A Report on the Forum “To Go Or Not To Go Native: The Role Of Native Speaker Teachers and Trainers in Second and Foreign Language Teaching” held at the 19th MELTA International Conference:

The Royale Chulan, Kuala Lumpur: 8 June 2010
M.S. Garden Hotel Kuantan, Pahang: 12 June 2010
Four Points Sheraton, Kuching, Sarawak: 18 June 2010
The Role of Native Speaker Teachers and Trainers in English Second Language Teaching in Malaysia

The Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA) organised a special forum on the role of native Speaker Teachers and Trainers in Malaysia during its recently concluded 19th International conference that was held in three venues, Kuala Lumpur, Kuantan and Kuching.

Since independence Malaysian education has had its ebb-and-flow romance with English native speaker teachers, consultants and trainers. In the immediate period post-independence this was inevitable due to a lack of Malaysian teachers. Later the country saw the coming of the American Peace Corps and much later still the Ministry of Education worked with universities and organizations from native speaker countries to bring in native speaker teachers, trainers and consultants to Malaysia with the aim of building local capacity. In the year 2010, we again hear the familiar clamour about bringing in hundreds of native speakers to act as trainers and consultants to the Malaysian English Language Teaching Community. This forum deliberated on the role and value of native speaker contribution to ESL/EFL education. It also touched on issues of non-native teacher education, capacity building, sustainability and self-reliance.

The idea for drawing out public and professional opinion on the prospect of bringing in native speakers to act as consultants and trainers to Malaysian teachers, particularly in rural settings, emerged from informal feedback on the issue provided in letters to the editor columns in local newspapers as well as feedback channelled to MELTA by its members.

At each of the venues, Malaysian and international panellists were invited to present their perspectives on the issue. To ensure that Malaysian grass-root voices were heard, teachers and teacher trainers were also invited to be panellists. In each of the three forums, the panellists were given ten minutes to present their views, following which members of the audience were given the opportunity to voice their views. The conferences attracted a total of 900 teachers and education professionals from within and outside Malaysia.

Many pertinent points were raised and debated at each of the forums. These centred on the following key issues:

1. Competence and professional training, rather than native-speaker status, as primary criteria for selection of trainers and consultants

Past experience in Malaysia has demonstrated that selecting consultants and trainers based on the native speaker criterion had resulted in the recruitment of native speakers with no formal training in ESLT, let alone ELT skills. Both panellists and members of the audience in the forums called for the need to shift the focus of attention from native speaker teachers to
English Language educationists with professional training in the field of ESLT as a the primary prerequisite.

2. ESL/Bilingual trainers

Given the Malaysian context and the challenges of learning English as a second language, the panellists felt that it is important that trainers deployed to train ESL teachers have formally studied a second language themselves. Monolingual native speaker trainers are unlikely to be able to empathise with ESL learners and understand their problems; hence, they would be less effective than local teachers who have undergone the same ESL language learning experience as the learners. In the Malaysian situation, local teachers who speak the native tongues of the learners would relate much better to them, particularly with children in rural areas.

Another highly emphasised point was the need for trainers who understood the different varieties of English in Malaysia, including the standard variety, and more importantly, the cultural nuances of these varieties.

3. Knowledge and awareness of local cultures, ideologies and beliefs

Educationists felt that trainers need to be fully aware of culture, not just in terms of the social customs but also cultural beliefs about learning and teaching. Understanding these ideologies and beliefs will help trainers approach the teaching of a second language in a more informed and decisive way, reducing misconceptions and tensions resulting from cultural conflicts.

4. Sustainability versus Interim/Stop-gap Measures

Also raised was the issue of the need for sustainability of support systems and mechanisms for ESLT through measures that can provide long-term deliverables as opposed to short-term measures. Investing in native speakers from outside the country who will only be here on a temporary basis, particularly if they are not prepared for long-term commitment, is not the best way to build a sustainable pool of ESL teachers.

5. Recognition and Utilisation of Malaysian expertise

There was a strong call for the formation of a Malaysia-based ESLT team utilising already available Malaysian experts instead of depending on a community of sojourners. The measure to bring in native speakers as trainers undermines the expertise and legitimacy of home-grown talent. Malaysia already has local English Language academics and teachers who
are expert users of the language, possessing the same levels of linguistic and pedagogical knowledge as native speaker teachers. The forum iterated the fact that Malaysia has already spent enormous amounts of money training local talent and upgrading their knowledge and competencies in Malaysian and foreign universities. By not including these Malaysians in this programme, the country is sending out a message that Malaysians are not good enough or will never be good enough to become self-reliant.

These local experts are not only extremely capable but would also be more dedicated to the nurturing of their own nation’s young. If the incentives were channelled to them and their professional services in place of foreign ‘native speaker’ trainers, national funds would go to a committed team of local experts and would be preserved and maintained within the country instead of being drained away to foreign shores. It is highly conceivable that the country would end up spending less, and precious Ringgit could be better spent on the upgrading of schools throughout the nation.

6. Dangers of Educators-cum-Entrepreneurs Blue Ocean Strategy

The panel raised a concern about the dangers of the Blue Ocean strategy, where native-speaker programmes developed by educators-cum-entrepreneurs turn English Language Education into a commodity. In such financially motivated undertakings, native speakers without proper qualifications or training in ELT may be taken in as trainers. Such programmes need the involvement of educators, parents and learners to ensure the maintenance of proper skills, standards and professionalism.

7. Loss of Motivation and Self-esteem

Participants in the forum highlighted that the native speaker trainer programme will have serious implications on Malaysian ESL teacher morale, motivation and self-esteem. Teachers felt that they will be seen as second best at the most by fellow teachers and their students. The binary paradigm that this model creates will encourage comparison and unfair judgements.

8. Involvement of local teachers and local ELT organisations in such significant national ELE plans

Panellists and members of the audience raised the issue of the need for the involvement of local teachers and local ELT organisations in major ELE plans that affected the nation. The general feeling was that while one could recognise the strengths of skilled “native speaker” teachers, it was rather difficult to justify the cost of bringing them in, especially when one were to
consider whether such foreign experts could be as committed and as passionate about the future of the nation’s children as our own local ELT experts.

9. **Professionalism and Monitoring of English Language Teacher consultants and teachers**

Questions were raised with regard to the selection and monitoring mechanisms for the native speaker experts. It was also argued that short terms measures proposed, such as bringing in native speakers, will not be adequate to meet the need for sustainable monitoring of local ELT talent. There were calls for more quality assurance in the use of foreign consultancy and the selection of local talents for ELE teacher training programmes.

10. **Understanding the true challenges of ELT in Malaysia**

Teachers and panellist alike felt that the native speaker experts must be given a thorough induction of the ELT challenges confronted by Malaysian schools and teachers. This should include issues related to history, local teaching and learning styles, local expectations and values. In the past such programmes failed because foreign experts failed to truly understand and engage not just with Malaysian English language teachers but also the school as an education community.

**Proposals**

The issues raised at the Forum seem extremely pertinent in gauging the mood and professional understanding of the Malaysian ELT community regarding the proposed plan to bring in native speaker teacher trainers and consultants. MELTA feels that the success of the Ministry of Education’s genuine agenda through this programme can only be achieved if the issues raised by the ELT community is given serious consideration and addressed through mitigating measures.

In view of this and based on issues and ideas raised at the forum, MELTA puts forward the following proposals to the Ministry of Education, Malaysia.

1. **Criteria for selection and recruitment of foreign ESLT teacher trainer**

   a. qualified ESLT teacher trainers with at least 3 years experience in training English Second language teachers
   b. evidence of formal learning of any second language
c. a good spoken and written language model of an internationally acceptable standard.
d. commitment and passion for the profession
e. willingness to make cultural and social adaptations
f. willing to work in partnership with MOE leadership at all levels including district, school and language panels
g. compassion and empathy for the difficulties experienced by ESL learners.
h. ability to train and support novice as well as experienced Malaysian ESL teachers
i. ability to engage with the wider school community

2. Foreign – Malaysia Partnership

The school based teacher training programme should be done in partnership between foreign ESLT experts and Malaysia’s own ELT experts. The Malaysian experts may be selected from current and recently retired expert/excellent teachers and lecturers.

3. Definition of Native Speaker

The Ministry of Education should embrace a wider definition of the native English speaker than the one that is confined to the Caucasian. This will allow the MOE to consider a wider field of experts

4. Vetting of Foreign Experts

The Ministry of Education should set up a Malaysian ELT team to vet the selection provided by the contracted consultants. MELTA is ready to support the ministry with this.

5. Induction for Foreign Experts

There should be a through induction to the foreign ELT teacher trainers. This should be done by a team of Malaysian ELT experts made up of academic consultants, teacher trainers, expert teachers and school heads. MELTA is prepared to support the MOE on this. MELTA can develop the induction module and act as the secretariat for this programme.

6. Monitoring and Assessment

Monitoring of the work done by the foreign experts needs to done professionally and systematically through a specifically and specially develop set of Key Performance Indicators. Monitoring and assessment of the programme must be conducted at shorter intervals with clear achievement targets set for each interval. The monitoring structures should include school,
district and state level involvement. MELTA is ready to support the Ministry with the development of the KPI and the assessment structures.

6. **Building local training and teaching capacity**

   The programme will have to be designed in such a way that it does not just upgrade capacities in individual teachers but also develops a sustainable system of capacity building through clear avenues for competency and technology transfer. Malaysia cannot always be reliant on foreign expertise.

7. **Developing a Malaysian standard for English Language Teaching**

   Malaysia needs to review its teacher training models for English language teachers across the board – at IPGMs, universities and for in-service as well as continuous teacher training programmes. Better training and assessment models should be developed through the creation of a Malaysian standard for English language teaching. MELTA is ready to support the MOE in the development of such a model.

**Conclusion**

The Malaysian English Language Teaching Association has written this document to support the Ministry of Education regarding some crucial issues in relation to the proposal to hire native speaker teacher trainers. MELTA’s intention is to provide positive and proactive support to the Ministry of Education to ensure that this and all other programmes related to ELT in Malaysia are fruitful and successful.