Language, Identity and Mobility: Perspective of Malaysian Chinese Youth

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Abstract

The majority of the current generation of Malaysian Chinese youth go through Mandarin primary education and Malay-medium secondary schooling in the Malaysian public education system. Hence an average Malaysian Chinese youth knows, at varying levels of proficiency, at least three languages namely, Mandarin, Malay and English.

Drawing on the findings of three survey data collected in a local public university, this study discusses the reality and perceptions of Malaysian Chinese university students on various aspects of this linguistic dimension of education. It analyses their concerns with regard to language and education from the point of view of social mobility and cultural preservation.

Their perspective on the multilingual education system in Malaysia in relation to national integration is explored in one of the surveys. It is suggested that the national education system was regarded not only as serving the function of nation building, but the unique multilingual character of the institution in itself was also consciously or unconsciously perceived to be constitutive of the Malaysian national identity. The majority of the respondents approved of the vernacular education and regarded it as an institution which helped to preserve the cultural diversity of the population. Besides literacy in Mandarin, Chinese primary schools were also expected to transmit Chinese values and culture to their pupils. In this context, the preservation of cultural identity was regarded as going hand in hand with the fostering of national unity, and the reality of linguistic and cultural diversity was embraced as “a national asset”.

Key words: language-in-education, Malaysian Chinese, ethnic identity, mobility, national identity

Introduction

Malaysian parents who enrol their children in public primary schools may choose from among three languages as the medium of instruction, namely Malay, Mandarin or Tamil. This is a unique feature of the country. Malay-medium schools are called national schools while the Mandarin- and Tamil-medium primary schools are called national-type schools.

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or informally as the vernacular schools. They are often referred to respectively as Malay, Chinese and Tamil schools as well, though these schools are open to all Malaysians regardless of ethnicity. Despite using different medium of instruction, they share a common teaching curriculum. At the secondary level, 60 Mandarin-medium schools exist but operate outside the Malaysian public school system. Currently, their intake constitutes around 3 per cent of all the secondary students in Malaysia (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012a: chapter 3-22). Hence an overwhelming majority of the pupils who go through national-type primary schools attend secondary schools taught in the Malay medium.

Malaysian pupils start learning Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language or the national language) and English in kindergarten and primary one regardless of the type of school they enrol in. While national primary schools teach all subjects in the Malay language, students studying in vernacular schools learn it as a subject taught as a second language. The level of Malay language proficiency attained by vernacular primary school pupils is evidently not comparable to that in national schools. Moreover, there are comparatively few chances of speaking the language in vernacular schools as its usage is largely confined to the classroom.

However, an overwhelming majority of vernacular school pupils continue their secondary education in Malay medium from Forms One to Upper Sixth for the next five to seven years. In principle, given good linguistic coaching and adequate opportunities for practice, they may be proficient in the Malay language when they finish secondary school. In effect, all secondary students are required to score a credit for the national language at the Form Five public examinations, without which they cannot further their studies in public universities.¹

Given this situation, an average Malaysian Chinese student will have learnt some Chinese (Mandarin), Malay and English; in addition to speaking one or more Chinese dialects. However, many will discontinue the study of Mandarin as a subject in secondary schools for various reasons. It is hence a possibility that their best language (in particular for writing competency) may be the Malay language.

Drawing on the findings extracted from three non-random surveys conducted in the University of Malaya, this study will discuss the reality and perceptions of Malaysian Chinese university students on various aspects of this linguistic dimension of education. It will look at their concerns with regard to language and education and from the point of view of mobility and cultural preservation. One survey also seeks the views of respondents on what they think of the multilingual education system of the country in relation to national integration.

The surveys were conducted respectively in 2000, 2002 and 2003. The first two surveys were conducted by the University of Malaya Chinese Language Society (CLS) exclusively among Chinese students. The purpose was to understand the perspective of Chinese university
students on issues pertaining to language, education, ethnicity and nation. The president of the CLS has kindly made available the electronic version of press clippings for the 2000 survey findings and unpublished, raw statistical tabulations of the 2002 survey (馬來亞大學華文學會/University of Malaya Chinese Language Society, 2002). The findings of the 2000 survey, based on a sample of 500 respondents, were the subject of discussion by a three-member panel forum. These discussions and basic statistical information were published in the form of a series of articles in a local Chinese press (《南洋商报》/Nanyang Siang Pau, 2001a,b,c,d,e,f; 陈利良/Tan Lee Liang, 2001; 陈亚才/Chan Ah Chye, 2001). CLS conducted a second survey in November 2002 covering similar themes with a modified questionnaire and an enlarged sample of more than a thousand. The results were released in a forum discussion in January 2003.

The author conducted a separate questionnaire survey with open-ended questions in July and August 2003 and gathered a sample of 197 respondents of various ethnic groups. The unpublished findings of the 2003 survey (and the CLS survey data) form part of the analysis in my thesis (Ting, 2007). In this study, discussion is confined to the responses of the 54 Chinese respondents in the sample aged between 21 and 26 years. Despite this comparatively small sample, the questions are posed in a different manner and respondents answered freely to open-ended queries. Hence the semi-qualitative survey data capture a different dimension of the same issues concerned. The discussion based on data of the three surveys is meant to be indicative as these surveys were conducted non-randomly and the questionnaires were formulated differently. For the sake of convenience, this study will refer to the three surveys according to the year they are conducted.

**Socio-historical Overview**

In the states that make up Malaysia, a multilingual education system began to appear in the late nineteenth century. During the British colonial era, schools teaching modern secular subjects emerged to cater for the needs and interests of the various ethnic communities. While schools teaching in English and Malay languages were set up by the British administration and Christian missionaries, the Chinese founded community schools teaching in the major Chinese dialects until 1920 when they were gradually being replaced by Mandarin. Major rubber plantation owners were under legal obligation to establish Tamil schools for the children of migrant workers from Tamilnadu. Islamic reformers also sought to establish modern-style Islamic madrasah to replace the traditional Quranic schools from the early decades of the twentieth century. At the time of independence of Malaya in 1957, Malaya had 2,198 primary schools teaching in Malay, 1,342 Mandarin-, 908 Tamil- and 486 English-medium primary schools; at the secondary level, there were 86 Mandarin-medium schools in