

The Influence of Language Practices on Social Interaction in School Environment

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v11-i3/14616>

DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v11-i3/14616

Published Online: 25 September 2022

Abstract

This paper is to investigate and understand perspectives held by a diverse group of people in a multicultural school setting in Malaysia. It examined the understanding of, and attitudes towards language diversity of school administrators, teachers and students in a specific school setting. The study drew on literature in the field of multi/interculturalism, and used a qualitative case study approach employing an interview approaches. The paper examined the concept of language diversity as a social phenomenon and links current understanding of the phenomenon to that of the people involved, explaining how and why they think, respond and react the way they do. A national primary school was chosen for the case study. In Malaysia, the government has embarked on an ambitious program to promote national primary schools as 'a school of choice' as an attempt to promote 'unity in diversity'. School administrators, teachers, and students of this particular type of school were interviewed and the data analysed. The respondents practice Bahasa Melayu and English as the main medium of communication (*lingua franca*) and as a reflection on the increasing importance of this, they expect all students to take advantage and benefit from learning them both. However, the social factors and different environments are somehow conclusively determined to influence the way the language is used and learned by young children in MNS. Many Indians and some Chinese students, who came from the lower social background and speak their 'mother-tongue' at home, seem to experience difficulty in communication with people of the other race, especially during the classroom teaching and learning. At the end, the respondents drew attention to the way in which racial integration in MNS might be deteriorating, possibly by the use of the first language or/and the diversity of the language used in the school.

Keyword: Language Practices, Social Interaction, School Environment

Introduction

Malaysia is known as a 'de facto' country because its citizens speak different native languages, but the Malay language is legally recognised as the official language (Said & Ong, 2019). Malaysia's plural society is divided by nationalism, race-based politics, and globalisation as a result of the British divide-and-rule policy (Phan et al., 2013). In a multicultural society, the terms "ethnicity" and "race" possess social and political significance (Yusof & Esmaeil, 2017); and are inextricably linked to issues of languages, privileges, and education. Despite various

attempts and campaigns for an integrative culture, Malaysia has been witness to various ethnic conflicts since its inception, but it remains hopeful in creating and sustaining a united and harmonious society (Jamil & Raman, 2012; Yusof & Esmaeil, 2017).

In this regard, Aun's (2017) in her study of public opinion surveys in Malaysia had highlighted both racial tension and divide as well as integration and cohesion issues. While Malaysians generally relate well to other cultures, show goodwill toward others, move away from race-based politics, and increase interactions to foster better understanding and friendship across ethnic lines, they also tend to form circles of ethnically homogeneous friends, feel compelled to form inter-relationships with people of different race and religion, and gravitate towards opposing positions on issues of ethnic affirmative action (Aun, 2017).

Malaysians speak a variety of languages (bilingual, trilingual, and/or multilingual), but the two official ones are Malay or Bahasa Melayu (BM) and English. Malaysia's national language, BM, seeks to unite Malaysians, while English, the nation's second language, serves as a medium for globalisation, business, and international communication (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015; Ya'acob et al., 2011). All official business must be conducted in BM, but discretionary use of English is permitted (Pesuruhjaya Penyemak Undang-Undang Malaysia, 2006). Malaysians are optionally encouraged to be fluent in vernacular languages (VL), such as Mandarin and Tamil (Nair, 2018).

According to Lasagabaster (2015), the presence of languages and their role in education profoundly affect and motivate attitudes toward languages. Language attitudes have an impact on language behaviours, self and hetero perceptions in identity construction, instructional practises, and, ultimately, micro and macro language policies. As a result, researching attitudes toward language diversity may provide some useful insights into the conditions that may support the legitimization and affirmation of a heteroglossic perspective in education. Simultaneously, increased awareness of the factors that can have a positive impact on attitudes may encourage educators and policymakers to carefully plan and design specific interventions and learning strategies with the goal of maintaining an ecological multilingual stance among students. The following are the study's objectives:

- To examined the understanding of, and attitudes towards language diversity of school administrators, teachers and students in a specific school setting

Literature Review

Differences in race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, culture, cognitive and physical ability, age, and nationality are all examples of diversity. Individual, categorical, contextual, and pedagogical differences are the four layers of meaning proposed by Paine's (1989) diversity concept. Individual differences are explained psychologically (dispositions, interests, etc.) and biologically (sex, age, etc.). In understanding learner differences, categorical difference takes gender, social class, and race into account. Contextual difference exists because of the social context, whereas pedagogical difference takes into account causes and pedagogical implications. Shulman's (1986) conception of pedagogical content knowledge, on the other hand, views diversity as a combination of understandings of human diversity and knowledge of and skills in ways to respond to or build on diversity in educational settings.

Zein and Damanhuri (2019) conducted research on a mixed-race adolescent's language attitude. The Indonesian - American adolescent was enthusiastic about all three languages he spoke: English, Indonesian, and Javanese, with Javanese ranking higher than the others. The study concluded that this could be influenced by how the language was learned and the adolescent's community.

Sisamouth (2017) investigated the relationship between language attitude and language use pattern, as well as the domain in which the correlation occurs. According to Schober, Boer, and Schwarte (2018), there were positive correlations for all languages studied (Thai, Patani Malay, and English) and that fostering a good language attitude can help multilinguals maximise the use of different languages in more domains in their lives.

According to Abdul Razaq et al. (2011), who studied teachers' perspectives on school diversity among 161 Malaysian teachers, the mean scores of teachers' perspectives were found to be average. This is unfortunate, because as student and faculty mobility has increased, so has the demand for equal opportunity and the pressure to internationalise higher education.

Methodology

Social constructivism is the research paradigm employed for this doctoral investigation. This paradigm is referred to as 'interpretive qualitative research' by some authors (Robson, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research is a type of educational research that investigates the richness, depth, and complexity of phenomena. Given that the goal of this study, which is detailed below, is to investigate how intercultural education is addressed in the actual context of the multicultural school, a qualitative case study approach is used.

According to statistics, there are 7,504 national primary schools with 98,600 classes serving 2.3 million students across the country (Malaysia, 2004). According to Stake (2005), cases should be chosen for theoretical rather than statistical reasons. As a result, the researcher identified and chose a Malacca national primary school, Malacca National School (MNS is not the real name of the school), to participate in this study.

Data collection is an important step in a qualitative case study. This procedure entails gathering and recording data. Case studies, as previously stated, necessitate a variety of data collection methods. These methods, according to Yin (2003), include documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artefacts. Data collection techniques such as interviews were used in this study.

As previously mentioned, several key informants among school administrators, teachers, and students were identified and chosen for interviews. A key informant is a person with whom one interacts who is discovered to know more than the other members of the group. The individuals chosen would be key informants in the sense that they would be subjected to in-depth individual and group interviews (administrators and teachers) (for the students).

According to Creswell (2008), "data collection and analysis (and possibly report writing) are simultaneous activities in qualitative studies." While collecting data, you may also be

analysing previously collected information in search of major ideas" (p. 245). This method differs from quantitative research in that data collection comes first, followed by data analysis. The analysis in this study began early, as the researcher questioned and probed respondents to elicit their ideas, attitudes, and beliefs about the case under study.

Findings

Language abilities are used by the respondents as an indicator to identify cultural diversity in the school. Their perceptions of and attitudes to language diversity are as follows:

- i. In MNS, the young children have the opportunities to learn about and ability to communicate with each other using different languages;
- ii. Social factors in the children's homes and community environment, have significant impact on language performance of the young children in MNS;
- iii. Racial integration could be realized if only the young children could communicate more effectively among each other; and
- iv. There are high expectations for the young children growing up in a multilingual environment like MNS to have knowledge about other languages as well as their mother-tongue.

The Perceived Lingua Franca

In MNS, the young children have the opportunities to learn about and abilities to communicate with each other using different languages:

When asked what language is used by the children of the different races to communicate among each other in the school, the head teacher gave this comment:

RC: In this school (when children communicate with each others) a lot of Malay is spoken here ...English...second... especially among the upper primary student. When they go for the Mandarin classes, then sometime they do speak in Mandarin...but most of the time... in English. The Chinese and the Chinese students speak English...most of the time.

AT: What about Chinese and Malay students?

RC: Sometime (they speak English), yes!

(Document 'Manager 1', Paragraphs 136-138)

The above comments highlighted three important aspects of linguistic diversity which in her opinion are relevant to the diversity of race in her school. First, Bahasa Melayu (literally means Malay Language) is relatively most important among students of diverse racial group in the school, and English is second. This is because Malay is the official language for the nation, and also the medium of instruction for all teaching subjects (except teaching language subjects, like Chinese and Tamil) in the national primary schools. And also, English is adjacent to the Malay language because since independence, the Ministry of Education has chosen English as the second language in Malaysia. The bilingual education programme in English and Malay was merely a "stop gap measure" until a monolingual system could be implemented to unite Malaysia's multilingual-multicultural population (Chan & Ain, 2015). This is later consolidated through the introduction of the new policy of teaching Mathematics and Science in English in 2003. Second, other first languages or the mother-tongue, in her case Mandarin, is only used in a limited way during the language teaching. Finally, the students in MNS are able to speak at least two languages, Malay and English easily and naturally, especially

students at Level 2. As for the “non-Malay” students in MNS, their first language that they learn as a child at home can be added to their language ability.

Troubled Indians and Chinese

social factors in the children’s home and community environment, have significant impact on language performance of the young children in MNS:

However, most of the explanations above only applied to “upper primary students” or Level 2 student at MNS. What about students’ linguistic ability at Level 1 of their primary schooling? Generally, students’ ability to acquire second language (for example English) among Level 1 students is “unconvincing”. Based on his experience teaching English as Second Language, Teacher 1 claimed that:

I see that...in this school most of the students are very weak when they come to us (English teachers)...they are very, very weak (in English)”.

(Document 'Teacher 1', Paragraph 79)

The ‘unconvincing ability’ to acquire the second language among students at the early level of primary schooling in MNS also worries other teachers. Some of them focus their thoughts upon the language limitations among students to be the problems of one particular race: the Indians. Examples of their perceptions can be seen in the following quotes:

According to Manager 1

Indian students in this school... many! Many! There are about...90 over students here! So this year we some how found out that many Indian children here. Indian children sometimes when they come to our school...they don’t know how to speak (neither) Malay Language nor English...where as the Chinese at least...they can speak English.

(Document 'Manager 1', Paragraph 132)

Next, using the Indian students of Standard One (Year One) in MNS as her example, Teacher 3 commented about their language disabilities as translated below:

So lot of Indian students here...sometime they...they come here (to this school)...they don’t speak Malay...and don’t understand English! [S]o they speak Tamil. We speak English; even they don’t understand...we speak Malay, they don’t understand.

(Document 'Teacher 3', Paragraph 116)

From the above explanations, both Manager 1 and Teacher 3 indicated that Indian students are having difficulties to communicate in other languages. They suspect that the Indian students do not understand Malay and English. The choice left for these kinds of students, especially at the early stages of their primary schooling, is to use their mother-tongue: in this case Tamil. Among the reasons were studies that demonstrated that using the mother tongue was more advantageous for certain groups (Gill, 2014). According to some of the respondents:

The Indians children...‘pure Indian’, you know...they come (here)...don’t know a word of Malay and English. So it’s quite a very dodging stuff for the teachers of Standard One...to teach them.

(Document 'Manager 1', Paragraph 132)

Of cause the Indians and Indians.....they use Tamil.

(Document 'Teacher 2', Paragraphs 109)

The teachers above expressed their concern about language abilities among students because later during the classroom teaching, they as teachers will face difficulties to communicate effectively with students like this. The Indian students were classified as ‘pure Indian’ because of their social background (came from family of labours, estate dwellers, i.e. working class) and their incompetence to communicate in other languages, except their mother-tongue. Some in the school might form the impression that they are “arrogant” and reluctant to learn the other languages: Bahasa Melayu and English (See Document 'Teacher 2', Paragraph 97-99 and Document 'Teacher 3', Paragraph 116). At the end, this would affect the ‘racial integration’ among the students of different racial groups in MNS.

Racial integration can be realized if only the young children could communicate effectively among each other.

The situation of language used by students is rather complex. According to Teacher 3:

R: But India n student they cannot...difficult (for them)! That’s why I think...if we want to have racial integration, one of the problems is that ...the Indians are quite difficult to it (to be involved)...

AT: Because? From your opinion, why?

R: (Silent). They want to communicate...I think difficult (to them)

(Document 'Teacher 3', Paragraphs 147-149)

The above respondent pointed out the predicament of the relationship between racial integration and the language abilities among students in MNS. She expected that racial integration can be realized if only the students could communicate effectively among each other. She discovered that the Indian students have difficulties to be involved in racial integration or get along with the other students because they ‘themselves’ have problems with communication, especially to understand and use other languages as mentioned earlier. Should the teachers put the blame only on the students because they only know their mother-tongue? In fact, from my observation I realized that the situation is only relevant to students at the Level 1 and of course they are more comfortable at the moment to communicate in the in mother-tongue.

On the contrary, the situation is rather different in the case among Chinese students. Some of the students admitted that:

I myself...personally I think... I can speak Mandarins quite so-and-so lah...but I don't know how to write and I don't know how to read...Chinese...(I mean) Mandarin.

(Document 'Student Group 4 Old Boys', Paragraph 256)

The above student acknowledged that he is not proficiently skilled with Mandarin. His knowledge about the language is limited and according to him, “quite so-and-so”. This is because his parents are professionals (in this case both his parents are doctors) or “well educated parents” or “mixed marriages” and they use English at home. That is why they are more comfortable using English, rather than other languages (Malay or Mandarin) during the interview. So for students who are categorized in those groups, it would appear that they will not use their mother-tongue in school. As the head teacher commented at the earlier stage of this section:

RC: *The Chinese and the Chinese students speak English...most of the time.*

AT: *What about Chinese and Malay students?*

RC: *Sometime (they speak English), yes!*

(Document 'Manager 1', Paragraphs 136-138)

There are high expectations for the young children growing up in a multilingual environment like MNS to have knowledge about other languages as well as their mother-tongue:

Moreover, the school noticed that there are some parents, especially who do not speak or use their mother-tongue at home but realize the importance of other languages, and hope that their children will learn their mother-tongue and other languages at school. According to the head teacher, “because it is the parents’ wishes” (paragraph, 115), so the school should introduce such classes to teach the students.

Apart from that, in MNS or especially around Malacca City, there are a lot of ethnic groups who were culturally assimilated, as mentioned in Chapter 2.2.1, like the Portuguese-Eurasian and the Strait-born Chinese (locally known as Serani and Peranakan respectively). They were partially assimilated into the cultural and other traits of Malays, and because of that their later generations do not any more practice their original languages. Examples of these categories of people, i.e. Portuguese-Eurasian and Peranakan, and their knowledge about their ‘mother-tongues’ or ‘ethnic languages’ are described as follows:

School Manager 3 mentioned about the Portuguese-Eurasian in MNS as translated below:

SZ: *So we can say...we have Indians, Chinese, Malays students...we also got Portuguese...they are many here. I tried to learn Portuguese (language) from them...but the (Portuguese) students they knew a bit (about their own language) ...they can't help teaching me...If I asked a lot...about that...they don't even know. They cannot help me much.*

AT: *Portuguese language?*

SZ: *Portuguese language...can't learn much.*

(Document 'School Manager 2', Paragraphs 37-39)

School Manager 2 discovered that she could not learn much about the Portuguese ethnic language from the students. She believed that they, the Portuguese- Eurasian students, themselves knew very little about their own ethnic language.

Next example is about the Peranakan mentioned by the head teacher who belongs to this particular ethnic group. When introducing herself, the head teacher mentioned that:

OK. I am Mrs RCLN. I am a Straits-born Chinese. For you to know first...I am a person who can not speak Chinese.

(Document 'Manager 1', Paragraph 3)

Manager 1 acknowledged that she could not speak Chinese (actually she referred to Mandarin) to avoid the general perception that as Chinese should speak Mandarin and as their mother tongue. But Straits-born Chinese or locally known as Baba (male) and Nyonya (female), is an example of Chinese ethnic groups who had assimilated with the main stream culture in Malaysia. They use Malay to communicate. This happened in the 15th century since the first group of these ethnics Chinese came to Peninsular Malaysia during Melaka Sultanates Empire.

The explanations above show that there are high expectations for people who belong to certain ethnic groups to still have knowledge about their mother-tongue. Judging from their racial appearance, they are expected to understand and use their mother tongues during their informal conversations. Apart from that, they are also encouraged to acquire the second language in school. At the end, all students are expected to use Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) or English as the main medium of communication. However, because of some constraints mentioned above, not every student is able to do so. Some believed that languages became the barrier for racial integration and this creates problems during classroom teaching in MNS (see Document Teacher 3- paragraphs 147-149). Finally, what languages are purposely suitable for all students in MNS? These are among other complex issues, problems or dilemmas that are normally faced by the schools which are multicultural in context.

Conclusion

The respondents perceived Bahasa Melayu (Malay) and English as the main medium of communication (lingua franca) and as a reflection on the increasing importance of this, they expect all students to take advantage and benefit from learning them both. However, the social factors and differing environments are somehow conclusively determined to influence the way the language is used and learned by young children in MNS. Many Indians and some Chinese students, who came from the lower social background and speak their 'mother-tongue' at home, seem to experience difficulty in communication with people of the other race, especially during the classroom teaching and learning. At the end, the respondents draw attention to the way in which racial integration in MNS might be deteriorating, possibly by the use of the first language or/and the diversity of the language used in the school.

Intercultural education has the potential to help the school promote greater understanding among the young people. The study also has wider contributions for schools in Malaysia. Other schools with intentions to nurture cultural awareness or intercultural understanding might consider the way they could develop both the formal and the hidden curriculum. The findings also have contributions for existing theories of how society and educational policy and practice respond to cultural diversity. The research shows that the

national schools can support the government and society towards better intercultural understanding even in a highly dynamic and complex situation.

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