

Medium Of Instruction Policy In Malaysia:

The Fishman's Model

By

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Abstract:

*The aim of this study is to examine the development and the implementation of Malay medium policy in the Malaysia Education System, and it's relation to Fishman's model and multilingual society. This study using interviews with persons directly involved in the process of education in Malaysia examines a number of scholarly publications and other primary sources of information. Historical study is chosen as my research design. As a plural society, nation building or national integration (Ibrahim, 1986) is considered of the utmost importance in Malaysia. Fishman (1968) developed the concept of nationalist-nationist functions of language in nation-building. Since independence, the Malaysian leadership has believed that education is critical for national integration. It is generally believed that schools inculcate the child with values and facts, which are supportive of national ideology. The present study focuses on the process of development and the implementation of Malay medium policy in Malaysia. The performance of Malay-medium of Instruction universities (UKM, UTM and UPM) at post-graduate level is amazing. They have proven the ability to get Masters and Ph.D or degree in medic specialist from overseas and local universities. There are thousands of Malay language theses from public universities in science after 1990 and this indirectly shows the ability of Malay language in education and that it has world class standard. The Malay scholars have created a lot of terms in biology especially for animal and tree name. A part of beetle are being named with Malay words such as *Arthrotus hijau*, *Atrachya hitam*, *Dercetina bopeng*, *Itylus biru*, *Ophrida kuning*, *Monolepta merah*, and *Sphenoraia tompok*; and other words such as *Sarawakiola ajaib*, *Medythia bukit*, *Monolepta cantik*, *Nadrana dwiwarna*, *Podontia jalur*, *Pseudosastra indah*, *Monolepta kenit*, *trichomimastra kurnia*, *Xenoda lapan*, *Paleosepharia lawa*, *Metrioidea molek* and *Liroetiell warisan*; and from words that originate from the name of a place such as *Aplosonyx pahangi* and a name for a Malay man such as *Arcaries ismaili*.*

Keywords: *Language Policy, Multilingual Society, Nation Building And Nationalism*

Introduction

The language medium policy refers to the policy related to the medium of instruction in school. The medium of instruction is the language used in the school to implement the curriculum. It performs all the functions of language (informative, regulatory, international, personal) but in practice the most commonly formed ones are the informative, the regulatory and the heuristic. Language has been used as a means to convey the accumulated knowledge and wisdom to the human race. It is also used as a tool to teach students the basic skills needed in later life. In addition, the student is given some practice in using language to find things out for themselves (Halliday, 1975). Many issues and questions arise in multi-ethnic and multi-lingual countries about the language selection for the establishment of the main medium of instruction in the education system. One question includes: What is the most suitable or appropriate combination of the national language and the second language (English, French, Spanish, etc.) that would promote effective learning amongst the students and at the same time enable them to gain the language skills that they would need from the second language? (Tollefson, 2004). The aim of this study is to examine the development and the implementation of language medium policy in Malaysia Education System and its relation to nation building. This study is relevant in Malaysia since it is known to have a multi ethnic society that means a nation with cleavages of race, language, religions, customs and other primordial.

1. Fishman's Dichotomy (1968): Nationalism and Nationism

Fishman (1968) has developed the 'theory' or 'formula' to describe and explain language functions in nationalism and nation building. According to him western languages such as French, English and Spanish should be used in ex-colonial countries to further develop their countries. This is the function of nationism. Whereas, the indigenous language such as Swahili, Guarani and Malay should be used as nationalist language for national unity and identity only, which serves as a nationalism function. The indigenous languages could not be used to develop the nation with respect to education (especially higher education), economy, industry, science and technology. According to Fishman's theory, this role should be given to the Language of Wider Communication (LWC) such as English, Spanish or French.

2. Malaysia : A Plural Society

Malaysia is located in Southeast Asia, consisting of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. Peninsular Malaysia was formerly known as the Malay Peninsular or Tanah Melayu (the land of the Malays) until the states within it were united and become independent from the British colonial power as a Federation of Malays in 1957. It later transformed into Peninsular Malaysia in 1963 when it merged with the Borneo territories of Sabah and Sarawak to form the Federation of Malaysia. Viewed historically, for almost a century (from the end of the 18th century till 1957), different parts of Malaysia were under Portuguese, Dutch and British rule at different times, with British colonization having greatest impact on the country's socio-political development (Wong, 2000).

A classic case of the plural society, Malaysia's racial divisions tend to coincide with and be reinforced by linguistic, cultural, religious, and most importantly, economic divisions. All political issues are inextricably interwoven with communal considerations-economic policy, regional development, language, education, immigration, recruitment to the civil service and armed forces, and many more. Virtually all government policies are seen as benefiting one or the other in the main communities, where anything that benefited one community tend to be seen depriving the others. Despite the government's attempt to work out an acceptable balance between the communities, communal sentiments remained strong and frustrations often rose to the surface (Crouch, 1996).

The best description of Malaysia was made by Fisk and Osman Rani (1982) as "not a tightly united little nation by any means. It is one that is subjected to a remarkable range of divisive and disruptive influences in its geography, racial make-up, religions, political institution and international relations". Therefore, in order to make a more complete and comprehensive analysis of education in Malaysia, it is essential that we begin by looking at the background of the country and how its various features affect education. These would be analysed in relation to the provision of education in the country, enabling us to understand the social, political and economic realities in which education has developed and taken its shape in Malaysia. This is important because the effects of education are both determined and influenced by the structure and behaviour of the polity (Levin, 1976).

3. Methodology

Historical study is chosen as my research design. Many current educational practices, theories and issues can be better understood in light of past experiences. The knowledge of education history can yield insight into the evolution of the current educational system as well as into practices and approaches that have been found to be ineffective or unfeasible. In fact, studying the history of education might lead one to believe that there is *little new under the educational sun* although some practices seem to appear and disappear with regularity. Policy makers at any level in education can benefit from the contributions of historical research in arriving at decisions (Wiersma, 1995).

4. Malaysia Education System

There is a common phenomenon to all colonized countries, that is, all inherit the educational model of the metropolitan power. Colonial powers in most cases disrupt the traditional educational systems of the colonized and supplement them with systems based on imported models. Miller (1997) viewed that the formal educational policies of India, Sri Lanka, Burma and Malaysia were moulded on the English pattern, those of Indo-China on the French, those of Indonesia on the Dutch, and those of the Philippines on the Spanish patterns. The British colonial system of education made its impact on almost every aspect of the education in the colonized countries. In the aspect of curriculum, its contents were almost a carbon copy of that used in the then aristocratically oriented British system. As such, it was, as many authors have generally conceded, not in tune with the pupils' environment nor practical use in their lives (Tuqan, 1975; Altbach, 1978).

According to Bakri (2003), "schools were along racial lines during British. Malay schools

were consumed with religious studies and limited to primary level only. Chinese schools were nothing more than fronts for the Communist Party. Tamil schools might as well have been in Tamil Nadu, India. Only the English schools had a multiracial student body. But they were few and necessarily elitist". The colonial system never held out the prospects of integration into indigenous culture to those who attended their schools. The colonial system or schools were marked by diversity (Altbach,1978).

All the National-Type schools in the country had to undergo a change in their language media of instruction to Bahasa Malaysia. The result of this change will be the conversion of National-Type Schools into National Schools. The first conversion was launched in January 1968 with the conversion of English primary schools to National Schools (State the name of the school). The conversion was conducted in stages, by first teaching five subjects in the Malay language in Standard one (I) to three (III) in National-Type English Primary Schools. By 1970, all subjects except English were taught in Malay in Standard one (I). Malay-medium classes had also started in secondary vocational schools in 1968 and in secondary technical schools in 1970. And from 1983 all courses in the local universities were progressively converted to the national language (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1: Malay language as a Medium of Instruction In Malaysian Education System.

Year	Implementation
1957	National Language was made a compulsory subject at all levels in all government funded primary and secondary schools
1958	The establishment of Malay-medium secondary classes which eventually developed into National Secondary Schools.
1963	<p>i) The establishment of the first fully residential Malay-medium Secondary School in Kuala Lumpur – Alam Shah National Secondary School.</p> <p>ii) Malay –medium Sixth Form Classes started in Shah Alam National Secondary, Kuala Lumpur.</p>
1965	First batch of Malay-medium pupils admitted to University of Malaya
1968	<p>i) First batch of Malay-medium students graduated from University of Malaya.</p> <p>ii) Malay-medium classes in Secondary Vocational schools.</p> <p>iii) Five subjects taught in Malay Language in Standard 1-3 in National-Type English Primary Schools.</p>
1969	Civics taught in Malay Language in Standard 4 in National-Type English Primary Schools.
1970	<p>i) All subjects in Standard 1 taught in Malay Language in National-Type English Primary Schools.</p> <p>ii) Geography and History taught in Malay Language in Standard 4 in National-Type English Primary Schools.</p> <p>iii) Malay-medium classes in Secondary Technical Schools.</p>
1973	All Arts subjects in Form 1 taught in Malay Language in National-Type English Primary Schools.
1975	i) No more English-medium Remove classes

- ii) National-Type English Primary Schools were fully converted to National primary Schools.
- 1976
- i) All Arts, Science and Technical subjects in Form 1 taught in Malay Language in National-Type English Secondary Schools.
 - ii) All Arts subjects in Form IV taught in Malay Language.
- 1978
- Arts streams in Form VI (Lower) taught in Malay Language in National-Type English Secondary Schools.
- 1980
- First year in Arts and allied courses taught in Malay Language in the Universities.
- 1981
- All Arts, Science and Technical streams in Form VI (Lower) taught in Malay Language in National-Type English secondary Schools.
- 1982
- National-Type English Secondary Schools fully converted National Secondary Schools.
- 1983
- First year in all courses (Arts, Science, Engineering, Medical, etc.) taught in Malay Language in Universities.

Source: Ministry of Education, 2002

5. Results

Medium of instruction is the most powerful means of maintaining and revitalising a language and culture; it is the most important form of intergenerational transmission (Fishman, 2000), or the most direct agent of linguistic genocide (Snutnabb-Kangas, 2002). Medium of instruction policy determines which social and linguistic groups have access to political and economic opportunities, and which groups are disenfranchised. After more than 30 years of implementing the Malay medium policy, the reinstatement of English as a medium of instruction has become the controversial issue. This controversial move has been related to the Fishman's dichotomy philosophy.

The government implemented the National Education Policy which stipulated Malay as the main medium of instruction in schools. The aim of this policy was to remove the identification of a particular ethnic group with school achievement and reduce the inequality of opportunity among ethnic groups (Gill, 2004). The transition from English to Malay as the main medium of instruction began in 1958, starting from primary level. By 1983, the transition at the university level had been achieved. The transition throughout all levels of education took 26 years to complete, and it was done gradually and pragmatically. This extended time frame provided for a more efficient language planning, as well as the development of corpus to allow Malay to cope with science and technology (Asmah, 2002).

Malay has been the medium of instruction for more than 20 years and has not faced any problems that necessitate a change in the language policy, especially regarding the use of Malay as the language for imparting knowledge and instruction (Gill, 2004). During this period of education where the medium of instruction is in Malay, there were developments in many knowledge fields including medicine, aerospace, science and technology. DBP had produced more than 1 million

Malay terminologies in 300 fields of knowledge. The professors, lecturers and teachers gave their lectures in the Malay language effectively, especially in science and mathematics subjects.

The medium of instruction in Malay is judged to be successful. It has produced graduates and professionals that help to develop the country. The Malay scholars had created a lot of terms in biology especially for animals and trees. For example, since 2001, Dr. Mohammad Salleh, a world standard professor from entomology, UKM, had created hundred of terms in Malaysia. A group of beetles have been named using Malay words such as *Arthrotus hijau*, *Atrachya hitam*, *Dercetina bopeng*, *Itylus biru*, *Ophrida kuning*, *Monolepta merah*, and *Sphenoraia tompok*; and other words such as *Sarawakiola ajaib*, *Medythia bukit*, *Monolepta cantik*, *Nadrana dwiwarna*, *Podontia jalur*, *Pseudosastra indah*, *Monolepta kenit*, *trichomimastra kurnia*, *Xenoda lapan*, *Paleosepharia lawa*, *Metrioidea molek* and *Liroetiell warisan*; and also words that originate from a name of a place such as *Aplosonyx pahangi* and from a name of a Malay man such as *Arcaries ismaili*. All these terms were recognized by international body and indirectly recognized Malay as international science language (UKM,2004).

Thus, some Malays do not see the need to change the national education policy. But the Ministry of Education reintroduce English as a medium of instruction to teach Mathematics and science in all schools, colleges and universities. The stress on English medium on the other hand show that British colonial belief that language can change one's pattern of the output and to see things differently (Barbour, 2000). British wanted as many as possible, Malayan people to study in the English medium because this would help them to administer Malaya pre-independence and post independence. This objective was fruitful because after 53 years independence, many of the English educated still believe learning English as the best way to face globalization. From the Fifth Educational Conference of 1939, it was shown that the English language was the one great unifying principle in Malaya, while the English schools had the important cultural role and place in the making of Malaya.

This differential valuation of exchanged systems between two streams has posed a serious obstacle to Malayan government's stated goal of transforming the Malay medium stream into a unified National School System. After 53 years of independence, the Malay medium schools are national schools, only by name. Located primarily in rural areas and drawing their student enrolment almost exclusively from the Malay community, the national schools and public higher institutions continue to provide extremely limited access to modernized occupations as compared to the private schools and private higher institutions which used English as their medium of instruction.

The continued weakness of Malay language education relative to that of English has an important political implication due to the fact that this factor has served to undermine the legitimacy of the Alliance government among some important sectors of the Malay community. On the other hand, however, if the government were successful in rapidly reversing the value position of Malay education vis-à-vis the other language streams, it would be in danger of losing the tenuous legitimacy granted to it by the non-Malay communities.

After 53 years of independence, the response among non-Malays toward the national schools was still poor. In 2003, there were 191,679 Chinese and Indian students registered at national schools and in 2004, it was only 192,106 students. The increase was below than 500. This was partly due to the fact that credentials obtained from the national schools and public universities were not recognized by private firms and business organizations for job purposes because of their weakness in English. Before globalization era in 1990s, the government had still pinned its faith on

the role of formal education in the national language as the chief means of achieving national integration.

At the tertiary level of education, the policy makers have indicated that the higher education reform is vital to help realize Vision 2020, the national goal to be developed, as an industrialist country and to be a hub in education and information technology in the region (Najib, 1996, Fong, 1993, Johari, 1996). At this level, there is no more focus on nation building or national integration. According to Rajendran (2004), ethnic harmony is being taken for granted.

In 1995 (prior to the higher education reform), there were 48 public higher education institutions comprising eight public universities, six polytechnics and 33 teacher-training colleges. By contrast, there were 275 private colleges. In 1995, 11% of the student age cohort was enrolled in higher education – about 50% of them were in public universities. The other 50% were either attending courses in the local private colleges (35%) or studying overseas (14%). In 1985, there were 15,000 students studying in local colleges, and 68,000 students studying in overseas universities, especially in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. The majority of these overseas students were privately funded Chinese and Indian students (Lee, 1999).

According to Gill (2004), the policy for a dual medium of instruction has serious social and political implications. Firstly, the private universities have more expensive fees when compared to public universities that receive a large subsidy from the government. This means that the students that enroll in private universities come from middle-class families and Chinese families with high income, while the majority of enrolments in public universities consist of Malays that come from the average and poor families (Gill, 2005). The long-term effect has shown that the university students will divide according to the socio-economic strata and more often than not, the ethnic groups. Thus, the medium of instruction policy would give rise to class and racial division, and not unify the Malaysian citizens.

The dual medium of instruction policy has also caused public university graduates to be at a disadvantage when looking for work in the private sector due to their weak command of the English language. This policy type would cause the Malays graduates to be unable to compete with the Chinese graduates from the private universities. Also, the private companies would be more interested in hiring Chinese graduates than Malay graduates since the majority of the private companies are owned by the Chinese. Yet again, the policy regarding the medium of instruction tends towards the division rather than unification of races.

6. Conclusions

Rustam (2002) viewed the nostalgic return to the golden era of revering the English language amongst the general populace as being *creole* and as a crisis in tradition. The creation of a liberalised cultural policy and an unprofessional language policy will cause cultural contamination. For example, many individuals have returned to the craze in naming housing areas, corporate buildings, hotels, banks, schools, cities, and the like with western or foreign sounding names in keeping up with globalisation. Eastern and nationalistic names are considered by this group to be less attractive to customers, even to the extent that it will complicate international relations. If this group of individuals were to triumph, then surely this would mean the end for the Malay language.

In actual fact there is nothing special about the English language with respect to the level of

education of a student and in scientific discovery and advancement. This is especially obvious in the scientific field, as the number of important researchers and scientists who have made important discoveries are not dominated by native English speakers, or by English trained individuals. For example, the current joint Nobel Peace Prize winners for Chemical Engineering are Koichi Tanaka from Japan, John Fenn from the United States and Kurt Wuethrich from Switzerland. Tanaka is 43 years old and is the fourth winner from Japan for the past three years and does not hold a PhD (Berita Harian, 10.12.02).

The expansion of scientific knowledge after the 13th century was achieved according to the language of the scientists. The German scientists recorded their findings in German, the English in English, and the Swedish scientists in Swedish, and so on and so forth. However, in the midst of the multitude of languages, there existed a force to find common ground from the knowledge perspective, like getting a legitimate academic verification for each new finding.

Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the advancement of Science during the 20th century had occurred rapidly in many different languages: English, German, Russian, French, Japanese, Chinese and many other languages including Bahasa Malaysia in Malaysia which was pioneered by the National University of Malaysia (UKM). Using scientific knowledge recorded in the Russian language, the world has witnessed the first successful space ship built by mankind – the Sputnik was built by Russia and piloted by Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space. Scientific discoveries recorded in English had led to the creation of Apollo II, which brought mankind to the moon. In French, the French scientists had invented the nuclear bomb and had carried out tests in the Pacific Ocean (Shamsul Amri,2003).

The same was observed in the field of Medicine, a branch of applied science. Many important studies had been performed and paramount discoveries had been accomplished in this field, which were carried out as separate research in different languages. The researchers in Japan, including the Nobel Prize winners, had performed their researches in Japanese. The Spanish researchers who were successful in the advancement of several new fields in Pharmacy and Medicine had recorded their findings in Spanish. Obviously the researchers in Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and USA had used English.

In the field of Mathematics, there are many child prodigies below the age of ten and some in their early teens around the world who are granted scholarships in several universities, (like Sofia, a Malay girl studying at the Oxford University) each individual continuing their respective studies. It is obvious that language is not a matter of serious consideration when the universities are dealing with cases such as these.

If we were to say that only one language is responsible for the success in Science, then it would go against history. It would also be foolish to use scientific knowledge to learn a language; which is unheard of anywhere in the world. If we were to review the process of learning a language and the spread of scientific knowledge in various languages above, we would conclude that the two fields are worlds apart and to use one in an attempt to improve the other would be an incredible flight of the imagination. Perhaps the results will be too (Hassan,2002).

Collins (1995) had explained the belief in the English language as a functional and superlative language, which is pure fiction. This fabrication is constantly being used by people, like the races that are fluent in English and the guardians of the English education infrastructure, who want to maintain or raise the status of English. Alas the same false outlook is being taken up by a large number of the Malay speaking community, as they think it to be true. This occurrence does not

happen in Malaysia alone. In many third world countries, the English language is well respected and thought to be essential for development and inclusion in the movement toward globalisation.

In conclusion, most of the former Western colonies have not progressed even though they have used Western languages as their official or main language in their system of education. Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand use their own native languages fully in each of their respective countries. These countries are developed, or currently developing, or at the very least are not included in the list of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) which include 40 former Western colonial countries.

There are many other factors other than language that contribute to the economic development of a country. Some of the factors include the capability, honesty, trustworthiness of the government leaders and the natural resources of the country. Fishman's view is obviously influenced by traditional evolutionary Western thinking that assumes a modern language, like English, can bring progress to developing countries. This is the ethnocentric attitude and Western colonial mentality that is consciously or subconsciously expressed through the language planning theory that uses the Western model of progress as the criterion to define the function of language development. The essence behind this theory can be put aside since most of the countries that use English, French or Spanish (that are said to be advanced) as the official language, still have not progressed, and some still stricken by poverty, while several other countries that use their national/official language have become or are becoming developed (Alis, 2004).

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