1

Brunei Darussalam: Issues of Language, Identity and Education

Peter Sercombe

The language and language educational policies of all national governments have a bearing on the linguistic ecologies extant within their nations’ borders. With the increasing and alarming rate of decline of minority languages, in recent years, the issues of language and language education policies have come to be examined in greater depth (e.g. Skuttnab-Kangas 2000; Tollefson 2002; Tollefson & Tsui 2004; Canagarajah 2005; Hornberger 2006; Ricento 2006), particularly with respect to the ways in which these affect non-dominant or minority social groups. Issues include the major forces affecting language policies; how societies use education language policies to manage access to language rights and the consequences of these; and the ways in which states utilize language policies for purposes of political and cultural control (Tollefson 2002, pp. 13–14). This chapter seeks to understand the ways in which Negara Brunei Darussalam’s1 social organization and dominant national ideology impact on Bruneian society. The chapter begins with an introduction to the Brunei context and its physical and socioeconomic make-up, since context needs to be seen as socially constructed rather than a natural occurrence (Kramsch 1993, p. 46); and, it is both instructive and relevant to see the nature of the context, in order to comprehend more clearly its effects on Bruneians. This overview provides a useful backdrop to Brunei’s languages and language education policies and practices, and the ways in which these impinge on the languages, identities and affiliations of Bruneians.

Geographical context

The island of Borneo is divided politically among three nations: Brunei, Indonesia and the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. Brunei is
located on the northwest coast of Borneo Island. It has a total land area of 5,765 square kilometres and a coastline approximately 160 kilometres in length that edges the South China Sea to the north of the country. To the south, east and west is the east Malaysian state of Sarawak which also separates the two parts of Brunei, the western enclave being by far the larger. Brunei’s eastern area is physically separated from the western part by a portion of the Limbang district of Sarawak, in East Malaysia. Brunei’s western districts are linked by a single highway that runs parallel to the coast, from the western to the eastern border, where the capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, is located. There are, however, few roads that run south to north and which penetrate the southern interior areas of low rolling hills. River travel is the essential means of transport for those who reside in the southern areas of the country, mostly inhabited by small groups whose lives are traditional, involving subsistence rice farming, in stark contrast to the modern urban existence of coastal dwellers.

**Administration and economy**

In 1888 Brunei became a British protectorate, following which Brunei’s foreign affairs came under British administration. A British residency was established in 1906 and continued until 1959, when the British resident became a high commissioner to Brunei (Table 1.1). During this period a local administrative elite and a national infrastructure were established, and these were instrumental in determining the role of English as the language associated with the process of local modernization. They also helped to reinforce the sultan’s authority in an otherwise ethnically and linguistically plural state.

In 1984, Brunei gained full independence. ‘Since Brunei’s declaration of independence in 1984 as “forever a Malay Islamic monarchy”, Malayness has been a more prominent feature’ (Reid 2001, p. 312) of the country. Nonetheless, the link with Britain remains significant for a number of reasons: the strong historical connection which continues as part of an ongoing and officially perceived positive view of the period of British administration (from 1906–1959); a continuing British military presence in the country (in the form of a Gurkha battalion); a major role played by the British and Dutch-owned Shell multinational oil company in Brunei’s national economy; the Brunei legal system which is largely based on British law (except for matters pertaining to Muslims where Islamic law, *syariah*, holds sway); and the place of standard British English as the country’s second main language and as