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Attitudes Towards English Among Malaysian Undergraduates**Background and Rationale of the Study**

There is a continuing debate on the status and use of English in Malaysia. Historically, English experienced rise and fall of its status and importance here. This is because of the change of attitudes towards the language in the passage of time. Thus, the researcher found it relevant to profile Malaysians undergraduates' contemporary attitude towards English. The purpose of this study was to investigate Malaysian undergraduates' attitudes towards English since this group of people is considered an important source of human capital in the development of the nation. Data for this study was collected through a questionnaire survey administered upon a sample of UPM (University Putra Malaysia) undergraduates and analyzed them quantitatively. The findings revealed that the respondents showed positive attitudes towards English. They also felt that Malaysian variety of English should be standardized.

Multilingualism allows people to grow up with access to two or more languages and this allows people to show different attitudes towards languages. Attitude towards languages is an important issue in any multilingual society. Attitude in general is a hypothetical

psychological construct which defines or promotes certain behaviours and explains their direction and persistence. It is a convenient and efficient way of explaining consistent patterns in behaviour. It often manages to summarize, explain and predict behaviour (Baker, 1992). Thus, attitude to language is a construct that explains linguistic behaviour in particular.

The evaluation that a particular language is harsh, sweet, difficult, easy, international, local, prestigious or vernacular is due to the variation of attitudes towards the language. Therefore, attitude change is an important notion since attitudes are affected by experience. There may be both positive and negative feelings attached to a language. The major dimensions along which views about languages can vary are 'social status' and 'group solidarity' (Hohenthal, 2003). Ajzen (1988) says attitude is 'a disposition to respond favourably or unfavourably to an object, person, institution, or event' (quotes Baker, 1992: 11). It means that if a speech community shows unfavourability to a particular language, that language is unlikely to survive. Thus, in the life of a language, attitudes to that language appear to be important in restoration, preservation, decay or death (Baker, 1992). In this context Baker (1992:9) quotes Lewis (1981:262) who says

any policy for language, especially in the system of education, has to take account of the attitude of those likely to be affected. In the long run, no policy will succeed which does not do one of three things: conform to the expressed attitudes of those involved; persuade those who express negative attitudes about the rightness of the policy; or seek to remove the causes of the disagreement.

The construction and change of attitudes to languages are seen as the outcome of influences of several factors. They are socio-cultural background, historical and geographical profile, language policy and planning, language background, language proficiency, language function, age, gender and so on. It should not be misunderstood that the influences of these factors are one way, i.e. only factors influence attitude, rather the influences can be vice versa. To illustrate, as language policy changes the attitude of the speakers towards a particular language, similarly, attitudes might change the direction and success of the implementation of a policy. For example, the change of status and attitudes to English in Malaysia from British colonial period till date can be explained as a matter of policy changes attitude and vice versa.

Nature Of Language Attitude

Language attitude varies in nature. People show attitudes of different nature such as attitude to the variation of language; attitude to minority language and dominant language; attitude to foreign and second language; attitude to a specific language etc. Whatever the nature of attitude, it has two components: instrumental and integrative (Baker, 1992). Instrumental attitude refers to showing attitude to a particular language for self-achievement and recognition. People favour a particular language when they find that the language is a tool to achieve high status, economic advantage, basic security and survival and matters related to self-orientation. Integrative attitude, on the other hand, concerns someone's attachment with a particular speech community. People show such attitude in order to be identified as a member of the desired community. However, instrumental and integrative orientation to language attitude are not necessarily opposite and alternatives rather complementary to each other.

A person may be motivated in different strengths by both orientations (Baker, 1992). The present study assumes that attitude of the people in Malaysia towards English is instrumental in orientation. It expects that people in Malaysia show favourable attitude to English and learn and use it for individual development and survival in this era of globalization. This study, thus, aims to investigate attitudes towards English among Malaysian undergraduates. This study also aims to explore if there is effect of other variables especially gender, ethnicity and language proficiency in constructing and changing their attitudes towards English in the particular multilingual ecology of Malaysia which had come about due to individual history. The next section situates the study by explaining the linguistic situation of the country.

The Linguistic Situation in Malaysia

Historically, the first European language that came to Malaysia was Portuguese, and the Dutch and then English followed this, with the British colonization. During this period, Chinese and Indian languages also set foot with the migration of Chinese and Indians to Malaysia. This, in fact, contributed in no small measure to Malaysia's growth as a multilingual

country. As a British colony, the use of English occupied several formal and informal domains; it was the official language and used in court and education to a large extent. The use of English spread rapidly moulding an elite group of local users among the Malays, Chinese and Indians.

As English was the language of the 'ruler', people with knowledge of English were given privileges. This helped increase the number of English speakers leading to an increase in the corresponding number of English medium schools in Malaysia. This increase of English medium schools was linked likely to the increasing popularity of the language. English became so influential and conquered so many domains of use that it remained the official language even after ten years from gaining independence in 1957 (Ain Nadzimah and Chan, 2003). However, after independence, the English language diminished in importance as the language of education since the medium of instruction was changed to Bahasa Malaysia (BM). The status of English decreased to such a level that it became simply a subject of study like other subjects such as history, geography, and physics.

By the mid 1990s, tremendous changes impacted education. The government of Malaysia felt it necessary to give new emphasis on the learning of English, which was and still is increasingly seen as crucial in the advancement of trade and commerce as well as giving the country a competitive edge. A milestone change is the green light given by the government to start teaching scientific and technical subjects in English at tertiary education (Ridge, 2004). In addition, the then Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mohathir Mohamad made it public in 2002 that mathematics and sciences will henceforth be taught in English from the first year of primary school. This unexpected announcement brought a drastic change in attitude among the people towards languages and the linguistic situation in Malaysia.

The preceding discussion reveals that bilingualism and multilingualism in Malaysia did not happen overnight. Rather it took place through several phases with the changes of language planning and policy in the passage of time. With Malaysia being a multilingual nation, it is expected that people in Malaysia show different attitudes towards different languages. What is their attitude towards English and what influences their attitudes constitute the focus of the study.

Statement of the Problem

Attitude to languages in multilingual societies is an important issue of sociolinguistic discussion since it determines the growth, spread, development as well as decay and death of languages. Attitude being a conceptual phenomenon varies from favorability to unavailability or vice versa due to a number of factors which includes language planning and policy, instrumental and integrative values of languages, language proficiency, ethnic and speech community identity etc.

In Malaysia, there exists a continuing debate on the status and use of English. It is because that English experienced rise and fall of its status because of language planning and policy in the country. People had to change their attitudes towards English in the passage of time. When the values of English have been recognized as a lingua franca, an instrument of global network in this era of globalization, what is the attitude of Malaysians towards English?

This paper sets out to investigate the Malaysian undergraduates' attitudes towards the use of English in general and their view of the local variety of Malaysian English in particular. It is of relevance to profile the attitude of this group of people as they are considered an important source of human capital that provides the engine of national growth and development.

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