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The role of the language of unity at higher education institution: Malaysian experience

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Abstract

Malaysia, a multiethnic and multilingual country, has implemented a new language policy which made the Malay language as the national language and with the aim of uniting the Malaysians. While English, declared as the second language of the country, is seen as language of globalization and business. With the policy, the Malay language becomes the medium of instruction and also takes an important role in promoting national unity and integration among Malaysians of diverse ethnic groups and languages in schools and most institutions of higher education. Therefore, this paper presents the findings of an ongoing research conducted at a public university, with the aim of investigating the role of the Malay language at the university in enhancing unity. In order to achieve the aim of the study, the following questions are seen as vital –Does the Malay language function as the unifying factor and the tool for interaction in the education system especially in higher education institutions? Does the use of languages other than the Malay language hinder unity and integration? Data were obtained from a questionnaire administered on university undergraduates. The preliminary findings reveal that the Malay language promotes unity and the usage of different languages does not hinder unity and integration. Suggestions and recommendations for ways to improve unity among students will also be discussed.

Keywords: Language; unity; ethnic relation; university, higher education; Malaysia

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multiethnic nation and as such issues of integration and unity have been an integral part of its growth and development. Malaysia consists of the Malay Peninsula where there are 13 states and three Federal Territories and two states of Sabah and Sarawak, in Borneo. Prior to its independence, the Malay Peninsula was governed by the Malay Sultanate. Malacca, one of the states in the Malay Peninsula was a great empire, which attracted the European powers. During the 14th century, Malacca was an international port and traders from all over the world met to trade. These traders came from Indonesia, India, China and Europe. It was through trade that the international community began to develop in Malacca at that time. The language used at that time was the Malay language.

In 1511, Malacca was colonized by the Portuguese, later by the Dutch and finally the British. Although Malacca was colonized by the Portuguese and the Dutch, the Malay language was the main language used by everyone in the Malay Peninsula. It was only during the British colonization that many changes were made in the Malay Peninsula. The first thing that they did was to introduce English schools where the medium of instruction was entirely English. The British also brought into the Malay Peninsula, the Chinese from China and Indians from South India to enhance the economy as the Malays at that time remained the land owner and refused to work in tin mines and rubber plantations. The ‘divide and rule policy’ of the British empires had brought about present day dilemma with regards to language and national unity. The English language schools were dominated by the elite European
groups as well as the Malay rulers or leaders and very wealthy Chinese. Those studying in English schools were able to obtain ‘better’ job with the British administration at that time.

For many years from 1824 to 1957 there exist four main languages in the Malay Peninsula, namely the Malay language, Chinese language (where many Chinese speak their own dialect like Mandarin, Cantonese or Hokkien), Tamil language and English language. However, in the states of Sabah and Sarawak, the situations were slightly different. The British conquered the states and kept them as they were. The natives of Sabah and Sarawak, used their native languages and practice their native cultures and remained detached from the real world.

2. The Position of Malay Language after Independence.

After independence in 1957, the Malay language was made as the language of the Nation or the national language as well as the official language. It is also asserted that Malay language should be the language of education and administration (Gill, 2009).

The word Malay is defined by the Federal Constitution as: “Malay” which means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and -(a) was before Merdeka Day born in the Federation or in Singapore or born of parents one of whom was born in the Federation or in Singapore, or is on that day domiciled in the Federation or in Singapore; or(b) is the issue of such a person.

The definition clearly states that the Malay language is very much the language of the Malay people and as such is interrelated with issue of being ‘a Malay’ and speaking the Malay language. However, the article gives 10 discretionary years for Parliament and the courts to use English language in its proceeding. It is also clear from Article 152(6) that ‘official purpose’ means that Malay language is only to be used when writing to government institutions or bodies. Hence the private sectors need not have to use Malay and may choose to use any other languages.

Due to Article 152, the documentation of Article 152 resulted in the English primary schools becoming more popular than Malay or religious primary schools. The Chinese and Indians went to Chinese and Indian primary schools and there was no single language used at primary level. For secondary schools, the government schools were divided into Malay and English streams. All higher learning institutions used English as the medium of instruction. The Malays were unhappy as their opportunity to further their studies would be limited if they went to Malay school. Those who were qualified, may have to leave university much earlier as they could not cope studying in English.

A racial riot on May 13, 1969 had led to the National Language Act 1963/67. This Act states that : (2). Save as provided in this Act and subject to the safeguards contained in Article 152(1) of the Constitution relating to any other language and the language of any other community in Malaysia the national language shall be used for official purposes. A memorandum proposing the establishment of a public university in which the Malay language would be the sole medium of instruction was also put forth. (Gill, 2005:5)

The government acknowledged that the language policy was much needed to achieve national cohesion and this could be done by upgrading the status of the Malay language. It is stated in the Fifth Malaysia plan that the Malay language can play an important role in promoting and strengthening the national unity. (Hazri Jamil & Nordin Abd. Razak, 2010).

The implementation of the use of Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction, served to strengthen the basis for national unity in that it promoted effective communication among Malaysians through a common language.

(Malaysia, 1986, p. 6)

3. The Malay Language at Higher Institution

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1 Article 152, Federal Constitution of Malaya.
2 Act 32
The 13th May episode led to the establishment of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) on 18 May 1970 with Malay language used as the sole medium of instruction. The mission of the university is to ennoble Malay language. To uphold the mission, Malay language is used for all purposes or activities in the institution. It is the only university in Malaysia now using Malay language as the language of unity and integration for a diversified campus communities. Hence, after 40 years of its establishment as the institution which upholds the status and purpose of the national language, it is important to investigate the impact of the national language on unity and integration among its multi ethnic communities.

4. The Research

The research is a university grant research investigating the role of the Malay language at the university in enhancing unity and integration. It aims to investigate (1) how language reflects national identity among university students; (2) the language choice and functions outside classrooms; (3) to what extend language enhances or divides the university community.

4.1 Methodology

The approach taken in this study is the survey method whereby questionnaire is used as the main instrument to collect data. The study involved quantitative approach as the number of subjects is large.

4.1.1 Respondents

The respondents for the study were 382 first year and final year undergraduates at University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Out of the 382 respondents, there were 124 males and 258 females. In terms of ethnicity, 248 (64.9%) of the respondents were Malays, 98 (25.7%) were Chinese, 23 (6%) were Indians, 7 (1.8%) were bumiputras Sabah and Sarawak and 6 (1.6%) of other ethnicities.

4.1.2 Instrument

The questionnaire used for this study was developed with the goal of understanding the impact of the national language towards the formation of a sense of national identity and unity. The questionnaire is designed using a 5 point Likert scale and is divided into six sections; Section (A) of the questionnaire comprises questions on demographic information. Section (B) investigates national identity while Section (C) investigates the understanding of the 1Malaysia concept. In addition, Section (D) investigates how language and culture reflect the national identity among university students and Section (E) investigates the language choice and functions outside classroom. Finally, Section (F) measures the contribution of language and culture in enhancing or dividing the community.

This paper will only present selected sections of the questionnaire which are relevant to the focus of the paper. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 15.0 and the reliability factor was done by using the Cronbach reliability analysis approach. It was found that the instrument developed has a high reliability.

4.2.3 Results & Discussions

The preliminary results are presented in several sections: the acceptance of the Malay language as the national language, recognition of Malay language as the symbol of national identity, language choice for interaction and Malay language as the unifying factor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Moderately Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D17</td>
<td>I respect bahasa Melayu as the national language in Malaysia.</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>65.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 www.ukm.my
I acknowledged bahasa Melayu as the national language 4.57 3 1.3 5.5 27.5 65.4

The data in Table 1 illustrated that the respondents had positive attitude towards the Malay language as they indicated their respect and acknowledgement of the status of the language in the country. A high percentage (92.9 %) of the respondents indicated their acknowledgement of the Malay language as the national language (m = 4.57) while 95.3 % of the respondents stated their respect towards the national language (m = 4.59).

The acceptance of the language as the national language indicates the respondents’ loyalty in accordance with the national language Act of 1967 in which all Malaysians should accept the Malay language as the national language.

Table 2: Recognition of the Malay language as symbol of national identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Moderately Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D14</td>
<td>The Malay language should be standardized and made compulsory in terms of usage as the symbol of national identity</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the recognition of the Malay language as the symbol of national identity. The results demonstrate that the respondents were receptive towards the national language. With the mean of 3.94, 72 % of the respondents agreed that the Malay language should be standardized and made compulsory in terms of usage as the symbol of national identity.

This shows the respondents recognized the status of the Malay language and take pride in the national language. They further view it as the language which symbolizes patriotism and unity.

Table 3: Language choice for interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Moderately Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E20</td>
<td>The Malay language is frequently used rather than English for communication purposes.</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E10</td>
<td>I use the Malay language communicating with friends of other ethnics at the cafeteria.</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D3</td>
<td>I use the Malay language to interact with friends of other ethnic/dialect</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E1</td>
<td>I use the Malay language to interact with residence college administrator, fellow and principal.</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 illustrates the language choice for interaction purposes at the institution. It is found that the respondents chose to use the Malay language rather than English to communicate with friends of other ethnic groups and university officials at various venues. Majority of the respondents (93.7%) indicated that Malay language was used during interaction with administrators at the residence college while 82.5% stated that they communicated in Malay with friends of different ethnic at the cafeteria. A high percentage (83.3%) reported that they used Malay language to interact with friends of other ethnics.

The findings show the use of the Malay language as the language of communication or interaction is prevalent in the university. The choice of language used in the institution is probably influenced by the university policy in which Malay language is used as the medium of instruction. The respondents are more exposed to the use of the national language both in and outside classroom.
Table 4. Malay language as unifying factor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Moderately Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F4</td>
<td>I believe that the use of one common language which is the Malay language would strengthen the unity among the university community.</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5</td>
<td>I am confident that the use of the Malay language would further enhance relation with other ethnics.</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F9</td>
<td>The use of other ethnic languages among students would instill racism.</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 presents the extent of agreement pertaining to whether the Malay language could enhance and strengthen unity amongst university community. 76.2% of the respondents indicated that they believed that using one common language which is the Malay language would strengthen the cohesion of the university community. In addition, 79.1% of the respondents were confident that ethnic relation could be enhanced through the use of the Malay language.

The positive responses on the capability of Malay language in unifying the diverse communities in the institution are probably due to the fact that the Malay language is understood by all Malaysians.

Furthermore, with the mean of 3.38, respondents indicated that the usage of ethnic languages on campus would not instill racism among university students. The assumption made is that the use of own ethnic language does not necessarily mean that it can instill prejudice among the different ethnics. The respondents are probably more comfortable in using their own ethnic languages when communicating with people from the same ethnic background.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the national language does play a significant role in fostering and integrating unity in higher education institution. It also represents national identity as the national language is used among the multi ethnic communities on campus. To further instill and enhance awareness concerning the importance of the Malay language as the language of unity, the National Language programmes such as National language camp, Love the National Language campaign, National language appreciation day and Language forum should be continuously carried out at higher institutions and the country. This would be a constant reminder to all Malaysians that the Malay language is the key to foster national unity and integration.

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References


