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Shift in language policy in Malaysia

Unravelling reasons for change, conflict and compromise in mother-tongue education

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Malaysia experienced a major shift in language policy in 2003 for the subjects of science and maths. This meant a change in the language of education for both national and national-type schools. For national schools, this resulted in a shift from Bahasa Malaysia, the national language to English. Parallel with this, to ensure homogeneity of impact of change, the State persuaded the national-type schools, which have been utilizing the language of community, Mandarin and Tamil respectively, as medium of instruction since independence in 1957, to shift to English for the teaching of science and maths.

This paper aims to unravel the socio-political reasons underlying the shift with a focus on the Chinese community's responses to the change. This will be carried out by examining the discourses of the debate contested by members of the Chinese community, juxtaposed against the reasons for the change, set forth by the State, as articulated by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad. This multi-pronged approach will be used to unravel the underlying ideologies for the change and the reluctant compromise that was reached by the Chinese community.

Introduction

Malaysia experienced a major shift in language policy in 2003 for the subjects of science and mathematics. This meant a change in the language of education for both national and national-type schools. National schools are schools that use Bahasa Malaysia, the mother-tongue of the dominant ethnic group and Malaysia's national language, as the medium of instruction. On the other hand, the national-type concept gave the schools the right to teach in the language of their choice, using the mother-tongue of minority communities as medium of instruction, for example, Mandarin and Tamil medium schools. At the same time, for national-type schools the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, is a compulsory school subject (Asmah 1987: 60). For national schools, the

recent change in language policy resulted in a shift from Bahasa Malaysia to English. Parallel with this, to ensure homogeneity of impact of change, the State persuaded the national-type schools, which have been utilizing the language of community, Mandarin and Tamil respectively, as medium of instruction since independence in 1957, to shift to English for the teaching of science and mathematics.

There are many other ethnic communities in Malaysia but due to exigencies of space it will only be the Chinese community that will be focused on. Malaysia has a population of 25 million. The Chinese community makes up 26% of the population, numbering 6,500,000. The dominant ethnic group, the Malays, make up 65.1% of the population, numbering 16,275,000. The other significant minority group — the Tamil community makes up 7.7% (1,925,000) of the population (<http://www.statistics.gov.my>, Census 2000). In addition, there are a host of other smaller minority groups.

The Chinese community's response to the required change will be carried out by examining the discourses of the debate contested by members of the Chinese community. These contestations will be juxtaposed against the reasons for the change set forth by the State as articulated by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad. This multi-pronged approach will be used to unravel the underlying ideologies, that is, the set of beliefs that underpin the political systems in the country and that influence decision-making re: language policy in Malaysia.

At the start, it will be pertinent to establish the link between politics and language policy to enable us to unravel the socio-political reasons and ideology underlying the shift in language policy.

Language policy and politics

Research in the field of language policy of the 50's, 60's and 70's when many developing nations attained their independence, focused on the traditional mainstay of examining language as a mode for problem-solving and development. This was the period when ethno-nationalism was of prime concern and there was a strong need to establish a common language as a unifying force to draw multi-ethnic groups together. Tollefson criticizes the work of this period as failing "to capture the complex social and political context of language policies," and accepting "uncritically the claims of state authorities" (Tollefson 2002: 4).

Gradually, there developed a strong feeling amongst those in the language policy and planning field that there was a need to understand the reasons for the decisions made on language status and use in the various countries. This led to the field of critical language policy and planning (see Tollefson 2006: 42–59, for a delineation of this field). One of the dominant strands emerging from this field is that of the inextricable link between language — especially language policies in education — with economic, political, socio-cultural complexities and more recently the science and technology ideology.

Tsui and Tollefson highlight this as they discuss research in the field of medium-of-instruction policy. They draw our attention to the fact that decisions on choice of language in education should not just be looked at superficially but need to be examined in greater depth for us to unearth and understand the reasons for decisions that have been made. They stress the fact that

[a]ll too often, policy makers put forward an educational agenda that justifies policy decisions regarding the use and / or the prohibition of a particular language or languages. Yet, behind the educational agenda are political, social and economic agendas that serve to protect the interests of particular political and social groups. The tension between these agendas is difficult to resolve, and almost invariably leads to the triumph of the political, social or economic agenda over the educational agenda. For this reason, we feel that it is important, when examining medium-of-instruction policy issues, to ask and address the questions, "Which Agenda? Whose Agenda?" (Tsui and Tollefson 2004: 2).

It is in this context of asking these questions that this paper is approached. These questions will drive the examination of the reasons for the shift in language policy leading onto the resultant conflict and the compromises negotiated by the Chinese community for political stability. We now move on to setting the context for the shift in language policy.

Context for change in language policy

On the 11th May 2002, a drastic and sudden change in the medium of instruction was announced in the mass media (Mahathir Mohamad, *New Straits Times*, 11 May 2002:1). This coincided with the fact that the former Prime Minister was to step down from office on the 31 October 2003, a time lapse of 17 months and 20 days to be exact. Critics say he had the courage to carry through this change in language of instruction because he had nothing to lose politically since he was stepping down from office.

This then raises the question of whether a man who has led the nation for the past 22 years and taken it to such heights, initiate a major change in language of instruction that would disadvantage the nation and its people? Would it not be pertinent instead to examine and try to understand the factors that provided the impetus for this change? This then led to an interview with Mahathir Mohamad. It was relevant to access directly the reasons that caused him to initiate this shift in policy. The interview took place on the 16, June 2005 and the data from this interview will help unravel the State's stand regarding the change in language policy, reflected through his voice.

The first question at the interview focused on the reasons for the change in language policy. Mahathir was asked, with regards to the recent change in the medium-of-instruction in schools, which now have impacted higher education, what were the

reasons that provided the impetus for this change in language policy for the fields of science and maths? He said:

Education is for the purpose of acquiring knowledge. The most important thing is the acquisition of knowledge. If you have to use a language which makes the knowledge more easily accessible, you should use that language. Historically, the Europeans learnt Arabic in order to access the knowledge of the Arabs [...] but because of their work they also learnt Greek in order to access the language and knowledge [...] so if you want knowledge you have to acquire the language in which the knowledge is available.

Our education system is like any other education system. It's meant to enable us to acquire knowledge. If we have the knowledge available in the national language, by all means, go ahead but the fact is that in science the research that is being done is moving at a very fast pace. Everyday literally thousands of papers on new research are being published and practically all of them are in English. To translate English into Bahasa, would require a person with 3 skills. Skill in the 2 languages and skill in the subject that is to be translated and we don't have very many people who are qualified to do that or who wish to do that. That is why it is easier if you learn English and the students can have direct access to all the knowledge that is available in English (Interview conducted by Gill, 16 June, 2005).

The above draws in the issue of translation and the struggles of the national language to keep up with the proliferation of knowledge in English. If we refer to the past development of Bahasa Malaysia, it will be noticed that, like many other languages in the developing world, it underwent a period of modernization to equip it with corpus to develop as a language of knowledge for the field of science and technology. Together with these efforts, huge resources were injected into the development of the language and its utilization for the field of science and technology. These included translation efforts and encouragement of academic writings in Bahasa Malaysia. All of these extended over a period of thirty years. Despite all these efforts, Bahasa Malaysia, like many other languages, found it an uphill challenge to keep up with knowledge proliferation in English. This then highlights one of the major reasons for the change, which is the inability of translation and writings in Bahasa Malaysia to keep pace with the proliferation of knowledge in the field of science and technology in English. This is explicated in detail in Gill (in press).

One common comment to the above is "why couldn't the students cope with publications in English?" They could still be taught in Bahasa Malaysia and have their references in English — a bilingual situation that is found in many other parts of the world. Nambiar (2005) explains this when she concludes that for learners who are less proficient, (which many students are in the public university context), understanding a text is more a language problem than a reading problem. It is generally assumed that if a learner can read in Bahasa Malaysia he can also read in English. It is erroneous to make this assumption because the reality is that if a learner has a low level of

proficiency in English, he/she will find it challenging to process a text in that language. This is magnified when learners have to deal with scientific and technical texts where they have to struggle with both academic content knowledge and linguistic knowledge. This is because when texts become more conceptually complex, and there is minimum support linguistically because of poor proficiency, then this problem is exacerbated. Therefore, regardless of which language they use, if their proficiency is weak, then their processing and comprehension skills suffer.

Given this problematic situation, to ensure access to knowledge and information in English, there developed tremendous reliance on translated material from English to Bahasa Malaysia and to writings in Bahasa Malaysia. But as explained by Mahathir in interview with Gill (2005) and further elaborated on in Gill (in press), these processes were not able to keep pace with the proliferation of knowledge in English.

The weak competency levels in English have led to another problem. This is related to the fact that the national education policy has produced monolinguals, graduates fluent mainly in Bahasa Malaysia. Instead, presently, what is needed especially in this age of the knowledge economy and international competition are effective bilinguals, fluent in both Bahasa Malaysia and English, to cope with the demands of the private sector workplace. This is a situation exacerbated by the bifurcation of higher education. This is discussed in detail in Gill (2002) and will be summarized here. The bifurcation of higher education led to public universities which used Bahasa Malaysia and private universities which, through the liberalization of higher education, were able to use English as the language of education. The graduates from the private universities, because of their fluency in English and the marketability of their courses, were in greater demand in the private sector which was gradually becoming the main employer of graduates from universities. This gave them a distinct advantage over those from the public universities in vying for jobs in this sector. The linguistic disadvantage of graduates from public universities has resulted in large numbers (approximately 24,728) who have not been able to obtain jobs in the private sector. Mustapha Mohamad, presently the Minister of Higher Education and formerly the executive director of the government sponsored National Economic Action Council (NEAC), articulated the reasons for this problem clearly. He said:

This is basically a Malay problem as 94 per cent of those registered with the Government are bumiputeras (sons of the soil), Chinese constitute 3.7 per cent and Indians, 1.6 per cent. It has to do with the courses taken, and Also their poor performance in and command of the English language (New Straits Times, 14 March, 2002: 1 & 12).

These macro reasons resulted in a change in language of education, from Bahasa Malaysia to English in the education system of national schools in a staggered fashion — beginning with Primary One, Secondary One and Lower Six. This took place within a period of six months from the timing of the announcement to implementation in the school system.

Parallel with this, to ensure homogeneity of impact of change, the State persuaded the national-type schools, which have been utilizing the language of community, Mandarin and Tamil respectively, as medium of instruction since independence in 1957, to shift to English for the teaching of science and mathematics. This then takes us to the second part of the paper which explores the responses of the Chinese community to this directive for change and the resultant conflict and mode of compromise.

Education in Mandarin and the Chinese community's response to the change: Brief history

History very often provides a reliable window on the events in the past that have led to present systems of education. It is crucial to appreciate these past events to understand responses in present times regarding the change in language of education.

During the period of colonisation, the schooling systems in the Chinese and Tamil medium of education were set up largely because of indifference on the part of the British. This was mainly because the British felt that since the immigrants were regarded as birds of passage who would return to their countries of origin after they had accumulated sufficient wealth, they were not inclined to expend money on the Chinese and Indian vernacular systems of education. As a result, the immigrant communities had to see to the education of their own communities and they were given great freedom to develop their own educational systems. The immigrants spoke their own languages, financed their own schools and designed their own curriculum (Chai 1977: 252).

With this freedom and flexibility afforded to them, the immigrant communities, especially the Chinese community, sowed the seeds for an extensive development of Chinese medium education in what was then known as Malaya. Kua traces the historical development of Chinese medium education when he states that:

[t]he first Chinese school in the peninsula dates as far back as 1815. As Chinese settlements in Malaya grew, so did the number of Chinese-medium schools. [...] By the 20th century, the independence of the Chinese school system was already established. Its reliance on the Chinese community itself went beyond financial autonomy since the British colonial authorities were so impressed by the high level of communal organization among Malayan Chinese that they left them virtually alone to manage their own affairs. This struggle to preserve and promote the language, education and culture of the Chinese in Malaya involved the active mobilization of the whole Chinese community through the guilds and associations (Kua 1999: 2).

All of this was being developed against the backdrop of Malaysia's language policy, which on closer examination reveals a paradoxical nature. An analysis of the language policy journey since independence till now, a period of over 30 years, fluctuates between both recognition and provision for linguistic pluralism and in contrast, periods

of establishing the primacy of linguistic assimilation with the establishment of various educational acts to facilitate this. It is the latter approach of the nation's language policy that has led to frustration amongst the proponents of mother-tongue education in Malaysia.

Linguistic pluralism

In the years of newly attained independence, the liberal educational policies that supported linguistic pluralism provided the environment for the development of the largest number of Chinese medium schools in Malaysia outside of mainland China — no other country has this. This largely has been due to the benevolent and equitable policy instituted by our Prime Minister at the time of independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman.

One has to refer to the legacy left by him to understand how he recognised the need for mother tongue language and identity for the various ethnic groups in the country. We will begin with an examination of post-independence history, which provides an explanation for this liberal policy. After independence, the government of Malaya came up with the Education Ordinance 1957 which was based on the Razak report (a report by a committee that was formed in 1955 to review the education system and to make recommendations for an education system best suited for an independent Malaysia) (Asmah 1979: 14). One of the provisions in the Razak report proved to be beneficial for the development of mother tongue education and vernacular schools. Provision S3 of the 1957 Ordinance stated that

the educational policy of the Federation is to establish a national system of education acceptable to the people as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, with the intention of making the Malay language the national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of peoples other than Malays living in the country (Education Ordinance, No. 2 of 1957: 34&35).

It goes on to state that

regard shall be had to the general principle that, so far as is compatible with the educational policy of the Federation, the provision of efficient instruction and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents (Education Ordinance, No. 2 of 1957: 35).

All of this was part of “drawing up the various policies which all aimed at evolving Malaya, now Malaysia, into an integrated nation” (Asmah 1987: 59) after gaining independence from the British colonial powers. Therefore, the 1956 Razak Report provided for mother-tongue education at the primary school level to be integrated into the national education system. This was later legislated into the Education Ordinance 1957. This

resulted in the dominant minority communities, like the Chinese and Tamils, setting up what were described as national-type schools as compared to national schools.

The provision of mother-tongue education in Malaysia began with Stage 4 of Fishman's "Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale" (see Fishman 1991: 81–121). There are 8 stages in this scale ranging from Stage 1 which is "the most secure position for a minority language" where there is "some use of the minority language (henceforth ML) in higher level educational, occupational, governmental and media realms" to that of the least secure stage, Stage 8, where "remaining speakers of a ML are old and usually vestigial users" (paraphrased in May, 2001: 2). Stage 4 is at the mid-level where the minority language has a functional role to play in the educational system and is used as a medium of instruction.

This is a reasonable provision for an immigrant population as it provides the balance that needs to be maintained between minority community needs and the needs of the state dominated by a majority ethnic group. This is a crucial consideration for ethnic and political stability of most multi-ethnic nations.

Move towards linguistic illiberalism

In the latter post-independence period, the language policies of the nation gradually changed as the needs of the country altered. These were the needs of establishing a national identity amongst the multi-ethnic population. One of the means by which this was facilitated was via the selection and institution of Bahasa Malaysia as the national and official language. This meant that this was the language to be used as medium of instruction at all levels of public education, ranging from the school system to the universities and in public administration. The establishment and acceptance of Bahasa Malaysia in Malaysia's multi-ethnic population was an ongoing struggle for the nation. This was because of Malaysia's colonial past during which English had established itself as the dominant language of education and officialdom. Any language that is trying to assert itself in competition with English, an established international language with economic capital, faces many trials and tribulations. For the dominant ethnic group, for whom Bahasa Malaysia was their mother tongue, it was essential for them to ensure the success of the implementation of Bahasa Malaysia as national and official language as it additionally provided them with a means to legitimise and elevate their presence in this multi-ethnic national domain.

In this phase of linguistic illiberalism, the marginalisation of mother-tongue education began with the Rahman Talib Committee 1960. The recommendations of this Report reversed the liberal approach taken in the Razak Report 1956. Its recommendations were translated into the Education Act 1961. It did this by leaving out crucial aspects of the 1957 Ordinance, as underlined below:

3. The educational policy of the Federation is to establish a national system of education acceptable to the people as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, with the intention of making the Malay language the national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of peoples other than Malays living in the country (cited in Yang 1998: 40).

As stated earlier, this is because during this period, Malaysia, focused, like a number of other countries, on the essential “educational agendas of nation-building, national identity and unity ...” (Tollefson and Tsui 2004: viii). This is supported by Asmah, who states unequivocally that

the national language is the basis for the identification of the nation as one which is defined by linguistic and cultural characteristic peculiar to itself and which set it apart from others. This is especially so in a multiracial and multilingual independent country where if a common culture is to unify the young nation, it must have a common language, the national language (Asmah 1982: 19).

The authorities were very serious about “the progressive development of an educational system in which the national language is the main medium of instruction,” (para 3 of the Preamble of the Act). As a result, significant resources were channeled to enhancing the status and functional use of Bahasa Malaysia in the education system. Consequently, there was a reduction in the budgets for the upkeep of schools that used the vernacular as the medium of education.

The concerns of the Chinese community towards these changes in the Education Acts have been discussed in detail by Yang in his article, “Constitutional and Legal Provision for Mother Tongue Education in Malaysia.” The main thrust of the article is criticism and anxiety towards the various acts culminating in the 1996 Education Act which he says, “does not guarantee the permanent or continued use of mother tongue as the main medium of instruction in the existing national-type primary schools” (Yang 1998: 53).

In the face of these challenging problems, Kua (1999), a leading proponent of mother-tongue education, in his book, “A Protean Saga: The Chinese Schools in Malaysia” comprehensively describes the historical struggles of Chinese schools in Malaysia. He dramatically describes the situation when he says:

Reviewing its history, one realizes the fact that the Chinese schools system has come about only through blood, sweat, tears and sheer political will of the Chinese community in this country to defend their mother-tongue education ... truly, a protean saga (Kua 1999: 2).

Despite these challenges, there are presently 1,280 Chinese-medium primary schools and 60 Independent Chinese Secondary Schools in the country. This is an amazing fact given that their establishment, maintenance and sustenance has been largely community driven from the nineteenth century to now.

In these present times, this raises one of the major challenges facing the national-type schools in the country — this is the implementation of change in medium of instruction from Mandarin to English for science and mathematics. It is important to investigate this because any change in language policy can only be successful if the agents on the ground can be convinced as to the efficacy of the change.

The response to change of MOI in Chinese schools

As stated earlier, in Malaysia, a sudden change in the medium of instruction was announced in the mass media on the 11th of May 2002” (Mahathir Mohamad, *New Straits Times*, 11 May 2002:1). This led to a reinstitution of English as the medium of instruction for science and mathematics in the education system in a staggered fashion — beginning with Primary One, Secondary One and Lower Six.

Chinese educationists’ response to the implementation of change in medium of instruction

The Chinese school community was very unhappy with the change in the medium of instruction from Mandarin to English. Khoo Kay Peng, Executive Director of Sedar Institute, which is the think-tank of Gerakan, one of the multi-racial political parties in Malaysia, quotes from a number of studies to build up the integral case for mother-tongue education. He says:

Studies conducted at George Mason University in Virginia since 1985 have shown that children do better if they get a basic education in their own language. It positively established a direct link between academic results and the time spent learning in the mother tongue. Children who come to school with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in school language. Children develop concepts and thinking skills faster in their own mother tongue because the majority of children’s early childhood is exposed primarily to their own mother tongue. This is also the case for Malaysia; with the exception of urbanites with access to additional educational support services and facilities for their children (Khoo, accessed from MCA website on October 10, 2005).

His argument is that children through their strong literacy skills access knowledge and information better in their mother-tongue.

Chinese educators felt aggrieved that despite the fact that students in Chinese medium education outperformed students in national schools in the field of science and mathematics, they had to change their medium of instruction. They just could not understand any reason for the need to change, other than the government wanting to change the identity of the national-type schools. Dr. Kua, the principal of New Era

College, a tertiary level institution that uses Mandarin as the language of education, expresses the community’s concerns when he says:

... the Chinese ... education lobbies ... see the teaching of Maths and Science in English as a serious threat to the existence of the mother-tongue education system because at a stroke, it homogenizes all the primary schools. There would be no need for Chinese ... schools when the schools become effectively English schools with a subject in Malay or Chinese (Kua 2005: 175).

Placing this in context will provide a clearer picture of the Chinese community’s concerns. At the UPSR level (this is the level of Primary 6 where students have their first public exam), with this change, the subjects will be English, Mandarin, Bahasa Malaysia, Maths in English and Science in English. This means that if they implement the policy as it is being done in national schools, then everything will be in English except for Mandarin and Bahasa Malaysia — both language subjects. Therefore this erases the Chinese make up of these schools and transforms them into English medium schools with Mandarin and Bahasa Malaysia offered as language subjects.

The Chinese educationists were extremely unhappy with this situation. But despite their frustrations, this language policy was a “top-down” policy. This meant that these were “policies that come from people of power and authority to make decisions for a certain group, without consulting the end-users of the language” (Kaplan & Baldauf 1997: 196). Therefore given that it was not possible to avert the directive, they sought to influence the mode of implementation. Their reluctance was reflected in a document drafted by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) Central Committee, (MCA is the main Chinese political party in the country), in which they stress that “an important principle firmly upheld by MCA is that the teaching of mathematics and science in the Chinese primary schools should mainly be in the mother tongue” (MCA 9 Point Party Platform: 30). Underpinning all of this was the strong need to maintain their Chinese identity manifest through mother-tongue education. They suggested a 222 formula for implementation of the teaching of science and mathematics in English, which would have had a minimal impact on the use of Mandarin for the teaching of science and mathematics.

The 222 formula means 2 hours for maths, science and English respectively. In terms of implementation, it means for maths, out of 10 teaching hours a week, 2 hours will be conducted in English and 8 hours in Mandarin. For science, out of 6 teaching hours a week, 2 hours will be conducted in English and 4 hours in Mandarin. 2 hours a week will be allotted to English.

		English	Mandarin
English		2	
Maths	10 hrs per week	2	8
Science	6 hours per week	2	4

The former president of the Malaysian Chinese Association, Ling Liong Sik, took these recommendations to the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, for negotiation. Datar, a political scientist, describes this mode of negotiation as

a unique consensus between the leaders of the Malays, Chinese and Indians — important decisions affecting the communities would be worked out as a process of compromise at top level closed door meetings instead of being subjected to the process of democratic debate at the grassroots level. Instead of negating the ethnic configuration, it accepted its primacy and worked within the political framework (Datar 1983: 14).

After the negotiations behind closed doors, the leader of the Malaysian Chinese party, who attended the meeting with the community recommendation of a 222 formula, returned instead with the 243 formula which provided more hours for the teaching of science and mathematics in English.

243 Formula

This meant that for mathematics, out of 10 teaching hours, 4 hours will be in English and 6 hours in Mandarin. For science, out of 6 teaching hours, 3 hours will be in English and 3 hours in Mandarin. 2 hours a week will be allotted to English.

Lower Primary — Std. 1–3 2002–2003

		English	Mandarin
English	0 hours per week	2	
Maths	10 hours per week	4	6
Science	6 hours per week	3	3

Many Chinese educationists were unhappy with this outcome and politically did not look upon it favourably. They wanted as much as possible to minimize the role of English in their education systems. It was rumored through the grapevine that this was one of the contributory factors that led to the Chinese political leader stepping down from a long-standing career in politics.

Soon after this was settled, another dilemma arose. This was because the first batch of students who were in lower primary (Primary 1–3), beginning with Primary one in 2003, leading onto Primary 3 in 2005, had moved to Upper Primary (Primary 4–6) in 2006.

If the 243 formula were to be applied to the upper primary distribution of time for science and mathematics, it would have meant greater time for English and lesser for Mandarin. It must also be borne in mind that the time allocated for English was doubled from the 2 hours per week for the lower primary level to 4 hours a week for the upper primary level. Maths now has an allocation of 7 hours per week. With the

243 formula, as depicted in the table below, this has meant 4 hours for Maths in English and 3 hours for Maths in Mandarin. For science, for a 6 hours allocation per week, this has meant 3 hours for science in English and 3 hours for science in Mandarin.

243 Formula for Upper Primary Levels

		English	Mandarin
English	2 hours per week	4 (doubled)	
Maths	7 hours per week	4	3
Science	6 hours per week	3	3

The Chinese educationists' point of contention was: How can there be less Mandarin and more English? These schools will not be Chinese schools anymore. Therefore discussions and negotiations had to take place in 2005 and the Chinese educationists met with the Education Minister, Hishamuddin Hussein.

They told him that the 243 formula would not be able to work at the Upper Primary level. The solution recommended then was a 6232 Formula.

6232 Formula for Upper Primary Levels

		English	Mandarin
English	4 hours per week	4	
Maths	7 increases to 8 hours per week	2	6
Science	5 hours per week	2	3

For this to be applied, maths had to be increased from 7 to 8 hours per week. For this 8 hours of maths, 2 hours were to be taught in English and 6 hours in Mandarin. The allocation for Science was reduced from 6 hours to 5 hours a week. Out of this 5 hours, 2 hours would be taught in English and 3 hours in Mandarin.

This formula maintains the dominance of Chinese as a medium of instruction. But there were concerns that the 5 hours per week for science might not be sufficient to cover the syllabus. Therefore, they might have to have extra hours/classes to ensure that there is sufficient time for the subject.

Whither the way forward?

Where then do we go from here? How does one reconcile the divergent stands? What is the political agenda behind all of these initiatives?

In an interview with a leading proponent of Chinese language education, he says in reply to the above question that

[f]rom a very cynical suspicious mind of somebody who has written about Chinese education, this change in medium of instruction is an effective way of changing the character of Chinese and Tamil schools in one fell swoop and you would have accomplished the ultimate objective of converting all Chinese and Tamil schools into national schools (interview conducted on 20th July 2006).

Therefore, you have on one hand, the group that is striving for the maintenance of ethnic identity as reflected through mother-tongue education. On the other hand, you have forces that would like to see more linguistic and educational commonality at the national level that cuts across the various ethnic groups in the country.

Schmidt describes these two groups as the “advocates for minority language equality ... (who) speak in the language of justice, while proponents of national unity speak in terms of national good.” Therefore, this results in one of the most challenging complexities of language policy conflict, which is that “its partisans often appear to be speaking past each other — participating in parallel discourse — rather than to each other, seemingly motivated by differing concerns” (2000: 42). Tsui and Tollefson stress a similar point in their book “Medium of Instruction Policies: Which Agenda? Whose Agenda?” when they reiterate that “[t]he tension between these agendas is difficult to resolve, and almost invariably leads to the triumph of the political, social or economic agenda over the educational agenda” (Tsui & Tollefson 2004: 2).

Therefore just as national schools have shifted from Bahasa, the national language and more importantly, the mother tongue of the dominant ethnic group, to English for science and maths for political reasons, it was necessary that the national-type schools, which use the mother tongue of the minority groups, do the same as well.

This is not surprising because it is a common fact, that in any nation that is multi-ethnic, made up of a dominant indigenous ethnic community and other less highly populated ethnic communities, it is essential for the overall stability of the country that the dominant group feels secure and stays educationally and economically on par with the rest. It is in this context, that Mahathir emphasizes the need to develop and establish ourselves as a people first, using whatever language we need to do this, before we can ensure that our language receives the recognition that it deserves. He says:

We need to move from the extreme form of nationalism which concentrates on being a language nationalist only, not a knowledge nationalist, not a development oriented nationalist. I feel that we should be a development oriented nationalist. We want our people to succeed, to be able to stand tall, to be respected by the rest of the world. Not to be people with no knowledge of science and technology, very poor, very backwards, working as servants to other people. If we have no knowledge we will be servants to those with knowledge (Interviewed by Gill, 16 June 2005).

Mahathir's ideology is very closely linked to the human capital theory, as explicated by Grin when he regards language attributes, in this case English, as assets, comparable to education in general or more specifically computer literacy (Grin 1999: 9). Through this approach, linguistic assets provide the thrust for local knowledge creation and development, which in turn enhances a people's stature and prestige in both the national and world communities. This is a challenge that takes place over time but this is the reality of one of the main reasons underpinning the change in language of education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, attention should be drawn to the fact the Government is very concerned about ensuring that the majority of Malaysians study in national schools so that they have the multi-ethnic environment in which to study and play together, to grow up together and progress together. This is essential for the development of national integration and national unity. This concern attains an even greater significance when the reality is that close to 80% of Chinese parents send their children to the national-type Mandarin schools, at the primary level at least, schools that are largely mono-ethnic in composition.

In relation to the above concern, findings from an interview conducted with a leader of the think-tank of a Chinese political party presents the following viewpoint:

if the government improves the quality of their national schools and builds up the multi-racial composition of teaching staff and the management of these schools then more Chinese parents would be inclined to send their children to national schools" (interview conducted on the 5 July 2006).

Dr. Raja Nazrin Shah, a respected member of the Perak State royal family, stresses the same point when he says

there should be a concerted effort to make national schools the preferred learning institutions.... 80 per cent of the teachers at the school were Malays. This, he said, did not reflect the country's multi-racial population and neither was it an indication of the actual population ratio (Mimi Syed Yusof in *New Sunday Times*, August 13, 2006: 19).

With this change in the make up of national schools, it is estimated that "at least 30–40% of children who are presently in Chinese medium schools would be sent to national schools by their parents" (Interview conducted on the 5 July 2006 with leader of Chinese political party think-tank).

It is this that the government is trying its best to do under the leadership of our present Minister of Education, Hishamuddin Hussein. It will not be politically feasible to eliminate Chinese-medium schools — this will lead to political chaos and instability for the nation. Instead, the Minister of Education is working hard at efforts to make

our national schools the schools of choice so that they will reflect the multi-ethnicity of the nation and provide for plural integration. In the national school system, plurality of ethnic identity is recognized through the provision of mother-tongue languages as subjects whilst there is integration into the national milieu through the national system of education with most subjects still in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language and science and mathematics in English. It is this pluralistic approach that will lead the way forward for our Malaysian nation so that we deal not with Whose agenda? And Which agenda? but instead work interdependently towards a common Malaysian agenda.

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