

LANGUAGE AND NATIONALISM IN MALAYSIA: A LANGUAGE POLICY PERSPECTIVE

Paramjit Kaur¹
Aspalila Shapii²

^{1,2}School of Education and Modern Languages, Universiti Utara Malaysia
Email: paramjit@uum.edu.my
aspalila@uum.edu.my

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Abstract: *A shared language is often used by nations as a crucial and critical element to mold its population as a nation to promote and uphold nationalism. Language is an important symbolic marker and index of individual and group identity. A common language in a nation is used as a tool to create a common identity. Upon independence, most young nation states adopt a standardized, official language to assist in nation-building, promote socio-economic equality amongst its populace and boost unification through the provision of equal and improved economic development. Malaysia, upon independence from the British rule in 1957, promoted the Malay language as the sole national language of Malaysia in order to create a common Malaysian identity for its diverse multi-ethnic and multi-lingual populace. This paper examines several language policies adopted by Malaysia since independence to the present time to highlight the journey of Malaysia as a young nation state in creating its identity and promoting nationalism amongst its citizens. Although there was an initial shift in functional range and importance towards the Malay language, English continued to function as an official language in administration, education, diplomacy and commerce for ten years after Malaysia's independence. With the passing of the Malaysian Education Policy 1961 and the National Language Act 1967, the Malay language came to be the national and sole official language as well as the medium of instruction in mainstream primary, secondary and tertiary education. However in 2003, in response to the rise of globalization and modernization, saw a near-reversal of this national language policy with the re-introduction of English as a medium of instruction for the teaching of Science and Mathematics. This paper examines how language policies in different post-independence eras in Malaysia have been used to promote and nurture nationalism in Malaysia.*

Keywords: *Malaysia, National Language Act 1967, Language Policy, Nationalism, English*

Introduction

Post-independence language policy in Malaysia has been impactful in the ongoing shift in the functional range and emphasis towards the Malay language in various government administrative and educational aspects. Nevertheless, due to Malaysia's colonial history, the functions of English language as an official language in administration, education, diplomacy and commerce remained steadfast for ten years after Malaysia's independence. With the passing of the Malaysian Education Policy 1961 and the National Language Act 1967, the Malay language was acknowledged as the national and sole official language while being the medium of instruction in mainstream primary, secondary and tertiary education (Asmah, 1992). The two Acts impacted public policy and heightened nationalism; and relegated the English language to be "second most important language" in relation to the Malay language (Asmah, 1979).

In efforts to promote and maintain nationalism, a nation most commonly resorts to the use of a shared language as a fundamental element to shape its population as a nation. Language, being an important symbolic marker and index of individual and group identity, thus is useful as a tool to bind different groups with a common identity. Therefore, it is common for newly independent nation states to adopt a standardized, official language to assist in nation-building and to promote socio-economic equality amongst its populace. Similarly, Malaysia, upon independence in 1957, adopted a policy of promoting the Malay language as the sole national language of Malaysia to create the Malaysian identity for its diverse multi-ethnic and multi-lingual populace. In Malaysia, the existence of vernacular languages is guaranteed by legislation at the primary school as a medium of instruction with Malay and English being taught as subjects. Thus, a child in Malaysia, as stipulated in the Constitution, is assured an education in his/her mother tongue for the first six years of schooling. However, all children in vernacular public schools will also have access to the Malay and English languages which are taught as single subjects.

Malaysia's policy of ensuring that vernacular languages are used in primary education for its minorities embodies a dual education system: i.e. national schools where the medium of instruction is Malay, with English taught as a subject and national-type or vernacular schools where the medium of instruction is in the mother tongue, with Malay and English taught as subjects. The minority ethnic groups are allowed to maintain and learn their vernacular languages formally but these languages have no official status in the country. Throughout the four decades after independence, the establishment of Malay as the national and sole official language in the government and educational domains was strongly supported by the government. However, in 2002, the Government announced rather drastic changes in language policy which saw the re-introduction of English as a medium of instruction in the teaching of Science and Mathematics, from primary to tertiary levels and in both national and national-type schools. However in 2010, a re-reversal to this policy of teaching of Science and Mathematics was announced and carried out with immediate effect. Thus, for national schools the medium of instruction was once again fully in the Malay language. After 2010, there have been some other policies introduced, such as the Dual-Language Program (DLP) that re-introduces English as a medium of instruction for the teaching of Science and Mathematics. However, the DLP program is only available for selected schools by the Ministry of Education and is still highly debatable by stakeholders in terms of its effectiveness and potential adverse effects on the students' achievement (Jesica & Hamidah, 2017).

Language policies, in particular the language-in-education policies, have been fundamental in nation building in Malaysia. Given Malaysia's colonial history and a forced multicultural society, where immigrants of different ethnicities were introduced to the nation by the English rulers, language planning of the Malay language has been of particular importance. Since independence, the government has used the national language policy in an effort to unite its people and create a Malaysian identity. The need for national integration has always been crucial to Malaysia given its political reality of a pluralistic society in almost all aspects (Zawawi, 2005). The social and political reality in Malaysia is defined in terms of racial polarization where the three major ethnic groups, i.e. Malay, Chinese and Indians, primarily identify with ethnic identity first before national identity. The role and functions of English are secondary to that of the Malay language. However, in recent times due to the forces of globalization and internationalization various attempts have been made via changes to language-in-education policies that may affect the position of the Malay language.

Language and Nationalism

Nations often use and promote a shared, common language as a critical element to foster and preserve nationalism (Simpson, 2007). Language is an important symbolic marker and index of individual and group identity and can be used as a tool to bind different groups with a common identity. Upon independence young nation-states often adopt an official language as a tool to assist in nation-building, promote socio-economic equality amongst its populace and unify their citizens (Simpson, 2007). Malaysia, upon independence from colonial rule in 1957, adopted a policy of promoting the Malay language as the sole national and official language of Malaysia to create a common Malaysian identity for its diverse multi-ethnic and multi-lingual populace. At the time of independence given the disparate political, economic and social reality, the Malay language was chosen to help forge a Malaysian identity and encourage national unity. Given Malaysia's history and social reality where migrants were introduced to the country by the British, language policy in Malaysia is a highly political and sensitive issue; and any change in language policy can only be initiated by the government (Gill, 2005).

Gellner (1994) defines nationalism "as the striving to make culture and polity congruent, to endow a culture with its own political roof, and not more than one roof at that" (p.286). Gellner (1994) further adds that although, culture is largely left undefined, one of the important criterion of culture is language. Language is an important element in instilling a sense of belonging to a nation. A common language is usually an important factor in the creation of a cohesive, unified society. Nationalism, according to Gellner (1994) is a political concept and language plays an important role in the "politicization of a nationalism that culminates in the creation of a state" (Safran, 1999, p.77). Therefore, based on this premise of nationalism, language can be seen as a political tool that can be used to create and shape a nation state and its identity. Thus, a national language plays an important role in creating and maintaining nationalism and national identity. Most nation-states that gain independence and need to create unity amongst their populace will place one language above others as the national language. This chosen language that becomes the national language is taken to embody the 'soul' of the nation and represents the identity of the nation.

The Malay language was instituted through the Malaysian constitution as the national language of the country to unify its multiethnic society. The first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman highlighted the importance and functions of the national language through his statement:

(i) it is only right that as a developing nation we should want to have a language of our own.....If the national language is not introduced our country will be devoid of a unified character and personality – as I could put it, a nation without a soul and without a life (cited in Abd. Rahim, 2002, p.21).

The Malay language in Tunku's words is the soul of the nation and characterizes the Malaysian identity. The Malay language became the sole official language of Malaysia in 1967, through the National Language Act; and English was relegated to be the "second most important language" vis-à-vis to the Malay language in terms of its functions and roles (Asmah, 1992, p.24). The National Language Act 1967 introduced the current Malaysian dual education system, whereby national schools use Malay as the medium of instruction and national-type schools use Chinese and Tamil as the medium of instruction and Malay is taught as a subject only. A common syllabus endorsed by the Ministry of Education is used for all national and national-type schools. Mother tongue education is safeguarded by Article 152 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia; however these vernacular languages have no official and administrative status and functions in the country. The Malay language, through its role as the medium of instruction has evolved as a medium to create an encompassing national identity and developing nationalism.

Since independence, the Government has actively used the national language policy through its various efforts to unite Malaysians of different ethnicities and create a Malaysian identity. The need for national integration has always been crucial to Malaysia given the political reality of having a society that is pluralistic in most aspects (Zawawi, 2005). The social and political reality in Malaysia is defined in terms of racial polarization where the three major ethnic groups i.e. Malay, Chinese and Indians, primarily identify with ethnic identity first before national identity.

The National Language Act 1967

During the ten-year grace period stipulated in the Constitution that allowed the continued use of English alongside the Malay language, there were various crises stemming from language policy issues, mainly among the Chinese and Malays. As a result of this the government introduced the National Language Act in 1967 to calm mounting political and social tensions among the various ethnicities.

In 1966, the Government announced that the Malay language would be the sole official language and medium of instruction in all national schools. The Chinese protested for a "more liberal use of the Chinese language for official purpose" (Kua, 1999, p.89). In 1967, a 'modified' bill, i.e. the National Language Act of 1967, was passed to placate the Chinese and Malays. This Bill upheld the Malay language as the country's sole official language. The following clause was added to as a conciliatory move for the non-Malays:

Nothing in this Act shall affect the right of the Federal Government or any State Government to use any translation of official documents or communications in the language of other community in the Federation for such purpose as may be deemed necessary in the public interest.....The Yang di-Pertuan Agung may permit the continued use of the English language for such official purposes as may be deemed fit.
[The National Language Act 1967]

The National Language Act of 1967 reaffirmed the provisions of Article 152 of the Constitution. Article 152 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia states that:

(1) The national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in such script as Parliament may by law* provide:

Provided that-

(a) no person shall be prohibited or prevented from using (otherwise than for official purposes), or from teaching or learning, any other language; and

(b) nothing in this Clause shall prejudice the right of the Federal Government or of any State Government to preserve and sustain the use and study of the language of any other community in the Federation.

However, this clause was not acceptable to the various factions amongst the Malays and Chinese due to various circumstances. The Malays considered the provisions made for the other languages in the National Language Act 1967 as a “betrayal of the Malay cause” and accused the Prime Minister as having “sold the Malays” (Kua, 1999, p.90). The Chinese, on the other hand, were upset because a consequence of the Act, the Ministry of Education announced that students who wished to pursue studies overseas were required to obtain a pass in the Malaysian Cambridge Examination (MCE) or Government’s School Certificate (GSC) (Kua, 1999, p.90). The Chinese community, then, broached the idea of setting up a university locally to cater for students who had been schooled in secondary Chinese vernacular schools who were not required to sit for the MCE or GSC. The Chinese suggested the setting up of the Merdeka University, where the medium of instruction would be Chinese. This was met with resistance and protests from the Malay front.

There was an escalation of tension and dissatisfaction among the different ethnic groups in the 1960s over three major issues i.e. citizenship, the special position of the Malays and language (Chai, 1977). The 1950s and 60s saw growing Malay nationalism and escalating tensions among the ethnic groups and one of the causes could be attributed to the status of Malay as the national language. Language policies in education are important in creating and fostering the Malaysian identity for Malaysia’s multiracial population. However, these same language policies most often than not are partly responsible for the continuing disputes amongst Malaysians, to the present day. Post-independence tensions centred on vernacular languages as the medium of instruction for the minorities in the national education system. However, in later years, tensions and concerns are also centred on the role and position of English vis-à-vis the Malay language as a medium of instruction. As Kua (1999) pointed out the determination of the Government to adopt and use the Malay language as the national language to engineer and nurture race relations by itself may be the cause of the plurality in race relations in Malaysia to this present day.

Language-In-Education Policy: The Teaching of Science and Mathematics in English 2003

The Malaysian Education Policy 1961 and National Language Act 1967 secured and established the status of the Malay language as Malaysia’s sole national language, while English remained as the second most important language in relation to the Malay language in terms of functions and roles. Vernacular languages of the minorities were ensured for primary school

level education. A medium of instruction conversion process of all public English medium schools was initiated in 1968, and by 1984, the Malay language had become the sole medium of instruction in all national schools and tertiary education; English, until 2003, was only taught as a compulsory subject in all schools (Solomon, 1988). In vernacular schools, English and the Malay language were taught as subjects and the medium of instruction were the respective vernacular languages.

The early post-independence years also saw rigorous efforts to curtail the role of the English language in the domains of education and administration. This move was held to be symbolic as a means of ending the monopoly of the English-educated elites in the Malaysian society. These elites, be they Chinese, Indian and Malay had dominated the political and social scenes for over two decades and the Malay nationalists wanted to stamp out the English influence and its legacies. Chai (1977, p.55) states that the replacement of the English-medium schools, from 1970, by Malay-medium schools “symbolized the beginning of the end of the dominance of English and English-educated”. For the Malay nationalists the role reversal of Malay and English symbolized true independence and for the ethnic minorities who had been granted citizenship it was necessary to accept the Malay language as their national language to show loyalty and belonging to Malaysia.

Before English-medium schools could be phased out, there existed a restricted English-Malay bilingual education program, before a full conversion to the Malay language could be achieved. The English-Malay bilingual education program was merely a “stop gap measure” before a monolingual system could be put in place to unite Malaysia’s multilingual-multicultural population (Asmah, 1979; Chan & Ain, 2015; Solomon, 1988). There was no intention for the two languages to be equal partners in the education system, i.e. to have equal status. The Government was of the opinion that national unity among the country’s multilingual and multicultural population could only be achieved by a single uniform system of education, using only one language—the national language—as a medium of instruction (Asmah, 1979).

In the early 2000s, rapid advances in science and technology and pressures of a globalized economy as well as the deterioration of English proficiency among Malaysians raised concerns as this could hinder Malaysia’s aspirations to become a technologically advanced nation. Thus a drastic language-in-education policy change to address this problem was introduced in 2002; whereby all primary and secondary schools were to use English as a medium of instruction in the teaching of Mathematics and Science. It was to be a progressive change starting first at the primary school level in 2003 and would move to the tertiary level and a full switch to English at all levels by 2008. Assurances were given that the Malay language would remain as the main medium of instruction for the rest of the subjects in national schools and vernacular schools would still use their respective vernacular languages as the medium of instruction for the other subjects. One of the main reasons cited for the re-reversal to English was due to economic pressures of the globalising world and that there would be no compromise on the national language (Abdul Rafie, 19-20 January 2004). This change would lead to a partial change to the equilibrium between English and the Malay language in the Malaysian education system. For example, at the primary school level three subjects would be in taught in English, however, at the secondary level, for the Science stream students the instruction in English would be vastly different from those in the Arts stream.

This reversal of introducing English as a medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics move was greeted with mixed reactions. Proponents hailed this move as timely

and progressive given globalization and internationalization and the opponents voiced reservations as this move would be at the expense of the position of the Malay language, the national language. Unexpected voices of discontent were also heard from the vernacular schools proponents as this policy would reduce the contact time of the vernacular languages in these schools. Despite the opposition from certain quarters, the government went ahead with the introduction of English as a medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics without compromise; albeit granting flexibility only to the Chinese schools to use a bilingual approach where both English and Mandarin would be used to teach science and mathematics.

The protests from the Malays were mainly concerned with the impact of the new policy on the higher education policy and their social mobility (Geok, 2004). Since independence, the Malay language had been the sole national language and the education system was used by the government to help the Malays develop economically. With the switch to English, the Malays would need to develop competence in English as it has been noted that it was mainly the Malays who lagged behind the other ethnic groups in terms of competence in English (c.f. Geok, 2004; Gill, 2005). Thus the Malays, especially in the rural areas, would have to catch up with the non-Malays in terms of competence in English as well as competency in the field of science and technology. The former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who was responsible for the introduction of this policy, defended his decision by saying that it was done for the benefit of the Malays themselves. He goes on to explain that the “policy had to be adopted to ensure that the Malays’ command of English would be on par with the non-Malay students from the non-national type schools” (Zaini & Marhaini, 2005).

The Chinese group also protested against the change in language policy. The Chinese community opposed the policy as they claimed that the move was to eventually abolish Chinese schools in Malaysia (Lau, 2005). The argument was that with the introduction of a bilingual form of instruction in science and mathematics in Chinese primary schools, the only subjects that will have full instruction in Mandarin would be the “minor subjects” such as Geography and Civics. Mathematics and Science are held to be valuable subjects in terms of the power in terms of knowledge and position. After four decades of independence, the reintroduction of English as a medium of instruction in the Malaysian education system, albeit, partially, evoked many negative emotions and opposition once more. Not only the Malay community that felt threatened by the change in policy but also the Chinese and Indians who felt that English would encroach on their group distinctiveness and marginalize vernacular education. Once again communal interest in maintaining vernacular languages superseded national interest.

In 2008, the government announced a re-reversal in the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics from English to the Malay language based on several reasons. This re-reversal would take effect in 2011 in all schools. Some reasons included studies that showed that the use of the mother tongue was more advantageous for certain groups as well as the varying levels of English competencies of teachers and students (Gill, 2014). The mounting pressure of various factions against the adoption of English as a medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics forced the government to rescind the policy. The call to revert back to using the Malay language to teach these two subjects could no longer be silenced. However, the government in reverting to the Malay language added that more emphasis would be placed on the learning of English.

After this re-reversal in the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics from English to the Malay language, various strategies and policies have been introduced to enhance

the proficiency levels of English. Under the Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2013-2025 is a program called "Memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu, Memperkasakan Bahasa Inggeris" or MBMMBI (Uphold Bahasa Melayu, Strengthen the English Language) program was introduced. Under this program, two sub-programs have been introduced that seem to be differently named versions of the policy of using English for Science and Mathematics. These programs include the Dual Language Programme (DLP) and High Immersive Programme (HIP). The DLP allows students to use either English or the Malay language in Science, Mathematics, Information Technology and Communication, and Design and Technology. However, only 300 selected schools are allowed to opt for the DLP. HIP is a program implemented in 2016 in all schools throughout the country where English is used widely in encouraging environments for students to practice English. The DLP has gained opposition from certain quarters and once again the same arguments have been raised; i.e. the position and role of the Malay language and vernacular languages. However, this time around, the Government is allowing parents and schools the option for adopting the program.

English Language Roadmap 2015-2025: English Language Education Reform in Malaysia

It can be seen that throughout the years from the early days of independence to present times, any change in language policy will be met with opposition and debates in Malaysia. Globalization, internationalization and economic progress have forced Malaysia to progressively re-examine and re-calibrate its language policies. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 is the masterplan that maps the way forward for the Malaysian education system. The aspirations and thrusts in the Blueprint are holistically based on the future needs of the nation, current educational trends and stakeholders' viewpoints (Ministry of Education, 2013). The Roadmap for English Language Education 2015-2015 (Ministry of Education, 2015) aims to reform and rejuvenate the Malaysian education system so that it is aligned with international standards; especially in terms of English proficiency. This move of introducing the Roadmap for English Language Education understandably sparked some apprehension amongst the Malay language nationalists who fear that the English language may overshadow the supremacy of Malay language as the national language.

Despite the introduction of the Roadmap and the Malaysian Education Blueprint, the position and role of the national language in the Malaysian education system remains unchanged and unchallenged (Ministry of Education, 2014; 2015). There have never been any out-right calls to replace it. However, some ideologies such as nationalism and the concept of the national language as a symbol of "true independence" and for national unity have been recalibrated given the present times and pressures. Questions of whether the national language will maintain its role as the most important language in Malaysia, given the increasing role of English as a global and international language, is a central concern to all Malaysians. As Gill (2005) notes the change in policy centres mainly on economic considerations which have clearly "overrode traditional considerations of politics and nationalism" (p.250). Although the re-introduction of English in a more prominent position is seen as a threat to the development of the national language, not many see it as anti-national; rather the move is viewed as being pragmatic and being sensitive to pressures from a globalizing world.

Conclusion

The role of the Malay language as the sole national language has always been crucial in promoting and fostering a sense of national identity and nationalism among Malaysians.

However, it cannot be denied that in the past, language education policies and the role and position of the Malay language vis-à-vis other languages in Malaysia have proven to be somewhat divisive for Malaysians. Chai (1977) attributes this to the disparate inter-communal views about language and ethnic identities in Malaysia. Language is taken to be an important marker of ethnicity. Past incidences in the history of Malaysia have shown that attempts to introduce changes in education and language policies have resulted in racial conflicts and tensions (Abd. Rahim, 2002). Even in present times, tensions mount when education policies regarding language, are introduced. However, in present times English and the vernacular languages are no longer viewed as absolute threats to the Malay language. The role and position of the Malay language is solidified in Malaysia.

Language policies in Malaysia will continue to uphold the Malay language as the sole national language of Malaysia; however English will come to play a bigger role given the country's impetus for global trade and internationalization (Hanewald, 2016; Hazita, 2016). Malaysia, in current years, has been adopting pragmatic and progressive language education policies involving Malay, English and vernacular languages in order to become a developed nation. English and vernacular languages will continue to exist alongside the Malay language. However, Malaysia's history and struggles of finding equilibrium amongst its various languages and peoples should never be forgotten. The Malay language as a national language has come to play an important role in the lives of all Malaysians; however, all other languages that co-exist in Malaysia are also a part of the Malaysian identity. All the languages that co-exist in Malaysia have their own roles and functions in the Malaysian society and none threaten the role played by the national language. The national language is a strong identity marker of its citizens of varying races and a source that unites its citizens.

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