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# Maintaining the Medium of Instruction Policy in Malaysia: The Case for Bahasa Malaysia

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*Keywords :* *language policy, multilingual society, nation building and nationalism.*

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# Maintaining the Medium of Instruction Policy in Malaysia:The Case for Bahasa Malaysia

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*Abstract* - This study examines the development and the implementation of the Malay medium of instruction policy in the Malaysian educational system and the relation of this policy to Fishman's model and a multilingual society. The study uses interviews with persons directly involved in the process of education in Malaysia and examines a number of scholarly publications and other primary sources of information. Historical study is chosen as the research design. As a plural society, Malaysia considers nation building or national integration (Ibrahim, 1986) as being of the utmost importance. 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 children with values and knowledge that are supportive of a national ideology. The present study focuses on the process of developing and implementing the Malay medium of instruction policy in Malaysia. The performance of Malay-medium of instruction universities (National University of Malaysia, UTM and UPM) at the post-graduate level is impressive. These universities have proven their ability to get Master's and Ph.D degree holders and medical specialists from overseas and local universities. There have been thousands of Malay-language theses in science from public universities after 1990, which indirectly shows that the Malay language can be used in education in a manner that is world class. Malay scholars have created a lot of terms in biology, especially for animal and tree names. Name of beetles have been named with Malay words, such as Arthrotus *hijau*, Atrachya *hitam*, Dercetina *bopeng*, Itylus *biru*, Ophrida *kuning*, Monolepta *merah*, and Sphenoraia *tompok*. Other terms have been produced, 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*. There are also words that originate from the name of a place, Aplosonyx *pahangi,* and from a Malay man, Arcaries *ismaili*.

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## I. 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, inter-national, personal), but in practice the most commonly performed are the informative, the regulatory, and the heuristic. Language has been used as a means to convey the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the human race to its members. It is also used as a tool to teach students the basic skills they would need later in life. In addition, students are given some practice in using language to find things out for themselves (Halliday, 1975). Many issues and questions arise in multiethnic and multilingual countries regarding which language should be selected when establishing the main medium of instruction in the educational system.

One such question is, What is the most suitable or appropriate combination of national language and second language (English, French, Spanish, etc.) that would promote effective learning amongst students and at the same time enable them to gain skills in the second language (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004)? This study aims to examine the development and the implementation of the language medium policy in the Malaysian educational system and the relation of this policy to nation building. This work is relevant in Malaysia because the country is known to have a multiethnic society, which means a nation with cleavages of race, language, religions, customs, and other primordials.

### *a) Fishman's Dichotomy (1968): Nationalism and Nationism*

Fishman (1968) 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 for their further development. This is the function of nationism. The indigenous language, such as Swahili, Guarani, and Malay, should be used as a nationalist language for national unity and identity only, thus serving a nationalist function. The indigenous languages cannot be used to develop the nation with respect to education (especially higher education), economy, industry, and science and technology. According to Fishman's theory, this role should be given to the language of wider communication, such as English, Spanish, or French.

## II. Malaysia : A Plural Society

Malaysia is located in Southeast Asia and consists of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak. Peninsular Malaysia was formerly known as the Malay Peninsula or Tanah Melayu (the land of the Malays) until

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the states within it were united and became independent from the British colonial power as the Federation of Malaya 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 until 1957) different parts of Malaysia were under Portuguese, Dutch, and British rule at different times, with British colonization having the greatest impact on the country's socio-political development (Wong & Ho, 2000).

As a classic case of plural society, Malaysia's racial divisions tend to coincide with and to 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 benefits one community tends to be seen as depriving the others. Despite the government's attempt to work out an acceptable balance between the communities, communal sentiments remain strong and frustrations often rise to the surface (Crouch, 1996).

Fisk and Osman Rani (1982) best described Malaysia 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, 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 are 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).

## III. Methodology

I choose historical study as my research design. Many current educational practices, theories, and issues can be better understood in the light of past experiences. Knowledge of the history of education can yield insights into the evolution of the current educational system as well as into the 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. Policymakers at any level in education can benefit from the contributions of historical research in arriving at decisions (Wiersma, 1995).

## IV. The Malaysian Educational System

There is a common phenomenon in all colonized countries: 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 the formal educational policies of India, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Malaysia to be moulded on the English pattern, with those of Indo-China moulded 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 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, as many authors have generally conceded, this curriculum was not in tune with the pupils' environment nor was it of practical use in their lives (Tuqan, 1975; Altbach & Kelly, 1978).

According to Bakri (2003), "schools were along racial lines in British era. 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 & Kelly, 1978).

All the national-type schools in the country had to change their language media of instruction to Bahasa Malaysia. The result of this change was the conversion of national-type schools into national schools. The first conversion happened in January 1968 with the conversion of English primary schools to national schools. 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. From 1983 all courses in the local universities were progressively converted to the national language (Table 1.1).

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*Table 1.1 :* Malay language as a medium of instruction in the Malaysian educational system

| Year | Implementation |
|---|---|
| 1957 | National Language is made a compulsory subject at all levels in all government-funded primary and secondary schools. |
| 1958 | Malay-medium secondary classes are established, which eventually develop into national secondary schools. |
| 1963 | i) The first fully residential Malay-medium secondary school in Kuala Lumpur, the Alam Shah National Secondary School, is established. |
| | ii) Malay-medium Sixth Form classes start in the Shah Alam National Secondary, Kuala Lumpur. |
| 1965 | The first batch of Malay-medium students is admitted to the University of Malaya. |
| 1968 | i) The first batch of Malay-medium students graduate from the University of Malaya. |
| | ii) Malay-medium classes are held in secondary vocational schools. |
| | iii) Five subjects are taught in the Malay Language in Standard 1-3 in national-type English primary schools. |
| 1969 | Civics is taught in the Malay language in Standard 4 in national-type English primary schools. |
| 1970 | i) All subjects in Standard 1 are taught in the Malay language in national-type English primary schools. |
| | ii) Geography and History are taught in the Malay language in Standard 4 in national-type English primary schools. |
| | iii) Malay-medium classes are held in secondary technical schools. |
| 1973 | All Arts subjects in Form 1 are taught in the Malay language in national-type English primary schools. |
| 1975 | i) There are no more English-medium Remove classes. |
| | ii) National-type English primary schools are fully converted to national primary schools. |
| 1976 | i) All Arts, Science and Technical subjects in Form 1 are taught in the Malay language in national-type English secondary schools. |
| | ii) All Arts subjects in Form IV are taught in the Malay language. |
| 1978 | Arts streams in Form VI (Lower) are taught in the Malay language in national-type English secondary schools. |
| 1980 | First year in Arts and allied courses is taught in the Malay language in the universities. |
| 1981 | All Arts, Science and Technical streams in Form VI (Lower) are taught in the Malay language in national-type English secondary schools. |
| 1982 | National-type English secondary schools are fully converted to national secondary schools. |
| 1983 | First year in all courses (Arts, Science, Engineering, Medical, etc.) is taught in the Malay language in universities. |

*Source: Ministry of Education, 2002*

## V. Results

The medium of instruction is the most powerful means of maintaining and revitalizing a language and a culture; it is the most important form of intergenerational transmission (Fishman, 2000) or the most direct agent of linguistic genocide (Snutnabb-Kangas, 2002). The 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 a controversial issue. This controversial move has been related to Fishman's dichotomy philosophy.

The government implemented the national education policy that 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, transition from English to Malay as the main medium of instruction began in 1958, starting from the 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 more efficient language planning, as well as for 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 that has had Malay as the medium of instruction, there have been developments in many fields of knowledge, including medicine, aerospace, and science and technology. Dewan Bahasa Pustaka has produced more than 1 million Malay terminologies in 300 fields of knowledge.



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Professors, lecturers, and teachers give their lectures in the Malay language effectively, especially in science and mathematics subjects.

Using Malay as the medium of instruction has been judged to be successful. It has produced graduates and professionals that help to develop the country. Malay scholars have created many terms in biology, especially for animals and trees. For example, since 2001, Dr. Mohammad Salleh, a world-standard professor in entomology at the National University of Malaysia (UKM), has created hundreds of terms in Malay. A number 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*. Other words have been created, 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*, as have words that originate from the name of a place, Aplosonyx *pahangi*, and the name of a Malay man, Arcaries *ismaili*. All these terms have been recognized by international bodies that indirectly recognize Malay as an international science language (UKM, 2004).

Thus, some Malays do not see the need to change the national education policy. However, the Ministry of Education has reintroduced English as a medium of instruction to teach mathematics and science in all schools, colleges, and universities. The stress on English shows the British colonial belief that language can change one's pattern of output and make one see things differently (Barbour & Carmichael, 2000).

The British wanted as many Malayan people as possible to study in the English medium because this would help the Malaya's people administer Malaya pre-independence and post-independence. This objective was fruitful, because after 53 years of Malaysian independence many of the English-educated still believe that learning English is the best way to face globalization. In the Fifth Educational Conference of 1939, the English language was shown to be the one great unifying principle in Malaya, while English schools had an 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 the 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 with the private schools and private higher institutions that use English as their medium of instruction.

The continued weakness of Malay-language education relative to English-language education has an important political implication, as it has served to undermine the legitimacy of the Alliance government among some important sectors of the Malay community. On the other hand, if the government becomes successful in rapidly reversing the value position of Malay-language education vis-à-vis the other language streams, it could risk 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 is still poor. In 2003, there were 191,679 Chinese and Indian students registered in national schools; in 2004 there were only 192,106 such students. The increase was lower 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 the weakness of these schools in English. Before the era of globalization in the 1990s, the government 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, policymakers have indicated that reform in higher education is vital to help realize Vision 2020, the national goal of being an industrialized country and 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 8 public universities, 6 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% in public universities. The other 50% were either attending courses in local private colleges (35%) or studying overseas (14%). In 1985, there were 15,000 students studying in local colleges; on the other hand, there were 68,000 students studying in universities overseas, 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, private universities have higher fees when compared with public universities that receive a large subsidy from the government. This means that the students that enrol in private universities come from middle-class families and Chinese families with high

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income, while the majority of enrolments in public universities consist of Malays that come from average-income and poor families (Gill, 2005). The long-term effect is that university students will divide according to socioeconomic strata and, more often than not, ethnic groups. Thus, the medium of instruction policy would give rise to class and racial division, instead of unifying Malaysian citizens.

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

## VI. Conclusions

Rustam (2002) views 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 liberalized cultural policy and an unprofessional language policy will cause cultural contamination. For example, many individuals have returned to the craze of giving western or foreign-sounding names to housing areas, corporate buildings, hotels, banks, schools, cities, and the like, in keeping with globalization. Eastern and nationalistic names are considered by this group to be less attractive to customers, even to the extent that such names would complicate international relations. If this group of individuals were to triumph, then surely it would mean the end for the Malay language.

In fact there is nothing special about the English language with respect to the level of education of a student and to 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 is 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, is the fourth winner from Japan in 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 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 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 UKM. Because of the scientific knowledge recorded in the Russian language, the world witnessed the first successful spaceship built by mankind – Sputnik (built by Russia) and piloted by Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space. Scientific discoveries recorded in English led to Apollo 11, which brought mankind to the moon. The French scientists invented the nuclear bomb and carried out tests in the Pacific Ocean (Shamsul Amri, 2003).

The same may be observed in the field of medicine, a branch of applied science. Many important studies have been performed and paramount discoveries have been made in different languages. Researchers in Japan, including the Nobel Prize winners, perform their researches in Japanese. The Spanish researchers who were successful in the advancement of several new fields in pharmacy and medicine recorded their findings in Spanish. Obviously the researchers in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States 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 have been granted scholarships in several universities (like Sofia, a Malay girl studying at Oxford University), each individual continuing his or her 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 success in science, it would go against history. It would also be foolish to use scientific knowledge to learn a language; it 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 the 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 would be, too (Hassan, 2002).

According to Collins (1995), the belief in the English language as a functional and superlative language is pure fiction. This fabrication is constantly being used by the people who want to maintain or raise the status of English, such as the races that are fluent in English and the guardians of the English education infrastructure. Alas, the same false outlook is being taken up by a large number of the Malay-speaking



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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 globalization.

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 are currently developing, or at the very least are not included in the list of least developed countries, 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, and 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 are 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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