

Japanese Language Courses: A Surging Factor into the Future

(The Foundation of Japanese Studies in Malaysia)

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From the History

Malaysia and Japan have a long relationship and it has been reflected in many ways. The relationship started before the Second World War. Japanese had established ethnic enclaves in several states in Malaysia (Malaya as it was known) before 1942. They were involved in economic and social activities. Records have shown that they were engaged in several jobs such as barbers, sundry shop operators, fishermen, photographers and dentists. Some were also engrossed in other economic activities such as tin mining and rubber planting. Actually, many of them were working with the Japanese military to gather information about Malaya and its people before the military invasion.

On the 7th of December 1941, Japan began its invasion from the east coast of Malaya. Specifically, the invasion started at Kampung Pak Amat, Pengkalan Chepa in Kelantan. By 15th February 1942, Singapore, the last British bastion, was captured. Japan ruled Malaya for three years and eight months, and the surrender of the Japanese army saw the return of the British to Malaya. The Japanese occupation had positive and negative impacts on the economic, political and social development of Malaya. Nonetheless, the negative impact was great and had been associated with the poverty and sufferings of the people. Positively, the Japanese occupation had disseminated Malay nationalism and eventually a new horizon of a better nation and promising future grew from the dark side of the British colonization. In 1957, Malaya earned its independence and Malaysia was inaugurated six years later. Today, Malaysia and Japan are enjoying a constructive bilateral relationship.

During the occupation, the Japanese planned to implement the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (*Daito Kyo-eiken*). This concept was introduced to ensure that Japan would become an influential political power in East Asia. Education had been seen as a tool to achieve this mission. Japanese “spirit”, called *seishin*, had been injected for the purposes of creating a new society free from Western colonial influence. Consequently, a Japanese education policy was introduced and the Japanese language had been made an important intermediating language in

Malaya. The usage of the Japanese language had been regarded as a medium to cultivate identity and a sense of belonging to the race and nation among the society. Optimistically, the Japanese believed that their language could be the *lingua franca* for East Asian countries.

Politically, the Japanese wanted to abolish the usage of English and consequently to minimize the British influence. As a result, the learning of Japanese had been implemented extensively in the educational system, technical and teaching centers, government offices and in society. Strategically, the usage of Japanese had been established as one of the criteria needed for those who wanted to pursue further studies, get promotions, gain salary increase and secure acknowledgments. Besides the language, Japanese also put an emphasis on technical knowledge and skill development programmes. Technical schools connected to engineering, shipping and agriculture had been built to cater to the needs of the local people. The Japanese had reestablished the Technical College in Kuala Lumpur and Agriculture College in Serdang, Selangor. A few skills training centers in the fields of shipping, mining, agriculture, electrical engineering and engineering had been built in Singapore and other places in Malaya.

Unfortunately, the implementation of the Japanese educational system failed because of several factors. The short period of occupation was a deterrent to the Japanese to implement what had been planned; the war was not a situation conducive to supporting better education for the people; the Japanese were not in the position to support better education for the people because they were there for economic and political purposes; and the lack of financial sources and security made the people think their survival more important than education.

The Japanese lost the Second World War and had to comply with the War Compensation Programme. This programme was not really a loss to Japan. In this programme, Japan took the opportunity to build a new relationship with the countries compensated. This new relationship aimed at enhancing the trading opportunities with the countries involved. In September 1957, Japan opened its embassy in Kuala Lumpur, followed by the visit of Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi of Japan to Malaysia. This visit was aimed at building a strong relationship and fostering peace and harmony between the two countries. Beginning in the 1960s, Japan started to give serious attention to Asian economic programmes. For the Japanese, the countries in Southeast Asia had huge potential to provide raw materials for the industrial development in Japan, and creating strong trading ties with these countries was seen as a great benefit to Japan's economic development.

Tun Abdul Razak, the second Malaysian prime minister made an official visit to Japan on 17th October 1970. The aim of the visit was to enhance the collaboration between Malaysia and Japan in various fields. In 1971, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) was declared as an area of peace, freedom and neutrality. This declaration lured Japan to intensify and extensively broaden its

trading policies towards ASEAN countries, especially Malaysia. Tun Hussein Onn, the third Malaysian prime minister, also made an official visit to Japan from 18th to 23rd September 1977. During his visit, a discussion was held with his Japanese counterpart on the Japanese role in and contribution to the development of the Malaysian economy. Japan was requested to play a bigger role in the Malaysian economy through its investment policies and economic assistance. To lure the Japanese investors, Malaysia had implemented better and more attractive economic policies. Lots of incentives were given to private companies from Japan to invest in Malaysia, such as the creation of free trade zones, the provision of apprentice status, and tax exemptions. When the New Economic Policy was introduced in 1970, industrial sectors were intensified and expanded to curb poverty and restructure the society. This development created an environment conducive to business opportunities in Malaysia for Japanese investors.

The Look East Policy

In 1981, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed, the fourth Malaysian prime minister, launched a new policy known as the Look East Policy (LEP). This policy was introduced because Japan and Korea were regarded as the rising giants in the economy of the East and Malaysia wanted to copy the way these countries successfully managed their economies. Japan was regarded as a model that Malaysia should follow in order to be successful in economic endeavors. Programmes were created to facilitate this policy. Most of the programmes focused on innovation of Malaysian management systems and the development of human resources. Japan was mirrored as a model to follow in strengthening the productivity and economy of the Malaysians. For example, Malaysia Incorporated was launched based on Japan Incorporated; this was to ensure an improvement in the relationship and cooperation between the public and private sectors.

Japan responded positively to LEP. For instance, Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone invited Malaysian students to further their studies in Japan. Unfortunately, this opportunity could not be realized because of the language problem facing the potential students. They had to learn Japanese in order to study in Japanese universities, which was not an easy task. Realizing this obstacle, Nakasone promised to give a financial assistance to build a Japanese Language Centre at the University of Malaya.

In order to actualize the LEP, the Malaysian government introduced educational and technical programmes. The training section of the Public Service Department was given the task of creating a special section called the Look East Policy Section to design programmes for the strategic implementation of LEP. Some of the programmes implemented are as follows:

1. Academic studies at first degree level (including training for Japanese language teachers).

2. Technical studies at diploma level.
3. Technical and industrial training.
4. Business management and executives placed in training programmes at Japanese companies.
5. Executive training.

The academic studies programme was tailored to assist students in obtaining degrees from Japanese universities. With the cooperation of the Japanese government, “Ambang Asuhan Jepun” (AAJ) (literally translated as Japanese Threshold Care) was established as a centre for Preparatory Programme to Study Abroad. This centre was built at the University of Malaya. In those days, AAJ was the one and only centre in the world which responded to the urgency of sending students to study in Japan by creating a preparatory program. In 1983, this center was given 3.7 millions ringgit by the Japanese government to build a lecture theater, library and administrative building. Besides financial aid, the Japanese government also provided other kinds of assistance, such as the training of Japanese language teachers, and the provision of teaching aids and books. Students at this centre had to study Japanese language for 20 months before they were sent to Japanese universities and colleges. The first batch of AAJ of 1983/1984 academic session comprising 20 students were sent to several prestigious universities in Japan to study in science and technological programmes such as engineering, medicine, pharmacology and dentistry. Students from AAJ were not required to sit for the entrance examinations conducted by the Japanese Education Ministry (Monbusho), in contrast to students from other countries. From 1984 to 1994, this centre managed to send 949 students to Japan, and fourteen of them were medical students. Since then, the number has increased, which reflects the commitment of the Malaysian government to LEP since the 1980s. Currently, there are three types of Malaysian students studying in Japanese universities and colleges. There are students on Malaysian government scholarships and Japanese government scholarships (Monbusho scholarships), as well as privately funded students.

The Public Service Department was also given the task of creating technical programmes at the diploma level. Selected students were asked to register for the preparatory programme and required to study Japanese at the Technology University of Malaysia as part of the preparatory programme. They were also obliged to sit for the entrance examination by the Monbusho. Then they were placed at the National College of Technology in Japan and after three years given a diploma. Students with superior marks would be given the chance to study for further degrees. From 1983 – 1994, 483 students undertook this programme.

There was also a programme to train Japanese language teachers, and the qualified candidates were required to take the Japanese language course in the preparatory programme at the Technology University of Mara before entering the Japan International Institute of Education for

four years. From 1990 to 1994, ten qualified Japanese language teachers graduated from this institute. Starting in 1990, teachers have been sent by the Malaysian government to Japan to be trained as Japanese language teachers.

Besides creating programmes at the diploma level for school students, the Public Service Department, in collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), has also introduced technical and industrial training programmes for public service employees, semi-government agencies and companies. Participants in these programmes had to go for Japanese language classes for six months at Mara University of Technology. Between 1982 and 1994, 2508 participants matriculated in these programmes successfully. They were also taught about the work ethic of the Japanese.

Looking back now, twenty-eight years since the launching of the LEP, the programme continues, though it is no longer the trend that it was. Japan is still a country that fascinates Malaysians in many ways. Its advancement in science and technology and its determination to preserve its culture and heritage demonstrate the essential ingredients for Malaysia to sail through the challenges of globalization. In short, LEP is still relevant and provides a sound strategic policy for Malaysia to venture into future development.

Into the Future

With LEP still a significant agenda in Malaysian administration, there are plans being designed in many government departments and agencies of various ministries. For example, there is a proposal to build a Technical Malaysia-Japanese University, which would offer first degree programmes in technology and Japanese management skills.

Japanese language studies will flourish in a better environment, but it is not likely to turn into Japanese Studies because such a program would require more than language studies. In Malaysia, there is no Japanese Studies program being offered at a degree level. Despite the Look East Policy, the trend to establish this programme has yet to be seen. Only quite recently, there has been an effort to establish Japanese Studies in Universiti Sains Malaysia. The task of establishing Japanese Studies has been given to the School of Language, Literacy and Interpretation. This school, once known as Language and Interpretation Center, has recently being upgraded into a school which can offer degree courses. With this development, this school is radically revamping its academic programmes. A few degrees will be offered, one of them being a degree in Japanese Studies.

Previously, the Language and Interpretation Center of Universiti Sains Malaysia acted as a service center in providing language courses to students, and when this center has been upgraded

into a school, its function will be extended to the point of offering degrees in language, literacy and interpretation. Japanese language courses, which have been offered since the 1990s, will continue, and in the future these courses will be part of the package in the proposed Japanese Studies programme.

At the School of Language, Literacy and Interpretation, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Japanese courses have been offered as a package within a minor programme comprising four levels of studies. The first level is Basic Japanese; next is Intermediate Japanese; the third level is Advanced Japanese I; and finally there is Advanced Japanese II. There is also a course called Japanese Language in Business, which is a further option. Currently, there are only six teachers conducting the courses and the average number of students is 700. Two of the teachers are Japanese.

Besides Universiti Sains Malaysia, there are other universities in Malaysia which also offer Japanese language courses, such as the University of Malaya, Universiti Putra Malaysia, National University of Malaysia, Mara University of Technology and Technology Universiti of Malaysia. In these universities, Japanese language courses are conducted by their language centers, which act as a service center to cater to the needs of the students. Besides Japanese language, there are courses on Japan from different disciplines such as history run by a few universities such as the University of Malaya and Universiti Sains Malaysia, but they are not taking it to the level of a minor as compared with the Japanese language courses at the Universiti Sains Malaysia. In other words, Japanese studies has been neglected in Malaysia since the launching of the LEP. There are many reasons for this problem, such as the lack of teaching staff and financial support.

As mentioned earlier, at present the School of Language, Literacy and Interpretation, Universiti Sains Malaysia, is planning to introduce a Japanese Studies programme. The components of the programme are still being discussed and most probably will incorporate subjects such as language, culture (traditional and popular), literature, history, geography, management, politics and economics. One of the worrying obstacles faced by this school is whether there are adequate numbers of teachers. So, the time provided to implement Japanese Studies in 2010 is questionable. More studies should be done to get more data on many aspects such as the names and numbers local scholars who are involved in teaching and research related to Japan, essays and books on Japan written by local scholars, research projects related to Japan by local researchers, the patterns and the ways forward of the existing networks between Malaysian and Japanese scholars and government institutions, and the fields of studies which are relevant and related to the bilateral relationship between Japan and Malaysia.

To Conclude

During the Second World War, the Japanese language was forcibly introduced in Malaya. Japanese was taught to the people as a means of communication. Nevertheless, the effort made by the Japanese military failed. In the 1980s, there was a wind of change when the Look East Policy was introduced by the Malaysian government. Japan once again became attractive to the country. Japan has been seen as a model for Malaysia to advance its economic planning and development. As a result, Japanese has been introduced to Malaysians not only as a means of communication but also as a medium of science and technological knowledge. Although more than twenty years have passed since the introduction of the LEP, the related programmes are still running and students are still learning Japanese to acquire knowledge. The Japanese language is viewed by Malaysian youngsters as an asset in securing jobs and understanding Japanese popular culture, which is so familiar to them. Although Japanese language courses are still popular, in a broader perspective their contribution towards an understanding of Japanese culture as a whole is far from adequate. It also fails to give a full picture of what the Japanese are all about. Until today, there are no Japanese studies in Malaysia. So, it is timely that Japanese studies should be introduced in Malaysia. It is to be hoped that the School of Language, Literacy and Interpretation of Universiti Sains Malaysia plan to establish a Japanese Studies program will materialize. And if this comes true, a new and rigorous scholarly relationship between Malaysia and Japan will soon be seen.

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