



Allen Yu

JACK OF THREE LANGUAGES, MASTER OF ONE

By Allen Yu

A few years ago, a Taiwanese lawyer asked me whether it was difficult to practice law in Malaysia. I understood his reference was to the use of the Malay language in our courts. I replied with this statement, “I read law in English. My law books are in English. However in Court I used the Malay language. And my clients, mostly Chinese, speaks to me in Hokkien or Mandarin.”

He understood my answer. That for a Chinese to do well in legal practice in Malaysia, and especially for a general practitioner in a small time, one has to master the three languages.

If I had known this criterion whilst still in school, I would not have considered reading law. I was in fact poor in all three languages, although I was better in English. I did not have my father’s gift in learning languages.

My mother’s tongue was Foochow or Hockchew. However I spoke to my father in English and Foochow. The first English word I learned when I was in primary one in Malacca was, “bloody buffalo”. There were many Australian servicemen then. Nobody in my school spoke any Chinese dialect or Mandarin.

Then at Primary 4, I was in Batu Pahat. It was a culture shock to me. Most of the Chinese students spoke to me in the Hokkien dialect. And the first Hokkien words I learned, in English meant “F... your mother”. My mother was of course not pleased, and scolded me, asking me whether I know what the “F” word meant. I did not. Nevertheless she did not proceed with what would have been my first sex education.

Although I attended the Mandarin class from Primary 4 to Primary 6, I was not good at it despite having tuition. My father said I was not serious with the language and that I was making fun of it. Years later, I told my father that it was not because I was not serious that I did badly, it was because there was no opportunity to practice it. None of my Chinese classmates spoke Mandarin. We preferred to speak in the mixture of Hokkien and English. At Form 1, I dropped the subject since it was not mandatory.

At Primary 4, my batch of students became the first guinea pigs for the education department. History and Geography were to be taught in Malay. Jawi was taught in my Malay language class, although we the non Malays were assured that it would not be in our exams. My father nevertheless thought of sending me to an International boarding school in Singapore. I was terrified of that idea. The idea of living with a bunch of BIG white students and getting bullied by them was not to my liking.

I stayed in Malaysia and won a prize for best English essay in Primary 6. It gave me some confidence in the said language.

In Form 1, I realized that I have a lot to learn about grammar. A good guide was to write everything in the past tense. Grammar haunts me even today. My teacher also told me not to use bombastic words. Till this day, I still write with simple words.

In Form 3, I was part of an experiment of the education department. Together with 4 non Malays, we were placed in a class of Malay student from the rural area. These students were at least 2 years older than us. I believed the intention of *KLAS KHAS* was to help the rural students. My spoken Malay improved. But not my written Malay. Overall it was a failure. My grades went down. But the highlight of this experiment was the quarantine of the rural students in their hostels, because of the spread of venereal disease. But that is another story.

In Form 4, we were again guinea pigs again. The syllabus “Communication English” was introduced. The reason given by the ministry was that they have found that our engineers and other graduates could not write a simple letter. My English language teacher was not supportive of this syllabus. She felt that the standard of that English syllabus was equivalent to Primary 5. She asked my class of students how many intended to go overseas after Form 5. More than half

raised our hands. She decided that she was going to teach us the GCE “O” level English, and that 2 months before the exams she will guide us on the Communication English paper. To this day, I am still thankful for her decision.

It was my father who suggested that I take up law. I gave the excuse that I could not speak the language well. In fact, I was poor in all three spoken languages.

My father would not give in and consulted an Indian lawyer. That lawyer said, “Why do you want to talk? The Chinese lawyers make the most money but they don’t go court”. I did not reject my father’s suggestion then so as not to disappoint him.

I went to England to do my “A” levels without a clear idea of what I want to study. In my college, the subject Law was offered at “O” and “A” level. Many Malaysian students were drawn to it, as was I. I completed both levels in 2 years and found Law..... interesting. I was hooked.

I was told by the college administrators that I have to take an English “O” level class although I passed that paper. However I need not re-sit for the paper. Apparently they didn’t quite believe my result. In the English class I had a good time. Together with another student from Singapore and one from Iran, we were the most talkative students.

So when the college wanted a representative from each country to speak of their country in a community project, I was volunteered by my teacher. And because the other Chinese students were shy, I represented not only Malaysia but also Singapore and Hong Kong. There were no students from China at that time. One of the locals commended on my command of the English language after I told them that I arrived just 4 months ago. They were even more surprised when I told them that I have studied the language for eleven years.

If I ever felt arrogant with my command of the English Language, I was brought down to earth in my first year of Law school. The language terrified me. I could not express myself well. Very often I have to use whole statements from the books. It was here that I was told to speak slowly but not shooting words like a machine gun. It shows one’s confidence in the language.

It was also during my stay in London, that I was proud of the Malay language. When we Malaysian Chinese students did not want the Hong Kong Chinese students to listen to our conversation, we spoke in Malay. It was in fact the first time I ever spoke Malay to a Chinese. The Hong Kong students envied us, for knowing three languages. It was something that we Malaysian Chinese took for granted.

After six years in England, I came back and forgot how to speak Foochow, my mother tongue. It was awkward speaking to my mother in Hokkien. It took a few days before the dialect came back to me.

Batu Pahat had a surprise for me also. The Chinese were speaking Mandarin. My father suggested that I practiced in Sabah where most of his investments were relocated. I was against it. Although I could not speak Mandarin, Hokkien may still help me. Besides I need the referrals from my family and friends. In Sabah, the dialect was Hakka and Mandarin and I was an “*orang semenanjung*”. I might as well be in Japan.

My handicap then in my early practice was my poor command of the Chinese language. If I am not mistaken, I was not alone. Another Chinese lawyer, a few years my senior could not even speak Hokkien. However Chinese lawyers that came after me all had a good command of the language. One lawyer told me, he improved his Mandarin with his constant visit to the nightclubs. I do not know whether he was joking.

Even my command of the Hokkien dialect was poor. In my second year of practice, another lawyer in his first year wanted to observe how I handle my clients and asked to sit in. The clients present then were Malays and Chinese. I spoke to them in Malay and in Hokkien. After they left, my friend whose dialect is Hokkien, asked what a Hokkien word I used just then was. Although his dialect was Hokkien, like me, we spoke a mixture of Hokkien and English. Our Hokkien vocabulary was not wide enough.

I tried getting a teacher to teach me spoken Mandarin. It was difficult mainly because I was embarrassed to practice it. It was most embarrassing when I found some Malays could speak

Mandarin. The late Tuan Kohar Bin Kamarin, our Sessions Court judge spoke to me in Mandarin one day and I could not answer him.

My luck changed when I started speaking Mandarin to my daughter. She was placed in the care of a nanny. Her husband was a Chinese school teacher. Every evening, my wife and I would see her. The nanny could only teach her Mandarin. I pick a few words along the way and spoke without embarrassment to my daughter.

Then the Courts decided to use Malay as the medium in Court. I have almost lost touch with the language and it has now been brought back to haunt me. My *Bahasa cik gu* once told me that my problem with the language is that I think in English. I think it was more Manglish than English.

Indeed English is my first language, since I not only speak, read and write in that language but also think in the language. Malay would be my second language since I can speak, read and write it. And Chinese would be my 3rd language since I can only speak it and not fluently.

I was one of the Chartered members of Toastmaster Club when they started a chapter in Batu Pahat. From my membership, I realized that being a lawyer did not make me a good public speaker. Speaking to a judge and arguing with another lawyer in open court is different from speaking in a room of many people looking at you. The club did teach me a few tricks in public speaking. I left the club because the club had a rule that we could speak on anything except politics, race, religion and sex. That left me speechless most of the time.

The use of *Bahasa* in court was difficult for many of the senior lawyers. A Malay judge once said that he could write his grounds of decision in English in an hour. But it will take three hours to do it in Malay.

When a Sessions Court judge told a senior lawyer to take tuition to learn Malay, the lawyer replied that he was too old to learn the language.

On one occasion I was asked to give an oral reply in Malay to my opponent's (a senior lawyer) submission which was also in Malay. I told the judge that I could not, because I could not understand a word he said. To my surprise, the Malay judge did not seem to have a problem in understanding my opponent.

There was an initial confusion when the Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka and the judiciary both came out with their own translations. One judge was annoyed when some lawyers used "*di sampaikan*" for service, while another used "*di serahkan*".

For a long time I would have my Malay clerks help me with the translation. But when their command of the language is equally poor, I have to face the music. I did have one clerk who wrote very well. She was actually over qualified with her 1st class degree in Civil Engineering. She corrected so much of my submissions until she was embarrassed by the correction. Alas she left after finding a job more suited to her qualification.

I thanked my lucky stars that the High Court, Court of Appeal and Federal Court still permit the use of English.

It is my personal belief that grounds of decision made in Malay does not have that awe inspiring effect on the reader—that feeling that one have just read some words of wisdom, that the English language have. But then again, I may be wrong, as my Malay is poor.

Another Malay judge told me that when he reads the act, he prefers the ones written in English, as their meaning is clearer.

But to be fair, the Malay language is still young and needs time and adjustment before we seen it bloom. There are so many new Malay words that my *Kamus* looks like an ancient document.

A lawyer friend of mine told me that she felt her English has deteriorated because of lack of practice. I agreed with her that it will deteriorate if we don't practice it.

If my standard of English is good but not excellent, many of the younger generations are poor.

One Senior Assistant Registrar once told me in English, "You must proof the fraud". It took me a few seconds to realize he meant, "fraud". Another use the word "borrow" to meant "lend" and vice

versa. My father came to his defense and said that it was normal for Malaysians to confuse those two words.

I have seen some senior citizens who work as waiters, taxi drivers and rickshaw men using better English than some of our youngsters today.

I taught law as a subject in a local college for eight years. In my first year, I asked for personal assignments instead of the usual group assignments. The students were terrified and tried to dissuade me. Of the 40 assignments handed up, I could not mark six of thembecause I could not understand their English at all. They were neither in English, Manglish, or Phua Chu Kang's English. I tried direct translation from Chinese to English. It still did not make sense. In the end I told them that I was going to give my daughter to read and if she cannot tell me what they have written, I will give them a "zero". One of them asked how old my daughter is. I replied that she was in Primary 5 and in a Chinese school. They said, "Sir. That's very insooting". ("insulting" was the word they were looking for.)

My daughter had her primary and secondary education in Chinese before going to Australia. Initially I intended her secondary education to be in Malay so that she will have mastery of all three languages. But that would be the ideal result. I wanted her to know Mandarin, so that she would not have my handicap. A teacher from the government school told me that most of his Chinese students who came from primary Chinese schools were poor in Malay and English. Even the clever ones took three years to catch up with the Malay students in the said languages. Most of the average Chinese students were poor in all three languages with their standard of Mandarin only at primary six. A Chinese business man confirmed this opinion as he was a product of the said system. He was embarrassed of his Mandarin when speaking to his Taiwanese and Chinese counterparts.

As I did not intend to send my daughter to a local university nor for her to work with the government nor carry on my firm, there was no reason for her to be in a Malay medium government school. My daughter's Mandarin now is good enough for the Peking or Taiwan University. In Australia, although she had some initial problems with the language, she now speaks and writes well in English also. We encourage her to practice her Malay, whenever she can, so as not to lose touch with the language. She has now finished a course in Japanese. Perhaps she has my father's talent.

Unlike her most of the average Chinese in Malaysia of her age, will be a Jack of three languages, master of none.

As our country continues to argue over the position of English in our education system, I am glad that it no longer matters to me.

(This article was written the help of the Spelling And Grammar Check provided by Microsoft)

COR BLYME – D' LINGO !!

