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The Changing Language Policy in Malaysia : Facing New Challenges

Nor Hashimah JALALUDDIN*

The new policy imposed on the teaching of sciences and mathematics in English has an impact to the teachers and students. A survey was carried out to a group of 941 students of form one, form six and matriculation, and 43 teachers asking for their comments and opinions. The result shows that teachers are happier with Malay language as a medium of instruction in schools as compared to English. This paper attempts to appraise the implementation of this policy by making a comparative study of various perspectives, namely politics, education and linguistics. The human cognition notion shared by both education and linguistics proves that learning process is more effective by using first language as compared to foreign language. 98% teachers claim that students are having difficulties in understanding both subjects since they are taught in English.

Ironically, the recent report from the Ministry of Education proves otherwise. Apparently, there is a conflict between the administrators and the civil servants (teachers). The conflict invites contradiction between the reality in schools and the result presented by the Ministry. The administrators with the central power are seen as oppressing the teachers who are the peripherals. This is in accordance with the idea of language imperialism proposed by Philipson (1992) in "Language and Power". In the perspectives of nation building, Malay language as a symbol of unity in this multiracial country has been marginalized. The reversal of the policy, which in essence, takes us back to the colonial era would again result

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in racial disparity - a colonial leftover that the National Education Policy had overcome.

1.0 Introduction

The status of Bahasa Malaysia (BM) in Malaysia today makes one wonder if we are back to the 60s. The liberal use of various languages in the local electronic media (especially television) appears to have robbed the country of its distinct Malaysian identity. Even Radio Television Malaysia (RTM), the official government channel seems to be backtracking on its earlier objective of promoting BM. The situation is, of course, more glaring in the private TV stations like TV 3, NTV 7, Channel 8 and Channel 9. The irony is that Malaysia has a clear language policy as spelt out in Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution.

The National Language Act of 1963/67 (revised in 1971) reinforced the status of BM. In brief, legislation stipulates that

- i) BM is the national language of Malaysia
- ii) BM is the official language to be used for all administrative purposes by the Federal Government, Statutory Bodies, State Governments and Local Authorities
- iii) The citizens of Malaysia are not prevented from using or from teaching or learning other languages

Admittedly, there is no control over the use of other languages, but what raises questions of late is its excessive use. As such the position of BM as the dominant language appears threatened. This, in some measure, is linked to government policies. And the government must have its own rationale for being willing to “bend” existing policies. The information explosion made possible by the dramatic developments in information

technology (IT) has witnessed the ascendancy of English in the international arena. Under the guise of globalisation, English has further tightened its grip. Now the pertinent question is : Is English to be used as a medium of instruction in Malaysia merely because of its status as a global language?

Today the government clearly appears to favour English. The decision to teach Mathematics and Science (M& S) in Standard One, Form One and Lower Six beginning 2003 attests to this policy change. The National Education Policy (introduced in 1970) which promoted BM as the medium of instruction and the language of unity in multiracial Malaysia is under going change. The reversal has taken the nation back to the 60s.

There are mixed reactions to this policy change which has come into effect within a relatively short period. Whilst some are positive, other have responded negatively. The schools, however, have little choice as the directive has come down from the Ministry of Education as an administrative decision. Groups that have long struggled - including linguists- for the promotion of BM view this as a hasty decision. To them this is a regressive step. They argue that now, when the nation is making significant socio-economic progress with the indigenous populace, educated in a system that used BM as the medium of instruction occupying important positions in both the professional and corporate world, it would be unwise to "sacrifice" BM on the excuse the nation needs to revert to the use of English as the local have failed to acquire sufficient mastery of that language. There aren't many who question the role of English as the second language or the position of English as an international language. What is called for is a reexamination of the premise on which the decision to use English was grounded.

Language mastery does not parallel mastery of the knowledge. Science and Maths are "knowledge". A language - in this case English-is merely an instrument for conveying that knowledge. There is consensus among scholars that the first language is the most effective medium for transmitting knowledge. The practice in Japan, Korea, France and Germany illustrates this. Malaysia too should adhere to this practice. Considering the tremendous

impact this policy change would have on BM and the people, it was felt necessary that a preliminary study needs to be conducted. This paper looks at

- a) the factors that were instrumental to the change
- b) the response of teachers and students towards the change as well as the long term impact of the policy on national unity.

The paper examines the issue from the political, educational and linguistic perspectives, and presents the findings of this language attitude study in the context of Malaysia's attempt at forging a united nation.

2.0 The Root of the Problem

This study shows that the current threat to the dominant position of BM is rooted in several perspectives. These perspectives are

- a. political
- b. educational
- c. linguistic

2.1 The Political Perspective

Here the paper would highlight two facets- language imperialism and the present government's efforts at retaining power. Imperialism refers to the "policy of extending a country's empire and influence through diplomacy and military might, mostly through the acquisition of colonies". Imperialism has taken on new forms including linguistic imperialism which sociolinguists see as a phenomena which enables one society to dominate another society. The four mechanisms that propel imperialism are exploitation,

penetration, fragmentation and marginalisation (Phillipson, 1992). This theory of imperialism sees the division of the world into two entities- dominant Center and dominated Peripheries (the developing nations).

The elites at the center and the periphery are united by similar interests - language. The elites from the periphery are represented by the indigenous groups educated in the colonial language who have strong links with the center. In this phase international institutions including economic organizations (private or government transnational corporations), political (supranational corporations), military (various systems of alliances, treaties) communication (shipping, airlines, news agencies) and cultural (film producers, book publishers) play a key role.

Now, with the advent of neo-colonialism, the center-periphery interaction will be increasingly by means of international communication. And today's computer technology doesn't necessitate the physical presence of the ex-exploiter, and the new technologies can be further deployed to enable the center to control the society's consciousness. This in turn will heighten and consolidate control over the means of production. Ensuring the success of this demands the cultural and linguistic penetration by the center of the periphery. The strategy at work now is persuasion (ideas) not the stick or the carrot. The application of this strategy can be discerned from the role the media plays today.

Linguistic imperialism is linked to globalisation, which is often defined as a world without borders. As a consequence, values, especially modes of thought and action can be transferred freely and rapidly from one region to another. Currently the most conspicuous element being transferred through globalisation is western (especially United States) values to the non-western world. As the outcome of such a transfer, there is a clear trend towards homogenization of values leading to the notion that "one size fits all".

The effects of globalisation on language and culture have been discussed by Mohd. Fazli (1999,53-54) in his article *Amerikanisasi dan Masa Depan Budaya Tempatan*. American products and ideology clearly dominate world markets giving birth to the “Mcworld”, the resultant product of MTV, McIntosh and McDonald. Mcworld has entranced the world over with its concept of cultural integration. Cultural imperialism is certainly not new but today its threat is alarming as it is buttressed by new technologies and profit motive in the dynamics of globalisation.

Henriot (in Noriah, 2000) lists 12 areas in which the effects of globalisation are evident : the rise of neoliberal capitalist ideology, the collapse of the bipolar world, innovations in information technology, free financial and labour markets, transnational corporatisation, international financial institutions and donors, challenges to the environment, culture, crime and drug smuggling, increased sale of military hardware, and the widening divide between the rich and the poor. Noriah observes that even though all the above involve language indirectly, it is innovations in communication technology that have the greatest impact on language.

The pertinent question is, if English pervades the world of communication technology what would be the fate of BM? Linguistic imperialism supported by calls for globalisation is a factor contributing to the diminishing value of BM. The second political dimension that of attempts by the ruling government to retain political power is in line with the ideas espoused by Syed Husin Ali (1996) in relation to the increasing marginalisation of BM. He attributes the changes in the language policy to the “political games” of the ruling elite. Amongst the factors are :

- i. The desire to achieve development through modernization. This has prompted the elites to place a higher premium on economic growth and industrial development, hence encouraging the people to "go global".

ii. The top corporate leaders exert a major influence in politics at both the federal and state level and they manifest a distinct bias towards English. (It should be noted that in the past it was the Malay school teachers who formed the backbone of the ruling party UMNO and this group had been ardent supporters of BM).

iii. As a result of the dominant influence of globalisation, political leaders are now more receptive to a liberal policy. They perceive liberal policies in the realm of economics, culture and language as more popular thus paving the way for them to muster greater political influence.

The above factors, argues Syed Husin corresponds to their political strategy to retain power. Armed with the excuse of globalisation, the elites have introduced the first major change by directing that Mathematics and Science (M&S) be taught in English. The argument advanced by the elites is that the people of Malaysia would be left out of the rapid technological changes if the use of BM persists.

2.2 The Educational Perspectives

The educational perspective also hinges on two aspects; firstly, the government's liberal policy and, secondly, the educational reality. The decision to use BM as the medium of instruction was well-planned and the subsequent implementation of the programme was executed efficiently. Beginning 1957, BM was made a compulsory language in all government aided primary and secondary schools. The following year saw the birth of national secondary schools in which BM was the medium of instruction, and in 1965 the first batch of students from the Malay medium schools gained admission into University Malaya. From 1970 onwards there was a gradual shift in the medium of instruction in the English medium schools and by 1982 BM became the sole language of instruction. The ultimate goal of the implementation of BM in the national education system materialized in 1983 when all the universities began using BM for all teaching purposes. In terms of

codification of the language (BM) as well as its lexical expansion, the government agency, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (*Language and Literary Agency*) played a pivotal role. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka embarked on a massive program in terminology building and to date an estimated one million terms covering over 300 sub-fields of knowledge have been coined.

The special status accorded to BM in the nation's language policy was challenged with the passing of the Education Act 1995 and the Private Higher Education Act 1996. The two Acts provide for the use of English for teaching purposes in the private institutions of higher learning which now constitute an integral part of the national education system.

Teo Kok Seng (1999) views this liberalization as a move that contradicts the objectives of National Language Policy and the National Education Policy. These two policies which had been formulated and implemented with the objective of fostering national integration have been successful in addressing the problem of unity in the multi-racial society. The existing education policy which had been planned and implemented successfully now appears discredited. This liberalization in language use will inevitably pave the way for dualism in Malaysian society with one group educated in English and the other in BM. Apart from widening the gap between the different ethnic groups, and the haves and have nots, this shift also poses a threat to the continued survival of BM. With this policy change, Teo Kok Seong (1999) envisages a decline in the language (BM) proficiency of its users, more so among those attending private institutions of higher learning. Another closely related impact would be erosion of a national identity and value system that has been gradually nurtured through BM. It is only BM that can give expression to a Malaysian civilization, incorporating the aspirations of the masses.

Another aspect that needs scrutiny is the reality of language acquisition, **which** is linked to man's cognitive capacity in learning. Considering that the teaching of M & S involves students at school level it is imperative that the pedagogical considerations be

given due attention. By teaching M & S in English, a student's second language is used to impart knowledge. However, numerous studies have shown that acquiring proficiency in a second language takes time. In fact, students of a second language take two to five years to acquire basic interpersonal communication skills. Acquisition of higher language skills including cognitive and literacy skills takes from five to seven years (Hall 1996, Wood 2002) In short, acquisition of second language proficiency, especially if that language functions as the medium of instruction cannot be accomplished within a short period.

Together with the directive to teach S & M in English, the Ministry of Education has put into place a number of measures to ensure the success of its initiative, including arming teachers with laptops and the required software. Following the introduction of the new policy, a number of preliminary studies were undertaken to investigate related problems. Amongst the studies are :

- i. The Preparedness of Primary School Teachers to Implement the New Language Policy in Teaching Maths and Science(Mohd.Rasdi Saamah 2003)
- ii. Computer Literacy Among Teachers in Perak (Ibrahim Mohd et . al.,1997)
- ii. The Ability of Malay Students to Acquire Mastery of the English Language in the Face of Globalisation (Noreiny Maarof et.al.,2003)

The findings of Mohd.Rasdi Saamah's study indicated that 84% of the M & S teachers had low level of proficiency in English. They were, therefore, not able to successfully implement the programme as they were incapable of comprehending the concepts related to the subject matter. The Third International Report on Science and Mathematics (Ministry of Education, 2000) revealed that the performance of Malaysian students in M & S was much lower in comparison to those from other nations in the region, especially Singapore, Korea and Japan. These underachievers will be confronting an

additional obstacle when they are required to study the subjects in English.

Though the Ministry of Education has given the assurance that the language used in the teaching modules is easy to comprehend and appropriate for the learners age level (Salina 2002), in reality the students will be facing a daunting task. As for computer skills, the study showed that a good number of teachers were not proficient in the use of information and computer technology (ICT) despite the fact that computer application in the Malaysian education system is on the rise. An additional impediment is that some schools, especially those located in the interior are not equipped with the required infrastructure in terms of ICT. Under such constrains, the successful implementation of the policy becomes debatable as the primary methodology in the teaching of M & S involves ICT application.

2.3 The Linguistic Perspective

Studies conducted by Survey Research Malaysia (1972)¹ and Survey Media Research (1978) show that amongst West Malaysians over 15 years of age, 84 percent are proficient in BM whilst the corresponding figure for English is merely 28.4 percent. This demonstrates that BM is a widely understood and spoken language in the country.

Besides functioning as the main tool for communication, a language also reflects the world view of a society. Every race has its unique mode of thinking and this is shaped by its language and culture. This is line with the Sapir - Whorf principle that states that speakers of different languages experience the reality of the world differently. This is so since each language through its vocabulary and rules of grammar, determines how the language users perceive the world. Speakers of two different languages, thus view the world as two individuals from two different worlds.

Abdullah Hassan (2002) argues that each race is in possession of an “indigenous”

mind which is lost when the mind is dominated by a foreign language. Such was the case with the Malays. The outcome is a captive mind that is incapable of creating, with the speakers becoming mere consumers of products, both mental and physical. The role of the mind can be better explicated when analysed from the semantic and pragmatic approach. Relevance Theory illustrates the link between communication and cognition. It shows the close link between the mind and the way we communicate and interpret the intended meaning of utterances. Whatever message is communicated will be processed and interpreted before the meaning is derived at. This is based on two assumptions

The Main Principles of Relevance

Basic Assumption: Human cognition is relevance-oriented. We pay attention to information that seems relevant to us.

Consequence : By requesting your attention, a communicator creates expectations of relevance. The best interpretation is the one that satisfies this expectation.

(Sperber & Wilson ; 1995)

This theory focuses on three main concepts ; context, contextual effect and the processing effort. The most relevant information is that which has the highest contextual effect and minimum processing effort. This is in line with the definition of relevance itself :

- i) The greater the cognitive effects, the greater the relevance ;
- ii) The smaller the processing effort needed to achieve those effects, the greater the relevance.

We use the mind to interpret utterances and what we intend to communicate . We are

not merely able to decode utterances but are able to grasp and make inferences about what we see and hear. We stop, for example, when the traffic lights turn red despite the absence of any written instructions. This is making inferences from codes. Our environment helps us to form and build contexts. What an individual goes through becomes valuable experience and this helps in the context formation and contextual effect when he speaks. All this forms our cognitive environment and helps us to produce manifest utterances. To be manifest, then, is to be perceptible or inferable. An individual's total cognitive environment is the set of all the facts that he can perceive or infer : all the facts that are manifested to him. An individual's total cognitive environment is a function of his physical environment and his cognitive abilities. It consists of not only all the facts that he is aware of, but also all, the facts that he is capable of becoming aware of, in his physical environment.

This theory proposes relevance, seen as the key to human communication and cognition. The proof is man's heuristic tendency to make predictions which are actually approximations. For instance, if a person asks the distance from Kuala Lumpur to Johor Bharu, the likely response would be four hours even though it would be possible to reach that destination in three hours and fifty five minutes or four hours and thirteen minutes. This prediction in Relevance Theory is not incorrect as an interpretation. Such an answer is assumed to be relevant, though not true but with that information the listener is able to plan his journey and utilize his time optimally. Here comes the role of cognition. The theory also stresses processing effort, and processing effort is related to the time taken to interpret meaning. The lesser the time taken, the more relevant the information. Hence, information that is difficult and takes a longer time to process is less useful, and it might even lead to miscommunication. This occurs when there is mismatch between the information conveyed and the context of the listener.

What now is the link between this theory and language. Different languages exhibit different features, more so if the languages are not from the same family. This acts as a

hurdle when attempting to interpret meaning. In our case, the attempt to use English is the best example. English is a second language and its use is limited to the classroom, and besides having a structure that is distinctly dissimilar to BM, the thinking patterns of its users are different from those who use the first language - BM. What can perhaps be acquired by the students is the rudimentary language skills that does not require mastery of more complicated structures. But if the first language is used it would certainly enable the student to express what has been learnt more efficiently. This problem is best illustrated in the attempt to teach S & M in English. Communication failure is beyond question and it would have disastrous consequences for the teaching of M & S.

2.4 Education and Linguistic Vs Politics

From the above discussion it is evident that the linguistic and educational perspectives are closely affiliated as both share the notion of **human cognition**. Hall (1996) and Wood (2002) note that to acquire knowledge transmitted in a student's second language could take five to seven years, thus slowing down the process of knowledge acquisition. This is in line with Relevance Theory that stresses processing effort as an essential component of interpreting meaning of utterances.

Politicians, as policy makers, have clearly ignored pedagogical considerations. The hastiness in the implementation of the new policy - six months- raises several questions. What is the motive of this switch when its future seems uncertain. If the rationale for the switch is that low proficiency in English has led to unemployment amongst students from the present education system in which BM is the exclusive medium of instruction, then the reason advanced appears shaky and unacceptable. And what is even more unfortunate is that those who oppose this new policy, even on solid grounds, might be detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA).

In order to obtain a more objective picture of the "conflict", a study was carried out to investigate the response of teachers and students towards the change. The findings would throw light on how well the teachers are perceiving changes as well as how they are coping with the changes.

3.0 Findings

Six secondary schools ² from the central and southern zone of the country were chosen for the study. Both teachers and students were picked as respondents bearing in mind that both the groups are directly affected. As for students, the study involved 971 respondents, the Malays and non Malays from national and national type schools located in the urban and rural areas. The teachers in the study numbered 43 from the said six schools aged 25 and above who had been in the profession from one to twenty years.

Given below is the response of the teachers to the questionnaire.

Number	Question	Agree %	Disagree %
1	Students show greater interest when M&S are taught in English	4	96
2	My students have no problem understanding M & S in English	2	98
3	The results of my students taught M& S in English is encouraging	6	94
4	M & S can be taught in BM	81	19
5	The performance is better if M&S are taught in BM	72	28

6	The students are more attentive if the teaching is in BM	79	21
7	All the subjects should be taught in English	17	83
8	English should replace BM as the national language	2	98

The results of the survey show that the opinion of teachers is consistent even though there were variables in terms of age, years of teaching experience and location of work place. The teachers' feedback should be accorded attention as they are the ultimate judges of student ability. It should be noted that 96% of the teachers answered in the negative when asked if the students showed greater interest when the subjects were taught in English. Additionally, 98% replied that their students face problems in understanding the subject matter when the instruction is in English. And 94 % responded negatively when asked whether the students' performance in the examination was encouraging. Teachers are more confident of the use of BM as 81% want the M & S to be taught in BM and 72% replied that student performance is better if they are taught in BM. More significantly, 79% said that their students show greater concentration if the subjects are taught in BM.

The findings reinforce the view that cognition plays a crucial role - that students grasp the subject matter better if the instruction is in the first language. The sudden use of English has disorientated the students, thus impairing their performance. Students who scored A in UPSR (a public examination all primary students are required to sit for before they move on to secondary school) for Science failed to perform well in the first semester examination in Form one (the first year of secondary school), an unlikely scenario if BM had been maintained as the language of instruction. Below is the response of students.

Number	Question	Agree %	Disagree %
1	I have no problems in understanding M & S in English	25	75
2	M&S can be taught effectively in BM	77	23
3	I am more interested in M&S if they are taught in BM	71	29
4	I will perform better if M&S are taught in BM	70	30
5	I' ll be proud be become an internationally known Malaysian scientist (using BM)	55	45
6	All the subjects should be taught in English	16	84
7	English should replace BM as the national language	13	87

Students too have responded negatively towards the use of English ; 75% said that they encounter problems understanding M&S in English, 77% felt that the two subjects can be effectively taught in BM ,and 71% said that they would show greater interest if the teaching is in BM.

Students as recipients of information feel that their first language is a better medium compared to a second language (English). The first language is the best medium for a student to express his feelings, emotions and creativity. Yusof Othman, a scientist from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, sums up this view :

“ to develop science in Malaysia with Malay culture as its foundation science must be taught in BM. Language,culture and progress in science cannot be divorced from the value system, and culture itself cannot be narrowed down to the arts alone. Thus, science and technology cannot be developed in isolation from the aspirations and needs of the people. In other words,we need to develop science in our own mould, in our own language within the context of our specific culture and taste”.

4.0 Reality, Challenge and Hope

There is undeniably a conflict between the linguistic and educational perspective on the one hand and the political perspective on the other. Though there is apprehension about the success of the new policy,the Minister of Education was quoted as saying the performance of students in M&S has improved since the two subjects have been taught in English.Hence the Prime Minister has announced that he wants the teaching of M&S in English to continue (*Mingguan Malaysia*,7 September,2003).

Despite the fact that findings have shown that the policy is not in the interest of teachers and students,the government is continuing its pressure on schools. An interesting facet of the whole issue that needs to be highlighted is that the Chinese primary schools and Dong Jiao Zong have insisted that they would continue to teach M&S in Mandarin. Their argument is that the students in the Chinese medium schools have no problems understanding M&S in Mandarin, thus there is no necessity to covert to English (*Mingguan Malaysia*, 7 September,2003).

The challenge now is to confront the reality of the situation. If the views of Dong Jiao Zong are considered, the Ministry of Education,the authority in power, should review their policy. The previous policy in which BM was used as the medium of instruction was not a burden to students, be they Malays, Chinese or Indians.The National Education Policy launched 20 years ago has been implemented successfully with students graduating from

the system contributing to the nation's progress in all fields, including the professions.

What is urgently required is a review of the pedagogy of teaching English. We see no reason why Malaysian students who study English for 11 years cannot acquire proficiency in the language, when German students, for example, are able to master the language even though the formal teaching starts when they are 10 years old. Noreiny Maarof et.al (2003) in their study reported that English language proficiency in rural areas is low and that teaching methodology needs to be bettered to motivate students and create a conducive environment for greater use of the language.

4.1 Language and Nation Building

Language is an important tool in nation building, especially in a multi-racial society like Malaysia. The movement to unite the people through the use of one language has a long history, the beginning being the Razak Report (1956). The government then realized that a common language would be best means of achieving unity amongst the diverse races. The Razak Report categorically states,

“ it is hoped that this concerted use of the National Language will inculcate in all citizens the habit of using it regularly. It is only in this way that they will feel they belong to this country, and the National Language is a real living force that binds them together”.

The use of a common language to forge a national consciousness especially in nations with minorities is a time tested mechanism. In the United States, where there are a number of ethnic minorities, the English language has had a key role in nationhood.

“Americanism, they argue, loses something in the translation, while English offers the only key to the nation's democracy, history and culture. Language thus becomes a literal shibboleth of nationality, a badge of true Americanism,

and anything less than fluency in English- a foreign accent, let alone the maintenance of a minority tongue is perceived to threaten national security and subvert the national ideal". (Dennis Baron, 1990)

Another oft-repeated argument that English would accelerate the creation of Malaysian scientists calls for a reexamination too. We have to look far ahead of the possible consequences if the government insists on maintaining its language stand. Abdullah Hassan (2002) has highlighted two potential repercussions if we allow a foreign language to control our minds. Firstly, the weakening of our cultural defenses, and secondly the loss of confidence in our ability. The weakening of our cultural defenses will lead to an exaggerated admiration for the west. Excessive admiration for the west is likely to result in even more detrimental consequences- we as former colonial subjects would lose faith in our ability to produce our own intellectual products. We remain satisfied being agents who translate, teach, popularize and absorb intellectual products from our former colonial masters. If occasionally, there are locals who venture out to create indigenous intellectual products, their peers would be reluctant to offer recognition to such an effort.

As long as Malaysians remain faithful admirers of the west, BM cannot play its rightful role in Malaysia, and globalization often cited as the justification for reverting to English is not solid enough. Hassan Ahmad (2002) notes that other nations too are striving for progress, but policy makers there do not say

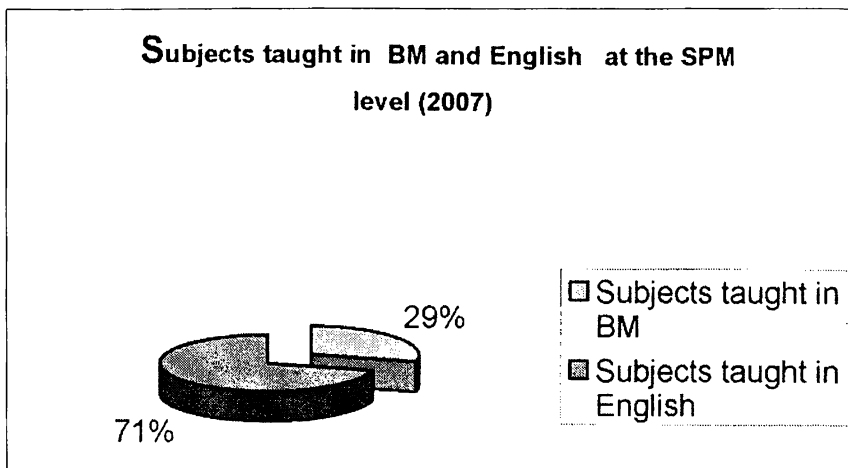
“ let’s replace our language with another language- English- in order to attain progress in our country. Only nations that are uncertain of their culture or people whose minds are still trapped in the colonial mould or ways would think along those lines”.

Hassan Ahmad adds

“to bring progress to our people and our nation in our own cultural, social and

political setting - not in the nation of others, not in England or the United States or in the global world where borders remain uncertain - the tool that is best suited is our own language”.

The greatest impact of the new policy which also forestalls our advances towards nation building is that it is pulling us back to the colonial days. The table below illustrates the decline in the use of BM, the national language and language of unity.

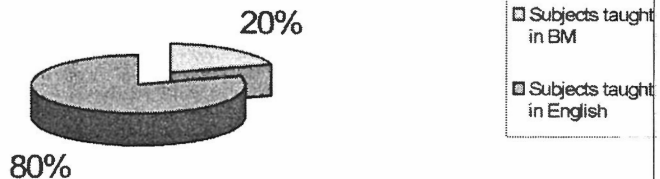


(Kamal Shukri, 2002)

The table above shows that in the future for SPM,³ only 29% of the teaching would be in BM as in the science stream classes many of the subjects - Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Additional Mathematics would be taught in English. The situation would worsen at the matriculation and form six level with the use of BM being reduced to 20%.

The chart below shows the use of BM and English at the Form Six (Science) and Matriculation level.

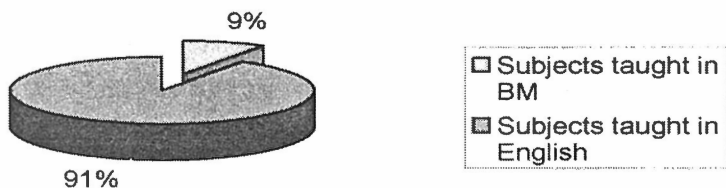
Subjects Taught In BM and English In Form 6 and Matriculation (2008)



Kamal Shukri (2002)

The decreased use of BM would be extended to the university level, especially in the teaching of engineering, IT and other based courses.

Subjects Taught in BM and English in the Universities (after 2008)



Kamal Shukri (2002)

The chart above shows that at the university level the use of BM would have shrunk to 9%. This runs counter to the present situation when BM is the main medium of instruction in all state owned educational institutions, from schools to universities. Are we then moving in the right direction considering the strong arguments against the use of English?

A cursory look at the Form One science text book reveals some unpleasant realities. When compared to the earlier text in BM, the English text covers fewer topics. This probably reflects the fears of the Ministry which is aware of the problems students and teachers have to confront. The ultimate losers are the students.

5.0 Closing Remarks

The discussion above clearly demonstrates that the shift in language policy would not only have negative implications for both students and teachers but also seriously hamper efforts at nation building and forging a national identity. The reversal of the policy, which in essence, takes us back to the colonial era would again result in racial disparity - a colonial leftover which the National Education Policy had overcome.

There could be some groups that propose that English replace BM since English is a dominant international language. Such people need to reevaluate their position as they are merely representing their narrow interest, thus ignoring the national prerogative. Rural students have a right to enjoy a standard of education comparable to that of those in the urban areas. But this would not be feasible as the rural students would inevitably be disadvantaged if English is used.

BM was officially declared the national language of Malaysia 45 years ago. By analogy this period is long enough for a man to reach maturity. But the bones of this malnourished 45 year old are waiting to crack and fall apart. A minor mishap, and he'll

collapse for good. Do we want the same misfortune to strike down Bahasa Malaysia?

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- 1 In 1972 with English as the medium of instruction in urban schools, the percentage of Malaysians proficient in Malay was 84%. The percentage increased after the implementation of BM as the medium of instruction in the education system would have in 1983.
- 2 The students involved are from form 1, form 6 and matriculation.
- 3 SPM stands for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia . It is a public examination Malaysian students sit for at the end of their secondary education. Equivalent to O'Level.