LANGUAGE CHOICE AMONG STUDENTS IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the aspect of language choice in the education among students at a higher learning institution in Malaysia. These students sat for the SPM examination in the year 2009 and their English language perceptions towards learning mathematics and science in English is also investigated. It is seen as important and relevant to examine the factors that govern students’ choice of a particular language in a particular setting. There are 30 respondents involved in this survey study which comprised of science stream students from Faculty of Education Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. These respondents are currently pursuing their studies in this higher learning institution. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17.0 for Windows is used to analyze and code the data. The findings showed that a large percentage of students have chosen to use English in learning science and mathematics but prefer not to use English in examination for many reasons.

Field of Research: Language choice, language perceptions, language shift

1. Introduction

There are a lot of programs and policies that have been introduced in the Malaysian educational system. Some has gone through remarkable changes over the year. One of the changes in language in education is from the year 2003 where national language is replaced by English in education especially for science and mathematics subjects. Malaysian Ministry of Education made that decision for it is important for these subjects to be taught in English in order to keep the students with the needed understanding and skills. However in the year 2010 where due to huge public pressure, the status of national language to be maintained again in education domain. Subjects related to science and mathematics is reverted in changes from English to Bahasa Malaysia from year 2010 to 2012. This decision caused many questions among the public, parents and even teachers on its efficiency as it is still in the transition stage. The aims for this paper is to investigate the language choice of Malaysian students especially in the education field which includes the language used in classroom and examinations.

1.1 Problem Statement

Language choice of Malaysian students in education which comprises language used in classroom and in examination. The main language used in Malaysian government aided primary and secondary schools are Bahasa Malaysia and English is taught as a second language. English Language has become the second most important language in Malaysia, after Bahasa Malaysia which is the
country's national language. The importance of English language as the global lingua franca has always been a major factor in the learning and use of the language in Malaysia. It works as a vehicle to gain information in science, technology and academic purposes (Vinodini, 2003).

The Malaysian higher learning institutions is currently using both languages in the curriculums. Even the medium of instruction in classroom used is in English for subjects such as Physics and Chemistry, Malaysian students who sit for major examinations like UPSR, SPM and STPM are given option to choose the language that they are good with to answer these examination.

Some teachers choose to use translating method in their way to help students to learn. Students from rural areas tend to use Bahasa Malaysia when answering the examinations. There are also few students who mixed both languages whilst answering these examinations. This study aims to find information of the language choice of Malaysian students especially in the education field. These students' reasons behind their choice and their general language will be observed as well.

2. Literature Review

This paper aims to highlight the language choice of Malaysian students with the focus in education field. The meaning of language choice is usually linked to debates over the official language in a country and in Malaysian context, English language, which is the second language in education system, is considered a competing language with Bahasa Malaysia which is the official and national language.

According to Giddens (1989), the theoretical construct of a domain has proven to be very useful, particularly when describing language choice among students and community which involves social factors such as who is talking to whom, where, the social context, the function and topic of the discussion. According to Gill (2007), Malaysians have to move from the extreme nationalism which concentrates on being a language nationalist only and not a knowledge nationalist, but it should be a development oriented nationalist to ensure the people of this nation succeed, to be able to stand tall and to be respected by the rest of the world.

Martin (2005) studied languages used in two rural schools in Sarawak, Malaysia. He stated that the existence of differences between the national language which is Bahasa Malaysia which get the acknowledgment as the official language and the Malaysian language policy of using English as the medium of instruction to teach subjects such as science and mathematics. Martin (2005) collected data showed that teachers and students were using both code-switching and bilingual in their teaching and learning. Gill (2007) added that people with no knowledge of science and technology will be very poor, backwards and working as servants to other people, and if Malaysians have no knowledge, they will be servants to those with knowledge.

Holmes (2001) cited several reasons affecting language choice in education domain. According to her, most students usually choose to use particular code. It is easier for them to understand the subject in that language. It makes it easier to discuss for the students especially when it comes to a particular topic while speaking to their friends or teachers or school administrators. Fishman et al. (1985), as cited in Hsi (2004), states that the three results of language choice discussed above result in linguistic resolutions. It is clear that in Malaysia, both languages are competing to function as in the same domain, situation and role relation to be the language for use in education. Language shift is an important aspect that needs to be examined as it is related to the objective of this study: to study the language choice of Malaysian students in education domain.
According to Fishman (1972), there are steps to be considered when reversing a language. These steps consist of some processes. Fishman’s theory proposed that efforts should be concentrated more on earlier stages to restore a language until they have been consolidated by a society in their daily life before proceeding further to the later stages. Firstly, Fishman (2001) claims that a language shift occurs if the acquisition of a specific language by adults who act as language apprentices and most of the remaining speakers of the language are elderly and socially isolated from other speakers of the language. Secondly, Fishman (2001) states that language shifts occur if a socially integrated population in a country actively uses a language. Thirdly, Fishman (2001) states that a language shift is suitable in a country if the state permits it, and where numbers warrant, it can encourage the use of the language in compulsory state education. After the above stages have been achieved and consolidated, the government may encourage the use of English in higher education and government services. If the earlier stages are not achieved, the implementation of later stages will leave an undesirable effect and hinders the policy makers from achieving their goals. The success in using Malay as the national language and as the medium of instruction was an expected outcome of the national language policy, but it has also been viewed as contributing to the neglect of English that is taught and learned in schools.

A language shift happens if a community decides to use another language and forgetting the language that it traditionally used. In Malaysian education context, an effort to change the teaching of science and mathematics from the year 2003 failed at the end in the year 2009 because the community chooses to continue using Bahasa Malaysia. Theory of Language shift was found by Joshua Fishman in 1970’s. Reversing language shift comprises instituting the grade to which a particular language has been 'interrupted' in order to determine the best way to assist or recover the language (Fishman, 1972).

3. Purpose of the Study

Many teachers teach their lessons by using some translations in Bahasa Malaysia to help students to understand the instructions better. There are some of the students tried to answer the examinations in English while some others still want to use Bahasa Malaysia. There are also students who use both Bahasa Malaysia and English in answering these examinations. This study basically aims to find information about the language choice of Malaysian students in education domain, and the reasons behind their choice and their general language perceptions.

3.1 Research objectives

The objectives of this study are to:
I. Find out the tertiary students’ perception about teaching and learning mathematics and science in English.
II. Discover administrative point of views on the use of English in education domain.
III. Figure our tertiary students’ language choice in education domain.

3.2 Research Questions

The research questions posted in this study are to find out:
I. What are the administrator’s views on the use of English language in education domain?
II. What are the tertiary students’ and academics’ language perceptions in education domain?
III. Which language do the tertiary students use in education domain?
4.0 Methodology

4.1 Participants

The numbers of the student subjects in this study are 30 which comprised of science stream students from Faculty of Education Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. These respondents are currently pursuing their studies in this private higher learning institution. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17.0 for Windows is used to analyze and code the data. Descriptive statistic is used in order to answer the research questions that were posed earlier. This includes description of respondent's gender, level of education they have completed, socioeconomic background, the school they studied and the area they are from. The frequency scores, percentages and mean are calculated for each variable to illustrate the results. In order to enhance this study, some interview sessions are conducted.

According to Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (2002), descriptive statistics are used to organize, summarize and describe observations. Therefore, descriptive statistic in this study is to determine the language choice and the language perceptions among UKM students in education domain. The first are interview sessions with 30 Mathematics and Science students from this institution. These students shared some information based on their observation towards these matters: reactions towards learning Mathematics and Science in English, students’ content understanding when English is a barrier to them, use of English in class or group discussions and students request for translation.

4.2 Sampling Procedures

The aim of this paper is to investigate language choice and perceptions of Malaysian university students in education domain. This study applies a mix method of both quantitative and qualitative method with a descriptive design. This study also adopted the descriptive survey approach in which questionnaire is used for the purpose of data collection. A pilot test is carried out on thirty non-responding students to allow ambiguities to be clarified and poor questions to be improved. Nevertheless, the questionnaire has been found to be acceptable and has not posed any problems to the students. To ensure the consistency of the instrument used in this study, the reliability Coefficient is computed using SPSS version 17.0. In this study, purposive sampling method is adopted. Purposive sampling includes methods of selection in which elements are chosen according to the specific purpose.

4.3 Instrument

Findings of this study were collected through questionnaires. Format of the items is selected-response or as known as closed-form items whereas the respondents select from five options provided. A selected-response format that will be used is the likert-scale. According to Wiersma (1991), a likert-scale is a scale with a number of points that provide ordinal scale measurement. The questionnaire, FLCAS (Foreign Language Communication Anxiety Scale) tested students’ perception. All questions in the questionnaire were formulated with adaptation to the questions from the previous studies (Horwitz et al. 1986). Only relevant questions related to this research are selected and there were some changes in wording in order to make the questions specifically intended for this study. The respondents of this study were asked to rate set of questions using the 5-point Likert Scale of which 1 refers to strongly agree, 2 refers to agree, 3 refers to neutral, 4 refers to disagree, and 5 refers to strongly disagree. Four items in the questionnaire namely item 6, 7, 10 and 13 in the The questions chosen were adapted due to two factors which to make them suitable for use in Malaysian context and to make sure only relevant questions related to this research were selected.

4.4 Data Collection Method
The questionnaires were distributed right after the class sessions with permission from the university and the lecturer in charge. The researcher explained the instruction for each part of the questionnaire and translated each of the questions to avoid misconception.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Research Summary

Evidence from this study suggests that language shift which took place since 2003 left a tremendous change in the linguistic choice among Malaysian students and more students are now able to accept and adapt to English language as a medium of instruction in education domain. The Malaysian language policy makers need careful planning and implementation from now on to ensure the students are not left behind in education, as from the year 2012, Bahasa Malaysia will be used in the teaching of mathematics and science. The government is now concern in dignifying Bahasa Melayu and strengthening English language through a new language policy known as (MBMBI). This policy is to replace PPSMI starting from the year 2012. The ministry of education is also in the plan to reduce reliability on high stake examination oriented education and will focus more on the hands on activities which are more practical and ongoing classroom based assessments in schools. These moves will certainly hip up the morale of students from exam anxiety. Nevertheless, Malaysian students have to be prepared once again to adapt, change and accept new language policy and assessment methods.

5.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis shows variety of results based on the research questions posted on language choice among the respondents. The quantitative analysis shows the highest percentage or 90% or 27 students choose to use English because of the availability of resources especially from the books and Internet encouraged students in using this language as their reference. Among other reasons for using English, 83.3% or 25 respondents choose English as the language of choice because they learn mathematics and science in English in school. Meanwhile 60% or 18 students choose English because their teachers teach mathematics and science in English and this fact also shows that the medium of instruction in schools are in English too.

![Chart 1](image)

**Chart 1 shows the percentage of students’ confidence level in answering exam in English**

On the other hand, only 15 respondents or 50% of them stated that they are confident in using English in their exams as stated in Chart 1. The highest percentage of difference toward using English is obvious when 86.7% or 26 respondents agreed that it was hard to get high score in examination by using English as shown in Chart 2.
Chart 2 shows the percentage of students’ choice in whether it’s easy to score exam in English

Next, 16 respondents or 53.3% respondents will not English as a medium in examination. Based from these results, English is a less popular language of choice in examination, even it was preferred in in teaching and learning the subjects. It can be concluded that students rather not to use English in examination because of their low level of confident that was most probably caused by their language obstacle. This can be proved as 70% or 21 respondents stated that it is risky to use English in answering their examination. These results showed that most of these students have learned mathematics and science in English and this is one of the factors that make them to attempt the examination in English. In examining these students’ English language perceptions, highest percentage or 73.3% strongly agree that learning science in English is useful for life outside school but only 26.7% strongly agree for mathematics. Another result is 56.6% strongly agree that learning mathematics in English is easy as compared to only 43.4% who strongly agree learning science in English is easy. This shows that learning mathematics by using English is more accepted than science although the result shows 28 students or 93.3% strongly agree that learning mathematics and science in English is interesting. 86.6% agree learning mathematics and a science subjects in English are easier.

Accordingly, these students still use bilingual dictionaries to improve their understanding towards the content. Almost half of the students usually involve in their class or group discussion conducted in English. Four subjects stated that students with same background will tend to use their native language in discussion. Other subjects follow on higher proficiency level in English will make the students confidence level improved especially in expressing their ideas using English. The interview data also showed that students who are weak in English will use Bahasa Malaysia in their class or group discussion. Some respondents also stated that their students will request for translation (from English to Bahasa Malaysia) when they have problems understanding the formula, key-term and when the questions are long and too complicated. The subjects suggested that to improve students’ ability to understand the content when English is a barrier is by using bilingual dictionary, use bilingual mathematical dictionary and do more practices and drills to allow them to get familiar with the language.

Finally, 14 students or 46.6 % strongly agree and 40% agreed that it is easier to find a job if one is able to master science and technology in English. The results show that English is still the preferred language among young Malaysian students especially among students who want to pursue their tertiary education in science and technology. The highest mean score (M=99.375, SD= 5.988) shows that respondents strongly agree with the perceptions supporting the importance English language, meanwhile (M= 15.875, SD= 4.412) shows that respondents are not sure about the statements, therefore it’s hard for them to make their perception, and only (M= 7.875, SD= 1.834) strongly disagree with the use of English in education domain. It can be concluded within the quantitative inquiry that the Malaysian students in this university prefer to use English as the language of their choice in education domain for various reasons stated above, yet they show anxiety to use English in examination. The qualitative stance by the interviews reveals that the students are keen in using English as a medium of instruction in learning mathematics and science.
Other than that, adding graphics into teaching and by using simple English to explain can enhance the instructions. 1% or 3 respondents disagree in giving bilingual instruction and suggested to only use English as the medium of instruction in tertiary education. This suggestion is seen significant as most teaching materials sources are mostly provided in English language. 99.6% or majority of these respondents agreed that most students have no confidence and high anxiety level that holding them from using English in high stake examination. 13.3% of subjects stated that students are afraid to use English as they are afraid of being punished for their mistakes. 5 subjects agreed that the ‘panic attack’ is not only due to the language but also due to students' incompetency in understanding the content of these subjects in English.

This varsity may have to train students in the foundation and diploma levels with content knowledge by using English before these students pursue to faculty. Syllabus and classroom instruction should be suitable for the students future needs. The subject emphasizes the importance of indirect learning through web based online interaction especially among students in universities. In another point of view, the idea of giving Malaysian students a freedom to choose their preferred language in learning the content based subjects is found not appropriate. It will only stressed and complicate the exam unit, management and it also will brings logistic problems. Early streaming in high school should be abolished and only introduced when they are in tertiary education.

6. Limitation

As the study only involved a small number of participants (n=30), the respondents which were selected in this study would not be representing all higher learners.

7. Implication

Evidence from this study suggests that language shift which took place since 2003 left a tremendous change in the linguistic choice among Malaysian students and more students are now able to accept and adapt to English language as a medium of instruction in education domain. The Malaysian language policy makers need careful planning and implementation from now on to ensure the students are not left behind in education, as from the year 2012, Bahasa Malaysia will be used in the teaching of mathematics and science. The government is now concern in dignifying Bahasa Melayu and strengthening English language through a new language policy known as (MBMBI). This policy is to replace PPSMI starting from the year 2012. The ministry of education is also in the plan to reduce reliability on high stake examination oriented education and will focus more on the hands on activities which are more practical and ongoing classroom based assessments in schools.

8. Recommendations for Future Study

As this study was done quantitatively in investigating students’ anxiety in speaking English, the future study should include an interview to investigate more in depth on what makes the students are anxious about. Besides, the differences of level of speaking anxiety between genders could be investigated as well.

This study further suggests that more sociolinguistic investigations to be carried out in a wider scope in Malaysian education setting. It is also recommended that in a multilingual Malaysian society where the social needs and disparity is wide among its people, a more comprehensive and viable approach could be adopted by teaching science and mathematics in selected schools based on students’ academic merits. This approach could be granted as to allow high achieving and English proficient students to continue learning science and mathematics in English. This may be seen as a
more liberal policy than the current monolingual system. Families with higher economic status could enroll their children to international schools where the medium of instruction is solely in English. Apart from just looking at the linguistic aspect in education domain, further researches should be conducted in the area of language planning and policy making. These studies should also be incorporated with inquiries on cause and effect of language shift and maintenance in a multilingual nation.

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