

## Education Policy for Globalization and Multicultural Society: The Malaysian Experiences

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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. Emerson, Furnival and Chopra contended that Malaysian plural society was divided in almost every respect. As a plural society, nation building or national integration was considered of the utmost importance in Malaysia. Fishman 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 was amazing. This studies using historical design. They had proved the ability to get Masters and Ph.D or degree in medic specialist from overseas and local universities. UKM had produced 272 theses at post graduate level since 1994 which 247 theses at master level and 25 Ph.D theses. Since 1995, UKM was producing about 200 theses at post-graduate level yearly. Usually there are thousands of Malay language theses from public universities in science after 1990. The thousands of theses in Malay language indirectly showed the ability of Malay language in education and its world class standard. The Malay scholars had created a lot of terms in biology especially for animal and tree name. For example, since 2001 Dr. Mohammad Salleh a world standard professor from entomology, UKM had created hundreds of terms in Malaysia. A part of beetle were being names 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 place such as Aplosonyx pahangi and Malay name such as Arcaries ismaili. 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.*

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**Keywords:** education policy, multicultural society, globalization, Malaysia education system

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### INTRODUCTION

Language policy is the decision made by a country on the level and function of a language or languages that exist in the country in relation with the function of the country, thus there is no country in the world that does not have a language policy. There are two types of language policy that exist in all countries, which are (a) the official one-language policy and (b) official multilingualism policy. The official multilingualism policy is the adoption of two or more languages as the official language. Countries that have implemented an official one-language policy include Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan, Britain, France, the United States, and Australia, while countries that have an official multilingual policy include Singapore, Switzerland, India and the Philippines. Language policy can be in written form incorporated into the country's constitution or in language laws, as the case in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines and Canada, or it can also exist in a non-written form, as practised in Britain, the United States, Japan and Australia.

In countries that have implemented an official multilingual policy, the status of its use is different for each country. For example, in Switzerland, Singapore and most of all the African nations have two official languages, and the main language that is most often used is considered to be dominant. In Singapore, English is the main official language, while in Switzerland the main official languages are German and French. The multilingual language policy does not necessarily solve the problem of the right to use a language in the official administrative procedures of the country. Thus, the main factor that will decide the government adoption of a language at the official level is not based on the importance of ethnicity or certain groups, but rather for the benefit of the nation in overcoming the ethnic divide (Hassan, 2002). However, there are certain tendencies for ex-colonial countries to use a dualistic language policy, as put forward by Fishman.

### Medium of Instruction Policy

During the 1970s and 1980s, the discussion regarding the medium of instruction revolved around the effectiveness of the chosen language at the micro level, like in the classroom and its effect on the individual. The focus of the discussion changed in the 1990s when the issues regarding “linguistic human rights and the role of language in power, control, dominance and equality,” (Tollefson, 2004) had arisen. However Annamalai (2002) had stated that it is caused by two factors, which are “universalization of education and the political recognition of multilingualism.” This situation had caused the question of choosing the most appropriate medium of instruction as the main topic in the socio-politics of a country. The choosing of a suitable medium of instruction is important because it is the “main tool in maintaining and revitalizing a language and culture,” (Fishman, 2000); “the direct agent of linguistic genocide,” (Skutnadd-Kangas, 2002); “a symbolic reassurance,” (Snodgrass, 1980); or “to subjugate the colonized” (Pennycook, 2002). For post colonial countries, it was found that “indigenous languages were treated as backward and uncivilized and seen as something that must be eradicated in order for the country to become modernized,” (Tollefson, 2004).

In sub-Saharan countries, the colonial language is still used as a medium of instruction despite research findings indicate that the retention of colonial language policies in education contributes significantly to ineffective communication and lack of student participation in classroom activities (Alidou, 2004). This situation has caused many problems to surface for post colonial countries that use their mother tongue as medium of instruction.

The difficulties in using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction was described by Tollefson (2004) as follows:

*“The lack of opportunities for indigenous languages to develop into languages that could function in all domains has made it necessary for these languages to be standardized and codified....it also lead to a paucity of teaching materials...and the lack of a literacy environment for speakers. The long standing low status was accorded, and the prestige that the former colonial languages enjoyed, have resulted in a lack of confidence in the indigenous languages as adequate working languages and languages that are suitable for schooling”.*

The selection of an official language and medium of instruction is heavily influenced by political, social and economic factors. For multi-ethnic and multi-lingual countries, the selection of two national languages is based on political factors, where the leaders try to avoid dissension and division of ethnic

groups and in the extreme, civil war. In many cases, the colonial language is often chosen because of its characteristics which include it being a “neutral, lingua franca and dominant working language,” (Tollefson, 2004). Even though several post-colonial countries had chosen the mother tongue as the official language and medium of instruction, the language is more “symbolic than substantive” (Fishman, 2000:24). For example in India, Hong Kong, Philippines and Singapore, even though they have their respective national languages, English continues to play a prominent role as the official language, medium of instruction, or even official working language. Similarly in the African continent, colonial languages like English, French, Spanish and Portuguese continue to be the official language and medium of instruction. For Alidou (2004), “political independence does not necessarily lead to educational or economic independence.”

There are views that declare the use of colonial languages as the official language and medium of instruction in post-colonial countries as being “linguistic imperialism,” (Phillipson, 1992; Rasool, 2000). Tollefson (2004) pointed out that the asymmetrical power relationship among the official languages in these countries perpetuates social, economic and political inequality and favour speakers of the colonial languages at national, sub-national and supranational levels.

However, from the perspective of the relationship between the medium of instruction and the student cognitive abilities, the use of a single language will lead to difficulties in understanding the subject under study. A lot of research carried out on language and cognition has shown that children learn best through the medium of their mother tongue, especially in the single figure years. These findings showed that a single language for educational instruction in a linguistically plural society could hamper cognitive development (Sotomayor, 1977). Snider and Enloe (1973) had argued that “a diffuse language policy linguistically could divide developing states. The new states are artificial creations and that ethnic affiliations are much more persistent and pervasive than assumed.”

Ranaweera (1976), praised about the great advantages to the population of Sri Lanka with the introduction of Sinhala and Tamil instead of English as the languages of instruction – especially for the teaching of science and technology:

*“The transition from English to the national languages as the medium of instruction in science helped to destroy the great barrier that existed between the privileged English educated classes and the ordinary people; between the science educated elite and the non-science educated masses; between science*

*itself and the people. It gave confidence to the common man that science is within his reach and to the teachers and pupils that a knowledge of English need not necessarily be a prerequisite for learning science” (Ranaweera, 1976).*

Ranaweera noted that “the change of medium of instruction in Science and Mathematics always lagged behind the other subjects because of special difficulties, like the absence of scientific and technical terms, textbooks, and proficient teachers. Yet the greatest need to switch over to the national languages is the science subjects.”

Other than the above issues, the issue of educational segregation by race forms yet another barrier to national unity. According to Chai (1971) “if children grow up together and share the same educational experience under one roof, it will help to promote the growth of common outlook and a core of shared values.” The problem with educational segregation of ethnic groups will give rise to prejudice, fear and hostility. For example in the United States of America, much of the tension between blacks and whites has its roots in educational segregation.

There are also views that declare multiple mediums of instruction in the education system as not contributing to division, nor does it form a barrier to nation building. This is based on the premise that the Arab world has the singular language, yet tribal division still occurs. Using a single language does not guarantee the emergence and existence of national unity. There are even those that support the notion that using two or more languages in the educational system can increase knowledge, increase mutual understanding, and improve educational opportunity and outcome, and ethno-linguistic survival (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999).

However, Chai (1971) posited that “whatever the rationale for the segregation of the children in schools, the effects are nearly always mal-functional and counterproductive to the aims of social integration. If education is really intended to promote national unity, one of the first things it must do is integrate racial groups in schools.” The extent of the truth behind this premise can still be debated by future research. Chai’s view is closely related to the functions of language by Haliday (1975). Haliday had categorised the functions of language in the socialization of a person into seven groups, some of which are regulatory, interactional, informative and heuristic. As the medium of instruction, it performs all the seven functions of language but in practice the most commonly used ones are the informative, the regulatory and the heuristic (Nababan, 1981)

Another issue related to the medium of instruction is the issue of unequal linguistic dichotomy (Fishman

Dichotomy) in terms of language ideology. English has been projected as the vehicle for the ideas of the European Enlightenment – a language of rationality and progress – and hence the vehicle for modernity (nationalism) by the colonials. On the other hand, the indigenous languages are portrayed as vehicles for tradition and as instruments that fulfil emotional needs and maintain cultural values and practices (nationalism).

### **Education, Nation Building and Globalisation**

Integration theorists view nation-building as important, especially in the developing world, for creating the national unity and integration required for stability and development. The role of these forces, is explained by Deutsch (1966), the leading theoretician of Integration:

*“...the nation-state is still the chief political instrument for getting things done. The main basis of its power is the consent of the governed; and this consent is easiest to obtain and keep among populations with same language, culture, and traditions of nationality. Nation preserving, nation-building, and nationalism or the preference for the real or imagined interests of one’s own nation and its members – these still remain a major and a still growing force in politics”.*

The nationalists in many nation-states, including those in the multiethnic third world, wish to create a common culture to forge national identity amongst their people. This national identity is essential in facilitating the nationalist design of pursuing economic development and modernisation of these countries. The common culture, economic development and modernisation are vital ingredients in these countries with objectives of achieving cultural and economic growth, political stability and national unity (Smith, 1988).

Waters (1995) suggested that “there are essentially three forms of globalization- economic, political and cultural. The economic globalization is driven by trade, imperialist ambitions and by the aims and scope of multinational enterprises. The end point would seem to be a system of global free trade, where markets and laissez-faire economics ruled supreme. The nation state is now partner to global economic players. This form of globalization has important effects upon education for a number of reasons.” Firstly, the effects of globalisation towards education are that the language and values will influence thinking and the activity of economy. Secondly, it involves the problem of finance and ability to maintain education that is service oriented.

Daun (2002) declared that “at classroom level, it may not be changing much but at macro level

globalization is transforming education systems. This transformation is driven mainly by financial forces, new patterns of economic growth, and market ideology...one way to attract finance capital is to provide a ready supply of skilled labour by increasing the average level of education in the labour force. Rising relative incomes for higher educated labour increases the demand for university education and increase the number of secondary school graduates to attend post-secondary.” In the meantime, the financial aspect puts pressure on many developing countries to reduce the growth of public spending on education and to find other sources of funding for their educational systems expansion. Usually, the government will introduce a new education policy that will reduce the education expenditure cost, for example privatisation of institutions of higher learning policies, increased fee policies, reduction in scholarship policies, and so forth. Also, for post-colonial countries, there is also a change in the medium of instruction from the national language to English.

At the macro level, globalisation has undeniably changed the educational system. As an example, in the effort to attract Foreign Direct Investment, the Government has increased the level of education of its workers and decreased public spending as well as investing in the private sector. Financial forces put a strain on many developing countries to reduce the growth of public spending on education and to find other sources of funding for the expansion of the educational system.

According to Kunio (2000), for a developing country, globalisation means the increasing presence of foreign companies that rely heavily on English and the language of communication. When the national economy continues to weaken, more students will pursue their education in English and will be separated from the students that are taught using their mother tongue. When this division occurs, those left at the mercy of the market forces and globalisation may be politically unified which will stop future uncertainty and liberalisation. In the extreme, they may even force the government to take a step backwards, and when this occurs, the economy will stop or face a downturn.

According to Daun (2002), a country can respond to globalization in many different ways. The way a country reacts would influence the effect of globalization on education. In general, the reaction of education towards globalization depends on three main factors, which are the economic status, the interpretation of population towards an event, and their ideology towards the role of the public sector and education. In several cases, it was observed that the curriculum content and the medium of instruction had become more diverse.

### **Malaysia: A Multilingual Society**

Malaysia is located in Southeast Asia, consisting of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. Peninsular Malaysia was formerly known as the Malay Peninsula 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 important, 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 benefits one or another of the main communities, while 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).

### **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 (1989) 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.

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).

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 animal and tree name. For example, since 2001 Dr. Mohammad Salleh a world standard professor from entomology, UKM had created hundreds of terms in Malaysia. A group of the beetles were 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 a place such as

*Aplosonyx pahangi* and Malay name such as *Arcaries ismaili*. All the terms were recognized by international body and indirectly recognized Malay as international science language (UKM, 2004).

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 assisted primary and secondary schools
1958	The establishment of Malay-medium secondary classes which eventually developed into National Secondary Schools.
1963	i) The establishment of the first fully residential Malay-medium Secondary School in Kuala Lumpur – Alam Shah National Secondary School. ii) Malay –medium Sixth Form Classes started in Shah Alam National Secondary, Kuala Lumpur.
1965	First batch of Malay-medium pupils admitted to University of Malaya
1968	i) First batch of Malay-medium students graduated from University of Malaya. ii) Malay-medium classes in Secondary Vocational schools. iii) Five subjects taught in Malay Language in Standard 1-3 in National-Type English Primary Schools.
1969	Civics taught in Malay Language in Standard 4 in National-Type English Primary Schools.
1970	i) All subjects in Standard 1 taught in Malay Language in National-Type English Primary Schools. ii) Geography and History taught in Malay Language in Standard 4 in National-Type English Primary Schools. iii) Malay-medium classes in Secondary Technical Schools.
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

Although the achievement was not fully 100%, the Malay medium policy was able to maintain political stability and economic growth. Between 1987 and 1995, Malaysia recorded one of the highest growths in gross national product (over 8%) in the Asian region, both per person and only being second to China. The annual growth of real gross domestic product from 1965 to 1986 averaged 6.6%, a very impressive figure by developing country standards. Malaysian's export coefficient was third highest in the developing world in the decade up to the late 1990s, coming after the coefficients of 170% by Singapore and 140% by Hong Kong.

In 1993, 10 years after conversion to the Malay medium of instruction was completed, the government made a controversial move to allow the use of English in science, engineering and medical courses in universities and colleges. This move was considered by the government to be essential for economic and technological development of the nation (nationalist role). The ex-Prime Minister outlined the reasons for reinstating English as the medium of instruction in higher institutions. Firstly, competence in English is necessary for Malaysia to remain competitive at the international level; secondly to prevent the efficiency and capability of the Malaysian people from being lower than the other countries; and thirdly because the pace of translation cannot keep up with the generation of knowledge and information in the field of science and technology (Gill, 2004).

### CONCLUSION

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 (Alis, 2004).

Up until the end of the 1980s, the national education policy was successful in giving secondary education to millions of children in Malaysia regardless of race. This never occurred previously before Independence where more than 90% of the Malay children who were qualified in furthering their education at the secondary level were not given the opportunity to do so. Only students that were successful in entering English schools had that chance. Secondly, thousands

of Malay and non-Malay students were given the opportunity to further their studies using the Malay Language; this included bachelor, Master and PhD levels in various knowledge fields including science, mathematics, medicine, law and numerous others. This occurrence never happened before Independence in 1957.

In the space of approximately 100 years of British rule, there had not been a single Malay that had secondary school qualification in the Malay language. Furthermore, not a single Malay was observed to become doctors, accountants, lawyers, scientists, and professors, with B.A, M.A and PhD degrees through the Malay-medium education system (Hassan,2002). Abraham (1999) also showed that the Chinese and Indian community have accepted the Malay language as the national language of expediency but hold on to their own languages, and are very sensitive to any attempts to curb their development and use. Ethnic divisions and linguistic loyalties based on primordial ties were strongly felt, which manifests itself in highly visible ethnic polarisation.

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, 1999). 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.

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