

Language, Identity and Mobility: Perspective of Malaysian Chinese Youth

Helen TING Mu Hung*

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

* Dr. Helen TING Mu Hung is Research Fellow, Institut Kajian Malaysia dan Antarabangsa (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). E-mail: helenting2013@gmail.com

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 (马来亚大学华文学会/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

1958 (马来西亚华校董事联合总会/UCSCAM, 2004: 1267 and 1271), two Tamil schools and many English schools distributed in most of the towns.

The 1956 Razak Report accepted the maintenance of multilingual primary education as a way to preserve and sustain the growth of the language and culture of different communities in Malaya. The status of national-type primary schools was guaranteed with the enactment of the 1957 Education Ordinance. In 1961, Chinese-medium secondary schools were given the option to change its medium of instruction to either English or Malay as a condition for receiving the per capita aid of the government, with the promise that the teaching of Mandarin as a subject would continue. These schools are now known as “national-type secondary schools” or Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan (SMJK).² From 1970, English-medium schools experienced a gradual transition to Malay medium starting from pupils in primary one. By 1982, this change was complete, having been extended to the upper sixth form or pre-university grade. Schools that converted from the Mandarin medium were formerly known as “Chinese-conforming schools” while those converted from the English medium were called “English-conforming schools”.

With the tightening of the official education policy that gives priorities to the Malay language, the number of Chinese primary schools in Peninsular Malaysia declined from their previous number to 1,034 by 1970, though the enrolment had increased from 361,208 in 1957 to 399,302 in 1970. In the same year, there were 352 Chinese primary schools in the states of Sabah and Sarawak (UCSCAM, 2004: 1267-8). Despite the steady increase in enrolment, the total number of Chinese primary schools was on a gradual decline until recent years. As of last January, 1,294 Chinese primary schools are catering for 591,121 pupils in the country while 523 Tamil primary schools are serving the needs of 97,884 pupils (Table 1). In contrast, the 5,906 Malay-medium national schools boast an enrolment of 2.1 million pupils (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012b: 6, 8).

Table 1. Number of Primary Schools and Pupils in Various Streams, 1970, 2000 and 2012

School	1970		2000		2012	
	No. of schools	No. of pupils	No. of schools	No. of pupils	No. of schools	No. of pupils
SRK	4,277*	1,046,513	5,379	2,216,641	5,906**	2,115,400
SRJK (C)	1,386	439,681	1,284	622,820	1,294	591,121
SRJK (T)	657	79,278	526	90,280	523	97,884

SRK = Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan (National primary school in Malay medium)

SRJK = Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan (National-type primary school in Chinese (C) or Tamil (T))

* The figure includes English-medium schools affected by the language switch in Primary One in 1970.

** The figure includes 5,859 regular national schools and other miscellaneous “special schools” and a few religious schools.

Sources: Compiled from UCSCAM (2004: 1266-8) and Ministry of Education Malaysia (2012b: 6, 8)

The decision to maintain separate language streams in the education system at the time of independence is the result of a combination of historical factors, pragmatic considerations, and political compromise to meet conflicting claims and pressure from the three communities. In subsequent decades, interethnic contentions have surfaced from time to time whenever new measures taken by the government or education ministry officials were perceived to make attempts to erode the position of vernacular education. On the other hand, layman assumptions not grounded on empirical evidence about the role of national-type schools are quite prevalent, in particular with regard to its impacts on national cohesion. The discussion that follows hopes to contribute in a small way to deconstructing some of the misconceptions and to understanding the complexity of this linguistic dimension on the ground.

Competence of Malay Language and Educational Background

The 2000 and 2002 surveys queried the language competence at the spoken and written levels among Chinese university students and uncovered some rather unexpected results. They suggested that the linguistic competence of the respondents may depend more critically on their immediate linguistic environment, such as the family, ethnicity of friends and the background of the residential area, than the formal language of the school. In addition, there may be differences between the oral and written aspects of their linguistic capability.

Around 19 per cent of the respondents from both surveys studied in Malay medium only while the rest received Chinese primary education and then completed their secondary education in Malay. At the spoken level, both surveys revealed that a majority of their respondents' best spoken language was Mandarin (61 per cent in 2000 and 65 per cent in 2002). The next best spoken language was a Chinese dialect (14 per cent in 2000 and 16 per cent in 2002), followed by English (6 per cent in 2000 survey and 12 per cent in 2002). The 2002 survey found that among those from Chinese primary schools, more than 75 per cent confessed that they were most conversant in Mandarin. The 2002 survey indicated that Malay was the second best spoken language among 36 per cent of the respondents and a Chinese dialect among another 33 per cent. As for their third best spoken language, 43 per cent identified Malay while 30 per cent said it was English.

A surprising revelation of the 2002 survey is that, among those who acquired their primary and secondary education in Malay schools (Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan or SRK and Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan or SMK), only a tenth confirmed that Malay was their best spoken language. Instead, almost half considered that their first language was English, another fifth could best express themselves in a Chinese dialect, while 16 per cent were most comfortable in Mandarin. On the other hand, 44 per cent reported that Malay was their second

best spoken language, 23 per cent English, and 19 per cent a Chinese dialect. The proportion among Malay school goers who reported Malay as the second best spoken language is in fact only about 5 per cent above those who completed primary education in Mandarin and then secondary education in Malay-medium secondary schools or SMK (as distinguished from the SMJK). Among the latter group, 38.7 per cent reported that their second best spoken language was Malay. The importance of linguistic environment is attested to by the difference between students from SMK and SMJK. Although the Malay language is taught in these schools, there are generally more Chinese students in SMJK than SMK as the learning of Chinese is available in the former. Of the SMJK students, 28 per cent stated that Malay was their second best language compared with 42 per cent that identified one of the Chinese dialects. Another proof of the importance of environment in the mastery of language is that around 30 per cent of those who had gone through their entire education in Malay regarded Malay only as their third best spoken language, presumably after English and the family dialect.

In the absence of the details of education background from the 2000 survey, the same pattern may be inferred from the overall results as reported in a local Chinese press. Only 4 per cent regarded Malay as their best spoken language, compared with 6 per cent for English and 14 per cent for a Chinese dialect; yet 19 per cent of the respondents were from national schools. In the 2002 survey, the majority among those who attended Chinese primary schools indicated Chinese as their best written language, being 68 per cent among those who continued in SMJK and 64 per cent in SMK. On the other hand, 38 per cent of those attended SRK and SMK best expressed themselves in writing in English. After Chinese or English (for those attending SRK), Malay language is ranked as the next best written language among all the respondents. About 29 per cent of the Chinese-educated students who went on to SMK regarded Malay as their best written language, at par with the 30 per cent who attended only Malay schools. In this regard, again SMJK lagged slightly behind: only 23 per cent among those Chinese-educated students who continued in SMJK regarded Malay as their best written language. This trend is generally confirmed by the results of the less detailed 2000 survey, in which 53 per cent regarded Chinese as the best written language, followed by Malay with 30 per cent, and English trailing with only 8 per cent.

These findings illustrate eloquently that we cannot assume in a simplistic way that the mastering of a language could be attained automatically if it is used as a medium of instruction.³ In actual fact, we found that a comparable proportion of those who enrolled in Chinese primary schools acquired a reasonable level of proficiency in the Malay language compared with their counterparts who studied only in the Malay medium. Moreover, the education experience in Singapore illustrates that even if a student could master a language with reasonable proficiency and obtain good grades in examinations, this ability could be lost

rapidly in the absence of an appropriate linguistic environment for its use.

In fact, anecdotal evidence indicates that the cultural environment of national schools may differ according to its geographical location. A lecturer explained that even though his first child attended a national school, he realized later on that the majority of the pupils were Chinese, and they conversed among themselves in Chinese dialects. Despite the substantial Malay presence in his district of residence, its spatial concentration resulted in most Malay children attending the national school near their area of residence. If that is the case, it is unlikely that the ethnic composition of the enrolment in a national school and a national-type school is substantially different in a residential area with a high concentration of the Chinese community. Similar situations may occur in secondary schools in areas where different ethnic communities are spatially segregated.

Internal Differences and Student Self-Selection of Schools

Why do a high proportion of Chinese youths who went through their entire schooling in Malay medium regard their best spoken language as English rather than Malay? A plausible explanation is the heterogeneous background of the so-called Malay-medium schools arising from differences in their history. It is a fact that in the Convent schools oral English is often spoken even though lessons are taught in Malay. Similarly, an average SMJK which was previously a Chinese secondary school that had accepted conversion into the Malay medium still preserves its predominantly Chinese-speaking environment. The social ambience of different schools is influenced by their history and hence differs according to their spoken-language environments.

This historical continuity is maintained due in part to a certain degree of correlation between the pupils' socio-economic background and family cultural orientation and the type of school they enrolled in. Past studies have pointed out that, in the choice of schools, there is a certain degree of unconscious self-selection by students according to their parents' social, cultural and economic profile. In his study on the effects of schooling on national identity and integration, Yew (1982: 206-207) differentiated between students studying in what he called English-conforming schools (formerly English-medium turned Malay-medium secondary schools) and Chinese-conforming schools (the SMJK). He found that, compared with SMJK students, the English-conforming school students tended to have more exposure to English language, enjoyed a higher socio-economic status, had more Westernized family background, perceived themselves to be more proficient in the national language, and had more interethnic interaction. Yet these two groups of students were from schools that are to all intents and purposes Malay-medium schools.

John Bock (1970) in his large-scale survey studies found that the Chinese and Malay

students from English-medium secondary schools with enrolments of mixed ethnicity were more “national” (or less “communal”) in orientation than their counterparts in Malay-medium or Chinese-medium schools. Students of Chinese-medium secondary schools tended to rank low in their “national orientation”. Nonetheless, when he probed further, he found that over two-thirds of the difference in the national/communal orientation between students of the same ethnicity but attending different types of schools could be attributed to social or sub-cultural variables such as the family’s “place of residence”, “father’s language of education”, and “other language spoken within the family” (Bock, 1970: 332-334). Bock noted that these variables appeared to determine the students’ accessibility to the contemporary “nationalising message of the predominantly English-speaking governing elite of Malaysia”, more than their social class or the type of school they attended. In effect, Malay students studying in homogeneous Malay-medium secondary schools were similarly found to be low in their “national” orientation. Bock’s findings cautioned us not to make simplistic generalizations about the effects of schooling and medium of instruction on national unity and integration, as the socializing effects of the students’ social circle outside schools are as critical as, if not more than, the impacts of the schooling environment.

The findings of Bock (1970) might give the impression that parents who enrolled their children in English-medium schools were more “national” in their orientation and less “communal” than those who opted for Chinese schools. In fact, the assumption that “less communal” necessarily implies “more national” is probably flawed. Yew and Bock demonstrated that these parents in the 1960s and 1970s tended to be Anglophiles, generally had a more Westernized outlook and tended to belong to the higher socio-economic stratum of society. Their choice of English-medium schools might have had more to do with their generally negative perception of social and economic inferiority used to be associated with Chinese education (see, for instance, Colletta and Wong 1974). This issue will be explored below in the context of the CLS survey findings on the choice of language for schooling.

Language: Between Social Mobility and Cultural Preservation

The perceived importance of English proficiency in social mobility among Chinese university students was captured clearly by the results of the 2002 CLS survey. Respondents were asked to list, in order of priority, three languages that they regarded as important. An overwhelming 78 per cent identified English and 14 per cent Chinese as the most important; 63 per cent chose Chinese and 18 per cent Malay as the second most important language that they should learn; followed by 73 per cent that placed Malay and 17 per cent Chinese as their third choice. It is clear that the respondents generally viewed English as the most desirable language to master, followed by Chinese and Malay. A similar trend was also discerned in

the 2000 survey which sought the respondents' choice on the most important language. A clear majority of 69 per cent opted for English, 15 per cent for Chinese and only 1 per cent for Malay.

The 2000 survey sought to know from respondents the language stream of education they would prefer if given a choice. Six out of ten opted for Chinese while another three preferred English, with only one in fifty choosing Malay. The rest either did not respond or their responses were classified as 'others'.⁴ The 2002 survey is more nuanced, requiring the respondents to choose separately the medium of instruction preferred for their primary, secondary and tertiary education. For primary education, almost 80 per cent preferred Chinese and about 16 per cent English. At the secondary level, 60 per cent chose English, 17 per cent each for Chinese and Malay. As for tertiary education, the choice was clear, with English as the overwhelming favourite with a 90 per cent response rate, while Chinese and Malay were relegated to 5 per cent and 3 per cent respectively. These responses indicate that there was a graduate shift in the earlier pattern of self-selection of students in relation to the parental socio-cultural background. The extent of this change may be better appreciated if we examine the figures according to the educational background of the respondents.

The 2002 CLS survey found that only 14 per cent among its wholly Malay-educated respondents would choose Malay secondary schools if given a choice compared with 20 per cent among those from Chinese primary schools. In other words, the wholly Malay-educated respondents were less disposed to choose Malay-medium secondary education compared with those who received primary education in Mandarin. The proportion of the former group who would choose English medium secondary school was also the highest: 75 per cent. Besides their Anglophile cultural background, the determinant factor is perhaps the perceived importance of mastering English for social mobility. English-medium secondary schools were also the most popular choice among respondents who studied in Chinese primary schools. Among them, 63 per cent of those who attended SMK and 49 per cent who attended SMJK preferred a secondary education in English.

Interestingly, respondents who attended Chinese primary schools and proceeded to SMJK were *comparatively* more disposed to having their secondary education in Chinese schools (30 per cent). This figure is three times more than those who completed Chinese primary education and continued in SMK (10 per cent) and five times more than those who were wholly educated in Malay schools (6 per cent). Three most cited reasons (they were allowed to give more than one reason) for choosing Chinese secondary schools were sentimental attachment (68 per cent), utility (57 per cent) and educational approach of the school (52 per cent).

These figures testify to a greater sense of pragmatism among the Chinese student

respondents than their instinctive desire for cultural conservatism. This was confirmed by the attitude of the respondents towards language learning, which appeared to be determined more by its utility above other considerations. The 2002 survey stipulated that respondents identify the reasons for their linguistic preferences in education. Three out of four were motivated to learn English for its *usefulness*, while one in three cited the same reason for learning Chinese, and 30 per cent for learning Malay. The respondents were very clear in their perception of the specific social role of each language. The dominant attitude among 58 per cent towards the learning of the Malay language was because they were “asked to do so” while 44 per cent learned Chinese out of their interest in the language. The learning of the national language was not for any economic motive as it was not seen to help them in their social mobility. This attitude prevailed even among those who received their education entirely in the Malay medium.

Does educational background matter when it comes to preference for the type of school and assessment of the importance of languages? Both the 2000 and 2002 surveys showed that more than two thirds of the respondents regarded English as the most important language. Most of the 15 per cent of respondents who considered Chinese as the most important language went through Chinese primary schools. In both surveys, only 1-2 per cent thought it to be of foremost importance to master Malay, though there was a general consensus in the 2002 survey to acknowledge Malay as their third most useful language. This stark perception of the position of the national language was shared by all sub-groups, regardless of their educational background. Even 55 per cent of the wholly Malay-educated respondents regarded Chinese as the second most important language. Both surveys confirmed that only about 3 per cent of the Malay-educated respondents would choose the same educational option for themselves if given a choice. The gist of these findings is that educational background has little bearing on the perception of the respondents vis-à-vis the *relative economic status* of the national language.

This attitude arguably cannot be dissociated from decades of implementation of race-based affirmative policies of the government known as the New Economic Policy (NEP), which has had far-reaching impact on the recruitment and promotion exercise in the public sector. Recruitment of Bumiputra into the various sections of Malaysian public service (in which proficiency in the national language is the most relevant) was 75-80 per cent depending on the departments, and this figure had possibly been surpassed. In addition, the prospects for promotion in the civil service have also been known, if not perceived, generally as racially biased (Means, 1972: 47-48). This situation has discouraged the non-Bumiputra from considering their career option in the public sector. A telling indication is that 66 per cent of the 2000 survey respondents agreed with the query as to whether they felt like a “second-class

citizen”, even though 86 per cent of them also said that they are proud of Malaysia. Almost two-thirds (64 per cent) thought that the racial quota system of university admission should be abolished, while 33 per cent thought that it should be revised, and 59 per cent also felt that racial bias of the university administration was “serious”.

The private sector tends to give more emphasis on the command of either Mandarin or English in its recruitment policies. In addition, the relevance of English for social mobility, thanks to increasing economic globalization, evidently surpasses that of Mandarin. From a pragmatic point of view, the differential attitudes of the respondents on the different languages are thus understandable.

As mentioned earlier, those who attended national primary schools, especially in former Convent schools, often grew up in a more Anglophile environment that used to be even slightly hostile to the speaking of Mandarin. Despite this, it is significant that 55 per cent among them felt that the mastering of Chinese as a second language was more important than that of Malay. Among the Malay-educated respondents, 46 per cent indicated their preference for Chinese primary schools in the 2000 survey, whereas in the 2002 survey, 57 per cent would similarly do so if given a choice. Motivation for this switch in linguistic preference appeared to be a mixture of utilitarian and symbolic reasons. In the 2002 findings, 55 per cent cited its usefulness as well as sentimental attachment (respondents could cite more than one reason) for their choice of Chinese primary schools. There appears to have been a heightening of interest or attachment to the Chinese language in the Chinese community, especially among those from English-speaking background. Only 35 per cent of the Malay-educated respondents in the 2002 survey stated that they would choose English primary school if given a choice.⁵

It is notable that 38 per cent of the respondents (35 per cent for the Malay-educated) cited educational approach of the school as the reason for their preference for Chinese primary education, which implied indirectly that they probably harboured negative views on the way national primary schools were run. This reason, among others, also influenced 52 per cent of the respondents to hypothetically prefer receiving their secondary schooling in Chinese, reflecting their positive perception of the quality of education provided by these schools.

Issues of Concern with regard to the Education System

In the 2003 survey, the respondents were asked hypothetically what changes they would introduce to the education policy of the country if they were in a position to do so. Some of their responses may indirectly provide some explanations to the observed tendency to shy away from national schools.

Not all respondents answered the open-ended question. Chinese respondents who did so indicated the *quality* of education as their foremost concern. What is meant by *quality* here includes a whole list of different pedagogical aspects of the education system or the general educational approach that the respondents found wanting. Their comments include recommendations to “reduce rote learning”, “implement open-book examinations”, encourage the “right attitude” for learning such as diversity, creativity, critical thinking, lifelong learning, holistic education including more arts and music lessons, computer skills, and a curriculum that is more relevant to the job market.

The second most important category of recommendations pertained to issues relating to the *affirmative action policy* of the government. Often mentioned were such issues as the criteria of university admission and financial assistance for poor students, meritocracy, racial quotas, and others.⁶

Table 2. Recommendations on Education Policy

Recommendations	Number of Respondents
Improve quality of education	13
Affirmative action	11
A single national education system for all	7
Language policy	7
More funds for greater accessibility and effectiveness	6
Non-discrimination towards all students and schools	6
Others	1
Total	46

Source: 2003 Survey

The two next popular recommendations were those that concerned the establishment of a single national school system and the language policy. On the issue of having a single national school system, the non-consensual view was the choice of the medium of instruction. Some proposed either English or Malay as the *sole* medium of instruction, others suggested *both*, or to “incorporate all the elements of the other school systems”. A few put forward a system with appropriate provisions for the learning of the mother tongues.

Recommendations grouped under “language policy” included suggestions on giving more emphasis on English skills in the education system as well as those that advocated the opposite. Others called for better access to language learning and supported the policy of teaching of mathematics and science in English.

The last two categories of recommendations were to “allocate more funds to enhance accessibility and the effectiveness of education”, and to ensure “non-discrimination towards all students and schools”.

The category suggesting for more funds to increase accessibility and effectiveness of education includes those that referred directly to the budgetary aspect of education, or those recommendations with financial implications such as the call for more schools or universities, higher admission rate to tertiary education, and increased accessibility to financial support in education. Some touched upon the proper functioning of the education system such as providing better incentives to overcome teacher shortages and attract better-qualified teachers, to improve teaching equipment, to ensure rural-urban equity between schools, and to allocate more funds for research.

The category of recommendations on “non-discrimination for all students and schools” consists of those who wanted to “perpetuate the vernacular-stream of schooling” as well as those who talked about fairness in treatment in general terms.

The many categories of recommendations may be summarized into three areas of concern. In decreasing order of importance, they are: the quality of education, equitable and fair access to education, and the role of education in nation building.

Recommendations on Language Policy

In the 2003 survey, an unanticipated factor in the formulation of the questionnaire was the growing demand for English-medium education that was hitherto available only in expensive private schools.⁷ Without being prompted, some respondents suggested that English-medium education was a better option than the present system; or that English be adopted as the “first language” of instruction and the Malay language be a “second language” of instruction; or simply that a bilingual system in which both languages were used concurrently. Expressions of such perspective or wish sprang spontaneously from responses to various questions posed in the questionnaire rather than based on one or more specific questions on this issue. However, advocacy for English or bilingual education was not necessarily at the expense of vernacular education. Some of the respondents explicitly expressed their wish to let their children attend Chinese primary schools and subsequently English secondary schools. This trend corresponds clearly with the findings of the 2000 and 2002 surveys.

Apart from the education policy, the respondents were also asked in the 2003 survey to state changes they would introduce to existing language policy should they become the hypothetical Prime Minister. The policy recommendations on language suggested by those who responded to the open-ended questions are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Recommendations on the Role of English, Malay and other Languages

Language	Suggested Recommendations	No. of Responses
English	Strengthen learning and use of English in schools	15
	Use English as principal medium of instruction	11
	Encourage wider use of English in society	5
	Use both English and BM as media of instruction	4
	Total	35
Malay	Strengthen learning of Bahasa Malaysia	9
	Maintain BM as the sole National language	8
	Make BM the sole medium of instruction in school	1
	Total	18
Other Languages	Ensure the right to learn mother tongue	9
	Make language learning accessible to all	7
	Encourage greater use of vernacular languages	6
	Encourage master a third language	4
	Make Mandarin, Tamil and English national languages	1
	Total	27

Source: 2003 survey

Expression of concern with regard to policy on English language recorded the highest frequency, followed by that on the learning of mother-tongue education and then the Malay language. Among respondents who touched on the role of English, some wanted the learning and use of English in schools to be strengthened, while others wanted it to be adopted as the principal or one of the media of instruction in schools. Opinions on the Malay language touched mainly on its role as the sole national language and the strengthening of its learning in schools.

Among those who put forward language policy recommendations, a considerable proportion of Chinese respondents mentioned specifically the learning and use of languages other than Malay and English. The maintenance of the right to learn the mother tongue ranks before the request to make the learning of languages accessible to all. Another important recommendation was to encourage the greater use of vernacular languages in the public sphere.

Vernacular Primary Schools and Nation Building

One of the enquiries in the 2003 survey dealt with the medium of instruction in primary education and the impact of multilingual education system on national cohesion. As noted in Table 2, some 15 per cent of the respondents would like to see the standardization of the medium of instruction in primary education, though there was no consensus on what form it should take. The open-ended question on multilingual education was framed in the following

manner:

What do you think of the existence of three different media of instruction in primary schools? Do you think it is good for nation-building in Malaysia? Why?

Of the 50 respondents, 36 or 72 per cent approved of the role of vernacular primary schools in relation to nation building. Ten thought that the existence of trilingual primary education system posed an obstacle to national cohesion, while four were uncommitted in their evaluation. As for the rationale behind these responses, the most popular (22 out of 49 responses) was the perceived function of the Chinese primary education in the preservation of Chinese culture. Many of the respondents felt that they wanted their children to attend Chinese schools to learn their mother tongue and also their own culture and values. Some also mentioned that the children could then learn to interact with people from other cultures when they joined Malay-medium secondary schools.

There was a general consensus that it was inherently positive to preserve the various cultural identities of the population, their languages and traditional values. From this perspective, the Chinese schools were regarded as an important social institution serving to maintain the continuity and authenticity of Chinese identity. The second most popular expected function of the vernacular schools was the promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity, which 15 out of 49 respondents saw as “an asset of our nation”. Many of the respondents would enrol their children in Chinese schools so that they could learn more languages (Table 4).

Table 4. Perspective on the Role of Vernacular Primary School and Nation Building

Role of Vernacular Primary Schools	Number
Cultural preservation	22
Linguistic and cultural diversity is a national asset	15
Pedagogical: mother tongue education is effective	5
Right to learn the mother tongue and choice of education	4
Chinese schools provide better education	4
Reduced intercultural interaction	4
Not good because it is important to have a common language	4
Medium of instruction is irrelevant to ethnic division	3
English-medium school is better	2
Promotes communalism	1
Total	49

Source: 2003 Survey

A handful argued that what was more important or relevant to national unity was “the attitude of mutual tolerance and understanding” rather than the medium of instruction in

schools. Yet a few critical respondents expressed disapproval of vernacular education as its mono-cultural environment does not provide opportunities for intercultural interaction. A handful of others who saw vernacular education as hindering nation building also argued that it was important for all to have a common language for effective communication.

The last two minority reasons raised are legitimate concerns. Yet the reality on the ground was more complicated than the respondents had imagined, as indicated by the 2000 and 2002 survey findings. It may be relevant here to note that a campus survey conducted in 2002 by the Centre for Economic Development and Ethnic Relations of University of Malaya revealed that 29 per cent of the university students surveyed cited the lack of linguistic proficiency as a constraint for interethnic interaction. Yet it also found that more Malays were affected by language constraints in their daily interaction than other ethnic groups. In addition, Malay respondents from the predominantly Malay states and Malay neighbourhoods tended to be affected more than their counterparts from multi-ethnic states or neighbourhoods. It was also more likely for respondents from rural areas or poorer families to be handicapped by language constraints (Jahara *et al.*, 2004: 26).

Conclusions

Although the samples of the three surveys were different, there was possibly some overlap in terms of the respondents as the exercise was conducted within four academic years (2000/1, 2002/3 and 2003/4). The observed trend as indicated by the data does seem to harmonize with one another, though for generalization purposes we have to bear in mind that the socio-cultural and economic profile of the University of Malaya student samples is not necessarily reflective of the entire cohort of Malaysian Chinese youth of their age. It does nonetheless challenge the simplistic assumption that if all Malaysian children were to receive their education entirely in the Malay language in an identical schooling system, the problem of national unity can be resolved. The majority of the university Chinese students were found to generally rank their oral and written linguistic proficiency of Malay as second to either Chinese or English. The CLS surveys demonstrate that favourable linguistic environments in the usage of a language might be as important a social factor in determining the linguistic competence of a person as the medium of instruction in the classroom.

For the purpose of discussion here, it is useful to note that the considerable concern expressed by Chinese respondents about the general quality of education in the 2003 survey data was also reported by Malay and Indian respondents (Ting, 2007). The national schools were perceived to be particularly unsuccessful in satisfying the anticipation for either increased social mobility or quality education. This had led to many Malaysians turning away from national schools. The CLS surveys showed that more than half of the Malay-educated

Chinese might enrol their children in Chinese primary schools in the future. The significance of this finding of “switching camp” should be understood in the earlier context in which the choice of educational option was influenced by the cultural and socio-economic background of parents, a trend which no longer holds. This shift in social trends is confirmed by macro-statistical data on the ethnic breakdown of students in the various educational streams, and publicly acknowledged by the government. The preliminary report on Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-25 released by the Ministry of Education in 2012 noted with concern that the proportion of Chinese pupils enrolled in Chinese primary schools has increased from 92 per cent in 2000 to 96 per cent in 2011. Even more remarkably, the proportion of Indian students enrolled in Tamil schools increased from 47 per cent to 56 per cent between 2000 and 2011 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012a: chapter 3-24).⁸ The government has vowed to restore the “multi-racial character” of national schools, the effectiveness of which is yet to be seen.

The three surveys indicate that, if viewed from the angle of social integration by economic means, the Malay language was not perceived as playing a determinant role in enhancing social mobility. Forty per cent of the 2003 survey respondents expressed their preference for meritocracy and equal treatment and opportunities in education or employment, which is a clear indication of their disapproval of the race-based affirmative action policy of the government (Ting, 2007: 856). The Chinese respondents appeared to largely look to the private sector for employment opportunities as indicated by their emphasis on English and Chinese proficiency.

The survey findings point to three perceived functions of education which shaped the educational preference among the respondents, namely, cultural preservation, social mobility and national integration. The perceived function of vernacular education in fostering cultural preservation in one form or another among the Chinese youths appears to have increased if not remained as strong as before. The CLS surveys also indicated a significantly increased proportion of Malay-educated Chinese respondents who wished they had attended Chinese primary schools which would have enabled them to acquire literacy in Mandarin.

This expressed intention to preserve or rediscover one’s own language and culture appears to be tempered by pragmatic considerations of social mobility, and here in particular, education in the English language. The surveys revealed the overwhelming consensus of opinion on mastering English as the first language for socio-economic mobility. A significant minority in the 2003 survey was spontaneous in advocating English-medium education as a desired option, especially for secondary or tertiary education, and in their suggestion for making English only or English and Malay as the medium of instruction in schools. This trend is discerned not only among the Chinese respondents in the 2003 survey but also among the Malay and Indian respondents.

From the exploration of the role of the education system as perceived by the Chinese respondents in the 2003 survey, it is interesting to note that consciously or unconsciously, the national education system is regarded not only as a tool for nation building, but the multilingual character of the schools is also perceived to be constitutive of the Malaysian national identity. The majority of the respondents who approved of vernacular education regarded it as a means to help preserve the cultural diversity of the population. The Chinese schools, for example, apart from ensuring literacy in the mother tongue, are also expected to transmit Chinese values and culture to the next generation. In this context, the preservation of cultural identity is not regarded as something negative or detrimental to the fostering of national unity. On the contrary, many appreciate the reality of linguistic and cultural diversity as “a national asset”.

Notes

- 1 The award of O-level Grade One result is conditional on the obtaining of a credit for the Malay language subject. Candidates who score only a simple pass in this paper were awarded a Grade Two or lower, even if their overall results are outstanding.
- 2 The SMJK usually offers Chinese language as a subject in their curriculum, in contrast to the SMK where it is taught only when there are 15 or more parents who formally request for it but there is no guarantee that their wishes would be granted. A common reason given to reject the request is the lack of language teachers.
- 3 This phenomenon also surfaced during the heyday of English medium education. A history lecturer, Khoo Kay Kim (Dewan Masharakat, 1968) noted that some of his students from English-medium secondary schools (after a threefold increase in university intake within five years) could not express themselves well in English. He reckoned that it was the problem of the way language was being taught in school. The same dynamics with the learning of the Malay language would presumably apply here.
- 4 At the time the survey was conducted, English-medium primary schools were no longer available to respondents (except for some international schools reserved for children of expatriates or those who fulfilled specific conditions). Hence the response could be regarded as a hypothetical answer, or simply primary and secondary Convent schools where English is frequently used even though Malay is used in formal teaching.
- 5 There were also those educated in Chinese primary schools who “switched camp”, but only around 12 per cent or less, according to the 2002 survey (who stated that they would have preferred to attend an English-medium primary school).
- 6 Among a few of the responses, it was difficult to decide whether they should be categorized under affirmative action or “policies to improve general access to education”, another category of response, as many of the potential beneficiaries of the latter would be pupils from poor families, which can be construed as a form of affirmative action for the poor. It was decided that those who mentioned something to the effect of “help all poor students with good results” are grouped under the category of affirmative action. Included also is one borderline case here: “give enough loan to the poor students to study, be equal/fair (sic) in giving seat in university ...”.
- 7 Former Prime Minister Dr. Mohamad Mahathir had floated the idea of reviving English-medium schools during the final years of his mandate. Sensing opposition to it from within his own rank and file of UMNO, he proposed the alternative of teaching Mathematics and Science in English

in the schools. The proposal was contested by various interest groups from all ethnic origins, both in its substance and in the lack of careful planning before implementation. It was nevertheless pushed through hastily and implemented from 2003. It was abandoned in 2012 beginning with pupils attending Primary 1.

- 8 There is in fact an increase in non-Chinese enrolment in Chinese primary schools. In 2011, 86 per cent of the enrolment in the national primary schools were Malay students, 86 per cent of Chinese schools were Chinese students, and 96 per cent Tamil schools were Indian students (Ministry of Education Malaysia. 2012a: Chapter 7-16).

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