1 Introduction**

This paper examines the developments around English and its status in Malaysia, including the use of terms like ‘EFL’ and ‘ESL’, and discusses if they are still adequate. We will show how the status of English and the contexts of its uses have changed and why a single term, say ‘second language’, is

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### **\*Corresponding Author**

Address: Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, 50603, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Email: [azirahh@um.edu.my](mailto:azirahh@um.edu.my)

of little use and has been in its history. We examine this in the context of firstly, the historical role of English; secondly, the changes in language policy from independence to the present time; and finally, the features of Malaysian English (MalE).

## **2 ENL, ESL and EFL**

The English community has, in the past, often been categorized into three groups. Quirk et al. (1972) described the differences between English as a native language (ENL), a second language (ESL) and a foreign language (EFL). The first refers to countries where English is spoken natively, such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. The second refers to countries which are typically former colonies, e.g. India, Malaysia and Singapore. In this second category, English is an important language and, in some cases, an official language, but is not the main language of the country. Malaysia is such an example where English is said to be spoken and used as a second language (Asmah, 2012; 2013). In this context, English exists with other strong languages and is widely spoken in the country. Often, it is the language used in the media, in education and in other domains. It is also the language commonly used in the business domain and in higher education; furthermore, it is the language often used in casual conversations in urban areas between different ethnic groups (Kirkpatrick, 2007; Schneider, 2007).

The third category consists of countries where English is used with foreigners and for international communication, e.g. Indonesia, Laos, Thailand. In this category, English is not actually used or spoken much in daily life and is used mainly with foreigners. English is typically learned at school but students have little opportunity to use English outside the classroom and therefore little motivation to learn the language (Kachru, 1985). This ENL/ESL/EFL distinction has been useful to distinguish the English language situation in a country. However, this classification has certain limitations. The term 'native language' has become quite controversial. In ESL and EFL countries, ENL is often considered to be superior than other varieties and it has long been the model or standard to aspire to for language learners. It has been argued, though, that in ENL countries, there are actually several varieties of English and therefore, a standard model does not exist. In addition, models from ENL countries may not be suited to the context of ESL and EFL countries and a local model would probably be much more appropriate to aspire to (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Furthermore, it is becoming difficult to distinguish between ESL and EFL countries as English becomes the lingua franca in Southeast Asia and the first foreign language to be taught in EFL countries. English has come to play an increasingly important role in EFL countries and could, in some situations, possibly be called a second language. Likewise, in ESL countries, there can be big discrepancies between the English used by people within a particular country like Malaysia where for some, it is more of a second language and for others, more of a foreign language.

Malaysia is one of four former Anglophone colonies in Southeast Asia and occupies the southern extension of mainland Southeast Asia. Malaysia's federal states, Sarawak and Sabah, share with Brunei the north of Borneo. Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia have Malay as their dominant, official and national language. Although Malaysia and Singapore share a common history, today they are very different in terms of demography. Malay became a minority language in Singapore but it was made the national and official language for obvious geo-political reasons. In Malaysia, English is designated 'second language', the second most important language after Malay (Azirah, 2009; Asmah, 2012). It is used in a number of settings, both formal and informal, although it is formal mainly in multinational settings. In education, the use of English has been controversial and policies have shifted over the years. In informal settings, it is commonly used and different sub-varieties have appeared, for example, on social media and popular culture.

The development of MalE shows that English has become a local language influenced by Malaysian

languages and cultures, and is used especially in intranational communication (Azirah & Leitner, 2011; Baskaran, 2005; Tan, 2009a, 2009b). Several researchers have described the features of MalE and some MalE lexis have also been codified in dictionaries (Azirah, 2014; Azirah & Tan, 2012; Ooi, 2005; Pillai and Ong, 2018). While this variety has been placed in different categories in different models, MalE has to be investigated in its entire language habitat to determine its status today.

### 3 History of English in the Public Domain

English was brought to Bantam in Java by the East India Company as early as 1602. It was and remained a foreign language and was mainly the home language of officials of the Company. Trade and political negotiations were typically conducted in Malay, Thai or other, local languages. To give an example, when the Thai King, Rama III, signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the United States of America in 1833, it was done in four languages, i.e., Thai and English, with translations in Portuguese and Chinese (Azirah & Leitner, 2021; Wade, 2009). However, English did eventually become the working language in Bantam and in the Malay sultanates during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first phase was called the ‘foundation’ phase by Kachru (1985). During this phase, English began to be used in a country where, previously, it was not spoken. This typically happened when English speakers settled in a country. The second phase which Kachru called ‘exonormative stabilisation’, happened when the variety spoken was closely modelled on the variety imported by the settlers. According to Schneider (2007), Phases 1 and 2 took place between 1786 and 1957 when the British came to Southeast Asia to secure trading outposts and to challenge the economic and political power of other European nations in the region, most notably the Dutch. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth as well as the early phase of the twentieth century, the British influence expanded politically and geographically. Malaya was originally a trade colony in that the British prioritised trade through their Trade Company but did not perceive themselves as settlers (Mufwene, 2001).

Contact between local and imported languages increased and many local words were borrowed into English (Azirah & Leitner, 2021; Tan, 2009a; 2010b). English was mainly spread through education that aimed to create a workforce for the administration of the colonies. The British (and missionary) education systems promised greater advantages in the job market. Consequently, more and more Chinese, Malays, and Indians learnt English. Locals were trained as administrators and special schools where English became the medium of instruction were established to satisfy this need. In such a context, the variety of English developed through contact with local and other languages, for example, in schools where English was the language spoken. English was used as a medium of instruction and taught as a subject in educational institutions through the colonial education system. The English language was being used in new contexts, was subjected to change and, finally, a new variety which differed phonologically, syntactically, and lexically from the established British variety emerged.

In interethnic communication, English became a neutral language with ties to the colonial power deemphasised. Over time, an English-knowing elite developed and they secured the high social status of English. Many students were sent abroad to study on government scholarships and several parents sent their children to boarding schools mainly in the UK and Australia (Asmah, 2012; Azirah, 2009). The local variety became recognised as the norm and was accepted socially and recommended to become the model for language learning in schools. Today, in places where the local variety has become accepted, local people who continue to speak the imported variety can be seen as outsiders or as speaking unnaturally. This would be the third, ‘nativisation’ phase, considered the most important and dynamic phase (Schneider, 2007) resulting in the heaviest effects on the restructuring of the English language, mainly at the level of vocabulary and grammar. We will return to this in the section on the features of MalE.

## 4 Language Policy and Language Education

The colonial situation weakened the position of Malay, especially when English took over new domains in administration, the media, the sciences, and learning. However, Malay, Chinese languages and Indian languages were maintained and used widely. Not surprisingly, debates about language policy and media of instruction in the schools began even before independence in 1957. In 1952, the *Education Ordinance* proposed the establishment of a bilingual national school system with either Malay and English as media of instruction, although a Malay-medium system was favoured in the long run. To appease the Chinese and Indian populations' reservations about the likelihood of the domination of Malay, the Razak Report or the Education Ordinance in 1957 proposed the establishment of two types of primary schools, the 'National School' using Malay as the medium of instruction and the 'National-Type' School, which could use either Chinese or Tamil as the medium of instruction. It was also proposed that, at the secondary level, the national school system be implemented and that Chinese schools, which would have a common syllabus and examinations in Chinese, could continue (Asmah, 2012; Azirah, 2009).

Upon independence in 1957, the *Reid Commission* adopted many recommendations of the *Razak Report* and endorsed the establishment of Malay-medium National Schools, and Chinese and Tamil National-Type Schools where Malay was a compulsory subject. That compromise was spelt out in Article 152 of the Constitution, which made Malay the official and sole national language but stated that English would be phased out gradually over the next ten years (Asmah, 2012; Azirah, 2009). It elaborated on the use of English in courts, in parliament, etc. The language typically used would be Malay as it was the national language but paragraph 152 added that English would continue for a transitional period in legal and administrative affairs. A succession of language planning measures increased the role of Malay in the legal domain, following similar reforms in government and education. The *National Language Act* of 1967 made Malay the official language in these domains and relegated English to a second language. English was phased out in parliamentary debates in the 1970s but allowed in the courts to continue without translations. Courts had the discretion, in the interest of justice, to allow proceedings to be held in English if and when counsel and witnesses were unable to speak fluently in Malay. These allowances were also made because many judges and lawyers had been trained in the United Kingdom and were therefore more adept at conducting trials in English rather than in Malay. It was much later, in 1982, that the Lower Courts began conducting trials in Malay and interpreters had to be used, when English was not understood (Powell, 2008). However, lawyers could seek permission from the court to conduct the examination in English. In other words, English was still used. This position was and has remained stronger in Sabah and Sarawak where special provisions were made and set down as amendments in the constitution after their accession to Malaysia in 1963.

Education similarly experienced frequent shifts in the role of English. In 1971, the revised *Education Act* extended the shift to Malay to tertiary education. The development of the Malay language became a priority in order to consolidate its status as national language and as main medium of instruction. The Malay Academy, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, in Kuala Lumpur was entrusted with the promotion of the linguistic development of Malay that had become a priority in order to consolidate its status as national language and as main medium of instruction (Asmah, 2013). Malaysia was successful in reducing the role of English and promoting Malay to the position of an active national language. By the 1980s, Malay was the medium of instruction in all schools and public institutes of higher education.

After several years, the sole promotion of Malay was judged to be unsatisfactory. The competence in English of many people had declined so much that many graduates from local universities became virtually monolingual speaking only Malay. This led to their inability to secure jobs in multinational organisations in the business world as they could not meet the entry requirements needed. That was an acute new problem, a barrier in securing jobs in an environment where the private sector was expanding and where competition in the region was increasing (Asmah, 2012; Azirah, 2009). The English of these

graduates and especially those who do not live in the city would be more aptly termed 'EFL' rather than 'ESL', because, for them, English was not used in intranational communication and its use was limited mainly to the classroom. From this, it can be said that English may not necessarily be the second language of some Malaysians. It can be the first, second, or even a foreign language depending on several factors such where they live and attend school and their family background. In the rural areas, English is in many ways an unfamiliar language to many due to the lack of exposure and use of the language.

Today, English is not the sole language because a number of universities and disciplines use Malay but it is universally the sole medium of instruction in science, medicine and in all programmes in private higher institutions. The role of English has also increased with sociocultural, economic and political developments within the whole of ASEAN. According to Asmah (2012), the return of English does not mean that English has come full circle because it has not been accorded the status it had enjoyed during the colonial period and early post-independence period. However, she believes that the reemergence of enthusiasm for the English language is in line with the role played by the language in the development of the country. The English language, which had been associated with colonial rule and was discarded or given a less important role in many domains following independence, has reemerged as a language for international communication and knowledge. With the firm establishment of Malay as the national language, English need no longer be seen as a threat to national unity.

## 5 The Features of English in Malaysia

Before describing the features of MalE, a brief overview of models of World Englishes with references to MalE is useful. Kachru (1985) developed the 'Three Circles' model, the Inner Circle, Outer Circle and Expanding Circle. The first represents the native speaker varieties, the second, the non-native varieties (ESL), and the third, English in EFL contexts. MalE is placed in the second category. This model has advantages over the ENL/ESL/EFL model, as English came to be seen as plural and the model does not suggest that one variety is superior to another. Kachru also suggested three phases of nonnative institutionalised varieties of English - the first phase is characterised by non-recognition of the local variety, which means that there is a negative attitude towards the local variety and an imported native variety is considered superior and the model for learning English. In the second phase, the local and imported varieties coexist. The local variety of English is now commonly used for a wide range of purposes but is still considered inferior to the native variety. In the third phase, the local variety becomes socially accepted and the model for language learning in schools, while speaking the native variety is considered unnatural.

Moag's (1982) life-cycle model is another interesting model which provides a vivid description of the dynamic changes in the development of MalE. Moag's life cycle of nonnative Englishes identified five processes, four of which are undergone by all varieties, and a fifth one may only be experienced by some. Phase 1 is 'transportation' when English arrives in a non-English speaking place and stays. Phase 2 is 'indigenization', when the new variety of English starts to reflect the local culture and becomes different from the transported variety. The third one is the 'expansion in use and function' phase in which the new variety is used in an increasing number of situations and for more and more purposes. The fourth phase, 'institutionalisation', is marked by the use of the local variety as a language learning model in school. The fifth and final phase, 'restriction of use and function', sees a decline in use. Malaysia is an example due to the increased official promotion of Malay.

Schneider (2007) proposes that the nativization of an English variety comprises five distinct phases: Foundation, Exonormative Stabilization, Nativization, Endonormative Stabilization, and Differentiation. He places MalE in phase 3 as it is in the process of developing its own norms. Given the changing contexts and dynamic nature of this variety, we will now look at some features of MalE and see if MalE can still be considered to be in phase 3.

There is a considerable body of academic literature on the linguistics and sociolinguistics of MalE (eg. Azirah and Leitner, 2021; Low and Azirah, 2012; Tan, 2009a; 2009b). Features that mark MalE's departure from British English and American English which suggests that it is becoming an autonomous variety of English, highlighted in this section. In general, the following are noted:

1. the processes of simplification, especially in phonology, morpho-syntax and syntax
2. the influence of Malay and other locally important languages such as Chinese, Tamil and Arabic, and
3. the restructuring and features of MalE and the retention of older (colonial) forms of English and episodic features (Azirah & Leitner, 2011).

## 5.1 Phonology

MalE shows many features of the simplification of the phonological system of *Received Pronunciation* (RP) and of the interference of Malay, Chinese languages and Tamil.

The characteristics of Malaysian English phonology can be summarized as follows:

- Merger of /i:/ and /ɪ/: *feel – fill, bead – bid* all have /i/.
- Merger of /u:/ and /ʊ/: *pool – pull, Luke – look* all have /u/.
- Merger of /ɛ/ and /æ/: *set – sat, man – men* all have /ɛ/.
- Merger of /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/: *pot – port, cot – caught* all have /ɔ/.
- Variant realizations of /ə/: schwa tends to get replaced by a full vowel, the quality of which frequently depends upon orthography.
- Monophthongization of diphthongs: e.g. *coat, load* with /o/, *make, steak* with /e/.
- Stops are unaspirated in all positions.
- /θ/ becomes /t/ and /ð/ becomes /d/ before a vowel (*thin* → /tin/; *then* → /den/); /θ/ and /ð/ become /f/ in word-final position (*breath* → /brɛf/; *breathe* → /brif/).
- There is a lack of length contrast and tenseness contrast in vowels (*bit/beat* → /bit/)
- There are no syllabic laterals and nasals.
- In word-final position, voiced stops become voiceless (lɛg → lɛk).
- Diphthongs are often absent (/ei/ and /əʊ/ in *face* and *goat* → /e:/ and /o:/)
- It has syllable-timed, rather than stress-timed, rhythm (every syllable is given equal stress, or when one syllable is stressed, the stress may be on a different syllable from that stressed in RP).

(Azirah & Leitner, 2021; Baskaran, 2005; Tan and Low, 2010; Zuraidah, 2000)

A feature that has relatively recently been observed is the rise of rhoticity in MalE, which correlates with age, ethnicity and cultural orientation (Tan, 2012). Intrusion of American English features can be said to be due to popular culture, education, trade and presumably international organisations and agencies (Leitner, 2014). With the persistent acceptance of Standard British English and the influence of American English, MalE cannot merely be seen from the perspective of nativisation. A lot of variation can be related to demographic factors like age, education, ethnicity, and social status. Variation also depends on one's affiliation with popular culture.

In terms of phonology, there are many similarities across Southeast Asian Englishes (Low & Azirah, 2012), but studies by Low (2010) and Azirah & Tan (2012) show that what is considered educated or standard in Singapore need not be the same in Malaysia. This is because shared systems may well be exploited differently, given different values associated to education, race and religion. There is good ground to argue for ethnic patterns inside some national variety and a continuum across nations (Leitner, 2014).

MalE does not have stress to distinguish parts of speech. That is, stress placement is not used in

MalE as a feature of word differentiation. Thus, for the word *import*, the noun and the verb cannot be differentiated from the verb as in BrE.

## 5.2 Grammar

Many studies (Azirah & Tan, 2012; Pillai & Ong, 2018; Tan, 2012) have described features like the deletion of subjects and/or objects or both, the realization of yes/no questions, and the reduced uses of modal verbs in MalE. Malay and Chinese particles are commonly used in MalE and convey semantic and pragmatic (often discursal) effects. Norizah and Azirah (2009, p. 43–4) state that particles convey emotions and attitudes, such as ‘to soften a directive, place emphasis on a statement or word, and affirm a statement or turn a statement into a question’. This is similar to Tay *et. al.* (2016) who found that a single particle could have functions that act in opposite directions such as *lah*, which is “to soften an order or advice”, reduces social distance, while another of its functions is “to show disapproval, contradiction or disagreement in a harsh manner”. The same particle ‘has the opposite effect on social relationships’. In addition, they found two main functions of particles, either to reduce or to increase social distance.

The formation of yes-no question is exemplified where the sentence continues with ‘or not’ (Azirah and Tan, 2012; Baskaran, 2008).

She can come, yes or not?

She can come or not?

So you like the dress or not?

The use of ‘is it’ or ‘isn’t it’ is also common in question tags (Baskaran, 2008:616):

He is always late, isn’t it?

She likes cooking, isn’t it?

## 5.3 Lexis and borrowing

As for Malay loan words in English, it is important to distinguish between two overlapping periods. The first one began long before British colonisation, when Malay and other words made it into the core of the English lexicon, often via languages like Italian and Spanish. The second period started around independence when loan words became signals of localisation. In the first period of contact during British colonisation, Malay words entered English during the time when English-speaking researchers and adventurers lived among Malay people. Their exposure to the local languages influenced their own English, and borrowings from Malay, Chinese dialects and Tamil entered into their language as well as other European languages. Prominent examples are *to run amok* (*to behave disruptively/to go into a frenzy*), *sarong* (*a long piece of fabric casually tied around the waist*), *kampong* (*Malaysian village*) or *ketchup* (*tomato sauce*) (Azirah & Leitner, 2011, 2021). Tan (2009a, 2010b) provided a comprehensive study on Malay and Chinese loan words in MalE. The Malay word *rakyat* ‘nation’, for instance is an important and frequent political term that is often employed for political purposes in Malaysia to unite the Malays (Azirah & Tan, 2012). An example is given below:

“This momentum that we are experiencing is not because the *rakyat* loves Umno, but more so because the *rakyat* is angry at Pakatan. If we want the *rakyat* to love us, there are several tests that we need to pass,” the former Prime Minister Najib said in his winding-up speech at the end of the youth assembly (Shahril: Umno members must not return to old habits, *The Star*, 6 December 2019).

Tan (2009b) examined the contact between English and Chinese and the incorporation of Chinese

borrowings into MalE on the basis of her corpus of MalE newspapers. She identified loan words, compound blends and loan translations in the semantic fields of food, festivals, people, martial arts, traditional Chinese medicine and others mainly from Hokkien, Cantonese and Mandarin. Examples include *kailan* (a vegetable), *amah* (domestic helper) and *tai chi* (a kind of martial arts); compound blends: *kuay teow soup* (a soup dish), *Chinese sinseh* (a Chinese medicine man) and *angpow packet* (red money packet); and loan translations: *Hainanese chicken rice*, *Mid-Autumn Festival* and *coffee shop*.

Azirah and Leitner (2016) and Azirah, Leitner and Aqad (2017) surveyed the role of Arabic in creating an ethnic form of English in domains like religion, law and finance for Muslims in Malaysia. While the role of Arabic cannot be reduced to Islam in the Malayan context in the past, its association with Islam is the strongest factor today. Like in other languages, Arabic loans are mainly nouns but there are also some verbs, adjectives and exclamations. Their number is larger in the Malay press than in the English press. *Berterawih* (to pray) and *rafak* (to rise) are verbs; *daif* (weak), *thabat* (permanent), and *wajib* (compulsory) are adjectives; *Alhamdulillah* (praise be to Allah) and the globally known *Insha'allah* (God willing) are ritual expressions. While in the more distant past, it exerted a strong influence in Malay and Indian languages as a trade and religious language, its major association is with Islam and it accounts for a large number of contemporary influence. Loan words today tend to be typically markers of localisation and mark differences between varieties of English. When a donor language is used across a region which shares a particular religion, like, for example, when English is associated with Islam in different countries in SE Asia, the English varieties tend to share common features and may produce an internal segmentation of, or division between, religious communities. Therefore, similarities can be observed in MalE, Brunei English and Indonesian English where Arabic words are concerned, but differences in the use of Arabic words in English can be seen between ethnic groups in Malaysia.

MalE today is represented by phonological, grammatical and lexical features, some of which may also be found in other regional varieties. Studies have shown that some MalE features are shared by ASEAN speakers and that it has regional features shared across countries. The growing use of English as a lingua franca between speakers who do not share a first language has been brought about by intensified exchanges across language borders through intra-ASEAN mobility, ASEAN meetings and activities which have increased since the formation of the ASEAN community in 2015 (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Leitner, 2014).

The use of social media and the internet, television and media have also exposed Malaysians to speakers from all over the world (Azirah and Norizah, 2012). The distinction between Outer Circle and Expanding Circle countries cannot account for the growing use of Englishes in today's world. By examining the linguistic features of MalE, variation can be seen indicating that it is a variety that is still developing and is in constant flux. Although it has undergone linguistic and developmental processes as in other varieties, its current status and functions have changed from one period to another.

The discussion of MalE's features above has shown in considerable detail that it has developed into a rule-governed form of English. While the extent of use of its features correlates with the level of proficiency and, by implication, education, social status and ethnicity of their users, they are use variable and create a spectrum of localised styles. This variation can be seen in the examples below, the first an extract from the courtroom which is a formal context, and the second an extract from social media which is usually an informal context:

Courtroom:

Based on the letter would it be correct to say that the conclusion you came to was purely speculative?

Isn't it a requirement by the board if you wish to practise to be registered?

(Azirah and Powell, 2011: 99)

Social media:

How abt 10.30 am? Boleh tak (Malay - Is that ok?)

I cannot join u guys 2nite. Wa ai tak chek leh (Hokkien - I have to study)

(Azirah et. al., 2012: 331)

Whether MalE should be incorporated into the teaching syllabus of English in the country remains an issue that has varying views. In the case of Australian English, it took nearly 200 years for Australian English to be accepted and to be included in the English curricular as a teaching norm. Australian English had to be seen as stratifying and to have a viable standard form that was accepted widely. It had the necessary dictionaries, grammars and usage guides when it was accepted as a teaching norm. Hardly any of these materials is available in Malaysia. Whether English has moved beyond phase 3 of Schneider's model is debatable. The fact that indigenous terms are now accepted in the local newspapers with no need to provide a gloss (Azirah & Leitner, 2011) suggests that MalE may be moving into Phase 4. Some researchers have discussed the development of endonormative standards and codification of varieties of English in Southeast Asia while also arguing for pragmatic approaches to English language learning (e.g. Azirah and Leitner, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2010). There has also been lexicographic coverage of MalE, for example, dictionaries such as Times-Chambers Essential English, Macquarie Junior Dictionary and the Grolier International Dictionary (Azirah and Leitner, 2021). Only time will tell how many of the innovations found in MalE will become accepted as part of the English language around the world. The question of what MalE is, thus, remains an open question. One thing is certain, MalE is not a foreign language in the country and it may become a native language for a segment of its internationally-oriented society. In terms of its domains of use and the uptake in education, it may count as a second language.

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

This paper surveyed the history, language policies and features of English in Malaysia to understand the appropriateness of concepts like second or foreign language for English. MalE must, however, be embedded in the broader context of the upper level of national language habitats and its links to international and global levels (Azirah & Leitner, 2021; Leitner, 2014) as there are features that transcend national boundaries but may continue to be tied to a particular ethnicity or religion. Instead of nationalising the history of English and looking at Englishes as different national varieties, it seems better to argue for regional, pan-national layers such as the influence of Arabic on MalE, Brunei English and Indonesian due to Islam today. Given the pulls from ethnic languages like Malay and Chinese and from the outside, like American English, the drive to endonormativism is not the only development, and the development of MalE and other varieties is much more complex (Leitner, 2014).

What is the status of English in Malaysia in terms of the concepts mentioned in the title of this paper? The Constitution classifies English as the second most important language but does not give it a legitimate official place except in some domains like private higher education. English has become the medium of instruction in many of the science and engineering faculties in public universities although it is not officially endorsed. It is also used extensively in private and mainly Anglophone education, the press, book publishing, and other domains. The choice of a language is subject to the international pressures that favour English like international relations, finance and business and the media. To call English a second language is not far from the truth, given its long history in the country. However, there is a growing middle class that uses English as a home language and creates a young generation of first language English speakers. It is often the language in interethnic communication although Malay is preferred by the generation who were educated entirely in Malay.

Though MalE is widely used in Malaysia and is featured in creative writing, advertisements and other public displays, recognition of its local and informal variety and of its features that make it acceptable as

a model that students are exposed to or taught in the classroom or acceptable at the upper level of its uses is still absent. The development of MalE certainly shows that English has become one of the languages in intra-national communication. The influence of Malaysian and regional languages and cultures is hard to overlook. Although its adoption inside Kachru's circles may have been suitable historically and geographically in the past, in the last few decades, it has become problematic as MalE shows signs of its own norm-development. For older Malaysians, English is often a second or even a first language - this is the group that went through an English language education. For younger people, English may be a foreign language, and one used sparingly with other Malaysians.

Wong (1983) expressed the idea a few decades ago that there are three varieties. She stated that the acrolectal variety or Standard Malaysian English considered the standard formal and written native speaker variety of English is that which ought to be taught and learnt in the Malaysian schools. The mesolect is the variety that is used for intranational communication, between Malaysians of varying ethnicity, as a medium of local communication. The basilect is the English of low proficiency learners, characterized by limited vocabulary and efficiency as a means of communication. Since then, there have been dynamic changes in MalE and its official promotion in spite of its removal as an official language. With Malay now firmly established as the national language, the importance of English and the need to keep abreast with global and regional changes where Malaysia must play a key role have now become less sensitive topics.

Nowadays, the overwhelming majority of English speakers are in places that are either in the Outer Circle or Expanding Circle countries so the patterns that people from these countries adopt when they speak and write English are likely to have an increased influence in the development of English locally. The earlier models must be made more dynamic to represent the actual use of English. English in Malaysia has shifted its status several times throughout the country's history. There is variation in status in domains, in speech and writing and, of course in individuals. The debate about exo- or endo-norms for the teaching of English outside academia in Malaysia is only just beginning.

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**Azirah Hashim** is Professor in the English Language Department, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya. Her research interests include Language Contact in Southeast Asia, English in ASEAN, and Higher Education in ASEAN. Some of her publications include *English in Southeast Asia and ASEAN: Transformation of Language Habitats, 2021* (Routledge) co-authored with Gerhard Leitner, *Communicating with Asia: the Future of English as a Global Language, 2016* (Cambridge University Press) edited with Gerhard Leitner and Hans-Georg Wolf, and articles in journals such as *English Today*, *Discourse Studies*, *Multilingua* and *Higher Education Quarterly*.

**Gerhard Leitner** is a Professor Emeritus of linguistics at the Free University Berlin and Visiting Professor at University of Malaya, Nanyang Technological University, Monash University and other universities in Australia, India, China and Europe. He is a specialist in English worldwide with journal articles, book chapters and books such as *English in Southeast Asia and ASEAN: Transformation of Language Habitats, 2021* (Routledge), co-authored with Azirah Hashim, *English Today, 2012* (Reclam), and *Communicating with Asia: The Future of English as a Global Language, 2016* (Cambridge University Press) edited with Azirah Hashim and Hans-Georg Wolf. He has an academic interest in Aboriginal Australians and has published *Die Aborigines Australiens, 2016* (Beck) and *Die Geschichte Australiens, 2016* (Reclam).