

First, Second, and Third Tongues: Malaysia's Languages for Unity and Education

Shaidatul Akma Adi Kasuma*, Wan Azri Wan Hamid and Ayuni Akhiar

School of Languages, Literacies, and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study borders on the dilemma between the language for national unity, and the language for education in Malaysia. It is guided by the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 that recommends the learning of Bahasa Melayu (BM) to unite the plural society; English as the language for modernisation; and vernacular languages (VL), which are Mandarin and Tamil, to preserve culture and identity. This study aims to investigate the preferred medium of instructions at higher learning institutions, the value of different languages for national unity, and students' perceived reasons for using these languages. Using a set of questionnaires, the study was piloted to a group of 69 university students. The results indicate that many preferred English for the teaching and learning process, followed by BM, and VL. They perceived English as the most suitable, frequently used, and highly important for university education. Many students adhered to MEB's recommendation where they valued these languages for integration, internalisation, and preserving cultural identity; and perceived BM and English as equally important in promoting national unity.

The main finding suggests that students rely heavily on English for both educational purposes and national unity; thus, calls upon strategies to strengthen the language, while not forgetting to uphold BM and VL as part of the nation's identity, uniqueness, and pride.

Keywords: Bahasa Melayu, English language, globalisation/internationalisation, national unity

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E-mail addresses:

shaidatul@usm.my (Shaidatul Akma Adi Kasuma)

w.azri89@usm.my (Wan Azri Wan Hamid)

ayuni@usm.my (Ayuni Akhiar)

*Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

The Multicultural Society of Malaysia

As a result of the British divide-and-rule policy, the plural society of Malaysia is divided by nationalism, race-based politics, and globalisation (Phan et al., 2013). In a multicultural society, the terms 'ethnicity' and 'race' bear social and political importance (Md. Yusof & Esmail, 2017); and are constantly related to the issues of languages, privileges, and education. Despite various attempts and campaigns for an integrative culture, Malaysia continuously witnesses ethnic conflicts since the early days of its conception; but remains hopeful in creating and preserving a united and harmony society (Jamil & Raman, 2012; Md. Yusof & Esmail, 2017).

The rhetoric of "New Malaysia" after the 2018 General Election 14 has yet to materialise, as incidents of race-based comments, online and offline confrontations among different ethnicities and religions, and newspapers reports of race-based news escalate (Byrnes, 2018; Sipalan, 2018). Kamunri (2019) defined "New Malaysia" as an effort to repair what needed to be improved or to repeat successes that had made the country respected in the past. Therefore, the "New Malaysia" that is hoped to ignite the spirit of nationalism and integration, seems relatively distant.

In relation, Aun's (2017) study of public opinion surveys in Malaysia highlight its ethnic relation issues from both perspectives; racial tension and divide as well as integration and cohesion. While Malaysians

generally relate well to other culture, show goodwill towards other, shift 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 homogenous friends, feel constrained to forge inter-relationships with people of different race and religion, and gravitate towards opposing positions on issues of ethnic affirmative actions (Aun, 2017). Thus, the concepts of national unity, integration, nation-building and national identity are defined as a state in which all citizens from various groups (ethnics, religion, regions) live in peace as one united nation, giving full commitment to national identity based upon the Federal Constitution and the National Ideology (Lee et al., 2013) in Malaysia still have to be nurtured among individuals. Disunity, however, does not just transpire from self-integrity, but also the integrity of the leaders in civil society involving all sectors including economic, politic, social, religion and science and technology (Lee et al., 2013).

Education is therefore key in uniting Malaysians together and acts as an avenue to channel national consciousness and societal cohesion (Jamil & Raman, 2012; Ong et al., 2013; Puteh, 2010); hence, calls for a more interactive and proactive way of teaching and learning to introduce, practice and reflect the ideology of national policy (Lee et al., 2013). The long-enacted British policy and issues pertaining to language and education have, however, unfolded in the context of nation-building, societal multilingualism, and globalisation; that

threaten a united culture (Hashim, 2009; Ya'acob et al., 2011).

Malaysians speak many languages (bilingual, trilingual, and/or multilingual), but Malay or Bahasa Melayu (BM) and English, are the two official ones. BM, the national language of Malaysia, aims to unite Malaysians, while English, the nation's second language is the medium of globalisation, business, and international communication (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015; Ya'acob et al., 2011). All official businesses must be conducted in BM, but necessary usage of English is allowed, based on discretions (Pesuruhjaya Penyemak Undang-Undang Malaysia, 2006). Optionally, Malaysians are also encouraged to be fluent in vernacular languages (VL), like Mandarin and Tamil (Nair, 2018). Essentially, Nair (2018) believed that in creating a united nation, the society must be able to first communicate in the national language, BM, then the second language, English, and optionally, other VL like Mandarin and Tamil.

All in all, in the discourse of nation-building, Malaysia's education system is a constant agenda (Ong et al., 2013) which includes matters such as language policy, the medium of instructions (MOI), and vernacular school system vs national school system. On the one hand, the mastery of BM is key to national integration, which makes it equally as valuable for education. On the other hand, the English language is paramount for employability in local and international sectors (Selvaratnam, 2019) hence, necessary for individuals'

professional development. Accordingly, this study is interested to examine perceptions in the matter of languages for education and national unity.

Statement of the Problem: The Status of Bahasa Melayu BM and English in Malaysia

Schools are powerful institutions, capable of fostering a sense of coherence and a common identity among multicultural students, and are supportive of national ideology, in the most effective way (Kaur et al., 2017; Nordin et al., 2013; Puteh, 2010). To realise this, BM is made the instituted national language of Malaysia, and the main medium of instruction (MOI) to promote national unity agenda, and to balance linguistic imperialism of the English language (Selvaratnam, 2019). Despite this ruling, the use of English and other VL is permitted. This was as Ya'acob et al. (2011) observed BM as the MOI at schools and most tertiary institutions for content delivery, and inculcation of national unity, as well as the integration of Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups.

Studies on Malaysian languages and national unity are popular, with regards to education system and language policy (Yamat et al., 2014); MOI, English proficiency and employability (Selvaratnam, 2019); language planning and national unity (Coluzzi, 2017); the importance of languages on cultural identities and values (How et al., 2015); the impact of vernacular schools on national unity (Selvadurai et al., 2015); and the result of language policies on ethnicization, globalisation and

internationalisation (Ang et al., 2015; Lim, 2015; O'Neill & Chapman, 2015).

The findings from these studies generally concluded some extent of national unity among the plural society of Malaysia, but called out on the national language policy that is not economically strategic, but benefitted particular ethnics, ideologies, or communities (Ang et al., 2015; Coluzzi, 2017). These studies thus proposed suggestions to re-evaluate Malaysia's language planning and policy to ensure globalisation and internalisation, as well as practising fairness in its linguistic diversity and acceptance of other cultures (Albury & Aye, 2016; Coluzzi, 2017; Kenayathulla, 2015).

At times, however, the conclusions drawn from previous studies seemed bias against the Bumiputera due to the privileges they received. For example, several times, it was reported that the Chinese and Indian communities felt marginalised as the government give preferential treatment to the Bumiputera in terms of education, employment, and ownership, which resulted in the suspension of Chinese secondary schools' development due to the rising dominance of national schools, and lack of diversity and inclusiveness of the Non-Bumiputera (Kenayathulla, 2015; Khairul Anuar et al., 2015; Wong, 2017). Ang et al. (2015) further claimed that, though allowed sufficient breathing space for the development of their ethnic culture, the younger generation of Malaysian were subjected to the state's nation-building ideology, based on Malay cultural

nationalism. These arguments are indeed alarming as "a society divided along cultural and ethnic boundaries will create constraints for its social, economic, cultural, and political development and well-being"; resulting in unattainable social cohesion (Kaur et al., 2017, p. 45).

Essentially, Ong et al. (2013) offered that the different routes and complexity of educational choices, experience, expertise, and engagement in Malaysia, demonstrated inclusiveness that catered to the need of its diverse population. However, to what extent have this complexity of educational routes influence social cohesion? The answer to this has been addressed by many research, but comprehensively, it is agreed that BM promotes Malaysian unity, English is needed for internalisation and employability, and students from vernacular schools are loyal to VL and cultures and possess low sense of national identity (Ang et al., 2015; Gill et al., 2013; Ya'acob et al., 2011).

Therefore, due to the abundance of research that focuses on language, national unity and vernacular schools, this study fills in the gap in the literature by identifying the suitable language(s) for education and national unity in Malaysia. At present, a more pressing question lies not in the debate between vernacular schools and national schools; rather, in the intricacy of managing the language for internationalisation which is English, and the language for national unity which is BM. This argument mainly follows Coluzzi's (2017) recommendation that Malaysia replaces ethnic-based preferential treatment with a system based

on economic needs; which is deemed more effective for socioeconomic well-being and will simultaneously raise the prestige of BM. Campbell (2018) aptly summarised this issue as a previously stable but increasingly unstable tension between nationalist language concerns and the pressure of globalisation with its impact on economic development and social justice.

In moving forward towards modernisation, English becomes the language of choice at many local and international levels for various purposes of education, businesses, mobility, employment, and commerce. In effect, improved English competency entails increasing opportunity in a globalised knowledge economy (Campbell, 2018). When English dominates in academic institutions, BM may lose its importance as the MOI and the vehicle to push forward national unity (though some might argue that it has never had the standing of one). This study would, therefore, like to find out university students' view of the dilemma between the language for education and the language for national unity, as they are the generations who will be impacted, facing the challenges of employability, internalisation, national identity, and sociocultural values once they graduate.

Guided by the 2013-2025 Malaysia Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015), this study asks how do university students view English and BM as the languages for education at the university, and the languages to promote

national unity. Ya'acob et al. (2011) affirmed that BM promoted unity, and the usage of different languages did not hinder harmony and integration. Lee et al. (2013), however, argued that more efforts towards national unity in the forms of policies, concepts, or ideology should be reflected via practices at tertiary settings, as courses like TITAS and Ethnic Relations were insufficient. On the other hand, English is viewed more practically and more synonymously as the primary language of Malaysia's open, thriving, and highly internationalised economy; hence, demands effective proficiency amongst its citizens (Albury & Aye, 2016). Though English and BM are the focus of this study, the influence of VL on these issues is unavoidable, hence are also presented and discussed. To reiterate, this study contributes towards understanding the positions of these languages in Malaysian education system; as the fundamental that ignites the spirit of integration and cohesion. It calls for the involvement of students receiving tertiary education, whom are most likely to drive future economy and create policies. This study, therefore, observes the following research questions:

1. What are students preferred medium of instructions at the university?
2. To what extent do students perceive the importance of BM and English and VL for education?
3. To what extent do students perceive the importance of BM, English, and VL for national unity?

Literature Review

Malaysia's Languages and Nationalism.

Language represents a sense of belonging and dignity to many people and reflects the identity of a community; encouraging the citizens of a nation to bond with each other (Campbell, 2018). In a multi-ethnic society like Malaysia, the need to create a sense of national unity among its people is not only vital but also urgent (David & Tien, 2008). After achieving its independence in 1957, several policies were introduced to raise BM's status as the national language, immediately recognising it as a symbol of national identity (patriotism) and unity among Malaysian. National Education Policy (NEP) and National Language Policy (NLP) were the two prominent policies enacted in attempts to foster the spirit of unity and nationalism via a standard curriculum across the different types of schools in Malaysia. NLP has positively developed a sense of national identity among the youngsters due to the exposure to BM from the age of seven in schools (David & Tien, 2008).

As the national language, BM has been mandated the MOI in national institutions, but VL is still prevalent in vernacular schools. BM has expanded in its vocabulary (lexified) as a language (Tajuddin et al., 2019); and serves as the MOI for mainstream education (López, 2014) and intra-ethnic communication (John, 2015). Meanwhile, the VL, Mandarin and Tamil, are the two top languages used as the medium of communication in vernacular schools (Azman, 2016); a practice that leads to

ongoing debates as to whether vernacular institutions encourage disunity among Malaysian citizens (Editor, 2018; Mior, 2011; Wan Husin, 2011). In addition to being contested by the usage of their native languages in place of BM at schools, the Chinese and Indians may favour the *de facto* international language, English, compared to BM, in their communication; which may further hinder integration among Malaysians (Ying et al., 2015).

Ying et al.'s (2015) called upon concerted orientation to alleviate disunity among Malaysians. Fundamentally, racial integration and national unity could be promoted through BM that has been made the common medium of communication in all contexts and milieus (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Liu et al. (2002) compared between the Singaporeans and Malaysians perception of their identities and found that Malaysians tended to identify themselves with their ethnics, whereas Singaporeans tended to associate their self-identities with their nationality. As a multi-ethnic country, Malaysians are blessed with a rich exposure to languages and enjoy the perks of multilingualism. While it is valuable for the races in Malaysia to learn the VL, it is even more crucial that Malaysians master the national language, BM, due to its role in fostering socialisation and creating national unity (David & Tien, 2008; Nair, 2018).

Malaysia's Languages in Education.

BM and English were the two languages that formed Malaysia's bilingual education system, introduced by the Razak Report in

1956 (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012). After Malaysia achieved its independence in 1957, BM was mandated as the national, official language. It is to be employed in education and administration, as a tool for integration (Gill, 2009). Under the 1957 Malaysian Education Ordinance, English is recognised as the nation's second language (Azman, 2016).

NEP and NLP policies have seen to BM being the MOI in national schools. BM is made a compulsory subject to encourage its mastery and a pre-requisite for acceptance into tertiary institutions. Even with the implementation of the NLP in 1970, the importance of English language has not been diminished; it is a compulsory subject in most academic institutions in Malaysia, alongside BM (Darmi & Albion, 2013). However, the MOI in vernacular schools is either Mandarin or Tamil. Vernacular school students learn BM as a second language, thus are less proficient in the language compared to their peers in national schools (Ting, 2013).

In national schools, the curriculum was standardised, with hopes that BM becomes the instrument of unity for the different races in Malaysia (Foo & Richards, 2004). However, in 1979 the then Minister of Education, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, outlined a new policy to make English the MOI in primary and secondary schools primarily for Science and Mathematics subjects, to meet international economical and professional needs. This change caused a great disparity in academic performance between students in rural and urban areas. Therefore, not

long after, another reformation to the education policy would witness the MOI being reverted to BM at the expense of English competency among the students (Darmi & Albion, 2013). In 2003, the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English (PPSMI) was reintroduced but ended in 2012; and replaced by the Dual Language Programme (DLP). The latest educational reform that is the English Language Education Reform Roadmap 2015-2025 focuses on primary to tertiary institutions with hopes that it will bring significant transformations in the ways English is taught and learned as L2 in the 21st century (Azman, 2016).

While the government has remained faithful in their effort to empower and retain the national language status and its prestige in education through subsequent radical changes in the country education policy, its preference among the students especially in vernacular schools remains contentious. In a study conducted in vernacular schools, Ying et al. (2015) summarized that BM was not a dominant and preferred language among the students due to its inability to fulfil their daily communicative purposes and therefore was deemed as a language of little significance.

Despite the consecutive changes, the tertiary level of education remains largely unaffected. BM and English are both taught in universities and the choice of MOI is often the representation of the university mission and policy (Yamat et al., 2014). Even though the prestige and role of BM as the national language has been elevated

in both education and administration areas, the MOI for private universities and some courses at public universities is English. The importance of English language in Malaysia education is, therefore, indisputable due to its huge applicability and extensive use in various distinguished areas such as politics and media (Kok, 2018; Thirusanku & Melor 2012), tourism (Kostic & Grzinic, 2011; Selke, 2013), economics (Darmi & Albion, 2013), and business sectors (Soo et al., 2018).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Instrument

The data to this study were gathered using a set of questionnaire adapted from Ya'cob et al. (2011). The questionnaire consists of five sections to measure language for education and language for national unity, which is section A: demography; section B: medium of instructions at university; section C: a language for national unity; section D: factors that influence language choice, and section E: the importance of language.

The items in sections B and C were measured using a 5-point Likert scales (Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), Strongly Agree (5)); while the items in section D were measured using multiple-choice questions. Section E were written as open-ended items to gauge students' perceptions of the importance of the languages. The responses to the open-ended items (section E) are discussed as a means to corroborate the findings from the close-ended questions (section B to D). The

Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire is 0.893, thus indicates a high level of internal consistency of the items.

Participants

The participants were 69 university students; 91% Malaysian and 9% non-Malaysian. Many were in between 21-23 of age (84%); with 52% in the second year, 26% in the first year, 16% in the third year, and 6% in the fourth year. Malay students formed the majority with 62%, followed by the Chinese with 26%, Bumiputera (7%), Indian (3%), and Non-Bumiputera (1%).

RESULTS

The results of this study are presented as two sub-topics; language for education and language for national unity. In the former, the preferred MOI at university is discussed, while in the latter, the values and importance of Malaysian languages for national integration are examined. The items in Sections B, C, and D were run through One-Sample T-Test. All items score p-value 0.000 ($p < 0.0005$), hence indicate significant findings.

Language for Education: Medium of Instructions at University

This section presents and discusses the findings for preferred MOI at the university based on four main items: (a) language use in the classrooms, (b) language preference for teaching and learning, (c) suitability of language in teaching and learning, and (d) the importance of specific language for education.

Table 1 shows the statistics of the languages used in university classrooms. The participants reported English as the most frequently used language with 59% (mean score 3.62). Though the percentage is not tremendously high, it demonstrates the importance and value of English as the language for content delivery and medium of instructions at tertiary settings. This follows Dass' (2018) assertion that almost all universities in the country used English to a greater extent, where most of the books at the universities, libraries, and elsewhere were in English.

BM comes in second with 30% of participants who agreed that the language was frequently used in the classrooms. In the open-ended section, they cited reasons for using BM as both academic and social. Academically, many subjects at the university were taught in English, and they saw BM as promoting better communication with lecturers and friends. Socially, they regarded BM as the nation's official language, whose usage should be encouraged. This finding emphasises

Ya'acob et al.'s (2011) observation that BM was used for national unity and integration among diverse ethnic groups and languages in schools and most institutions of higher education. Arguably, Coluzzi (2017) asserted that the present situation of the language policy caused dissatisfaction to many people, which led to BM being viewed as being secondary in terms of importance.

Table 2 shows the students' preferred language in the classrooms. 58% of the participants (mean score 3.77) agreed that English was their preferred language for the teaching and learning process, followed by BM (33%; mean score 2.84). These two percentages are comparable to those in Table 1, but with higher mean scores. This again proves the value of English language in Malaysia as not only the language of modernisation but also as the preferred language for education; trumping the national language, BM.

It is interesting to note that the students mainly used English to improve their mastery (17%) due to its importance for employability (16%), great educational

Table 1
Language used in the classrooms

In the classrooms, I learn many of my courses in ...	Agree + Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree + Strongly Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Mean Score
Bahasa Melayu	30	46	23	2.83
English	59	13	28	3.62
Vernacular Languages	3	86	12	1.54

Table 2

Language preference for teaching and learning in the classrooms

In the classrooms, I prefer to learn in	Agree + Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree + Strongly Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Mean Score
Bahasa Melayu	33	42	25	2.84
English	58	13	29	3.77
Vernacular Languages	6	78	16	1.80

values (15%) and that its usage is encouraged at the university (15%). Mainly, the students showed initiatives to master the English language due to its instrumental values. These findings resonate with Abdul Kadir et al.'s (2015) earlier study that concluded the importance of English language proficiency for new graduates seeking employment opportunities. Despite the participants' belief that the university strongly encouraged the use of English language, findings from a comparative analysis indicate that each university interpreted bilingual policy differently, thus implemented it differently which in return resulted in distinguished language abilities among their graduates (Yamat et al., 2014).

The reasons for the students' usage of BM were different from that of English. The students stated that they were more comfortable using BM (12%), more fluent in BM (11%), saw BM's educational values (11%), identified with their cultural identities and values (10%), and believed that it is a vehicle to promote national unity (10%). To a large extent, their preference for BM

is due to its convenience for communication with fellow Malaysians familiar with the language.

Table 3 inquires the students' perceptions of the suitability of Malaysian languages for teaching and learning. A huge percentage of 70% (mean score 3.90) saw English is suitable for teaching and learning, followed by BM (37%; mean score 3.07), and VL (23%; mean score 2.07). While it is expected that the students saw English and BM as the languages for educational purposes, it is interesting to note that more students were positive about VL for academic purposes, compared to the percentages in Tables 1 and 2.

The participants saw English as a highly suitable language for teaching and learning at the university as many reference books and courses were written and taught in English; making it more convenient to transmit knowledge. Besides, they prioritised English to improve their communication skills, enhance the ability to understand and be fluent in English, as well as converse with many foreign students

Table 3

Suitability of language in teaching and learning

This language is suitable for content teaching and learning at universities:	Agree + Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree + Strongly Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Mean Score
Bahasa Melayu	37	29	35	3.07
English	70	9	22	3.90
Vernacular Languages	23	48	29	2.07

at the university in the international lingua franca. For example, one participant wrote that "... English is used to communicate with students of different ethnicities and cultures, and many foreign students at the university". Again, these findings reflect the students' awareness of English's educational values and the importance of its mastery; hence, grounds its inevitability as the language for education. Abdul Kadir et al. (2015) concurred that students possessed a medium level of awareness of the importance of English, particularly for job employment.

Table 4 shows the importance of specific languages for education. Not surprisingly, the English language comes in first with 74% (mean score 4.00), followed by BM (59%; mean score 3.62), and VL (23%; mean score 2.52). The findings in Table 4 are interesting for two languages, English and BM.

First, English was regarded as the most important language for educational purposes. This is not unexpected as English is the current lingua franca of the academic community (Liu, 2019). English is, therefore, prioritised, owing to its global

Table 4

The importance of specific language for education

This language is suitable for content teaching and learning at universities:	Agree + Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree + Strongly Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Mean Score
Bahasa Melayu	59	19	22	3.62
English	74	10	16	4.00
Vernacular Languages	23	48	29	2.52

status and widespread use. Second, the percentage of support for BM shows a huge increase of approximately 20% of the percentages in Tables 1, 2, and 3. This shows that the participants were aware of the importance of BM, besides English, as the language for education. The participants further expressed their appreciation of BM to preserve their identity, to uphold BM as the national language, to remind all Malaysians of the importance of BM, and to maintain its purity as a language.

Language for National Unity

This section addresses the theme language for national unity based on items classified into two main tables; the values of Malaysia’s first, second, and third languages; and Malaysia’s languages and national unity.

Table 5 illustrates the participants’ perceptions of the values of BM, English, and VL of Mandarin and Tamil. It is interesting to note the patterns of the participants’ responses for comparable items of the same language. The participants generally reported higher percentages for the items that show respect towards the languages, (a), (c), and (e); compared to items that indicate acknowledgement of the languages, (b), (d), and (f). Das (2015) differentiated these two terms by stating that ‘respect’ always conveyed or implied a positive feeling, while ‘acknowledge’ was to accept or recognise the existence of the truth of something in a neutral, positive or negative feeling. The students, therefore, perceived a higher positive feeling for the use of BM and English in Malaysia.

Table 5
The values of Malaysia’s first, second, and third languages

Statement	Agree + Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree + Strongly Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Mean Score
I respect Bahasa Melayu as the national language of Malaysia.	80	4	16	4.36
I acknowledged Bahasa Melayu as the national language.	68	12	20	4.00
I respect English as the language of modernisation.	77	6	17	4.16
I acknowledged English as the nation’s second language.	72	7	20	4.03
I respect vernacular languages for cultural identity and values.	70	7	23	3.87
I acknowledged vernacular languages as the nation’s third languages.	49	12	39	3.62

The participants largely respected BM as the national language of Malaysia (80%, mean score 4.36); but only 68% (mean score 4.00) acknowledged it as such. The English language comes in second with 77% respecting it as the language of modernisation (mean score 4.16%); but, not as high a percentage (72%) acknowledged it as the nation's second language.

The percentages are substantiated by the open-ended responses where the students reported the strongest feelings towards BM as the national language and English as the language for modernisation and the nation's second language. They defended BM as the nation's language that promotes national unity, and as their mother tongue. These findings, therefore, illustrate Malaysian university students' strong perceptions of the values of BM and English as languages for national integration, and education. It contradicts Puteh's (2010) earlier conclusion that the language medium policy was not successful in developing unity among the students, as the integration process at the school level is slow and tottering.

Table 6 addresses Malaysian languages and their importance for national unity. The percentages for the items in this table show quite a significant drop from the items in Table 5. Many students (74%) saw the English language as important for national unity, but only 64% felt that English promoted national unity. A similar pattern is observed for BM, whereby 71% saw its importance for national unity, but only 64% believed that BM promoted national unity. Relatedly, Ya'acob et al.'s (2011) found that BM promoted unity, and the usage of different languages did not hinder unity and integration.

Notably, item (b) that measures the importance of BM for national unity scored the highest mean score of 4.04; followed by item (d) for English (mean score 3.99); hence, indicates the students' awareness of the importance of both BM and English as agendas for national integration. What the students were less certain about were the ways that these languages encouraged national unity among the plural society of Malaysia.

Table 6

Malaysian languages and their importance for national unity

Statement	Agree + Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree + Strongly Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Mean Score
Bahasa Melayu promotes national unity.	64	9	28	3.97
Bahasa Melayu is important for national unity.	71	13	16	4.04
English promotes national unity.	64	7	29	3.90

Table 6 (Continued)

Statement	Agree + Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree + Strongly Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Mean Score
English is important for national unity.	74	7	19	3.99
Vernacular languages promote national unity.	35	17	48	3.26
Vernacular languages are important for national unity.	39	29	32	3.14

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The study sets forth to identify the language for education and the language for national unity among university students. The findings indicate that the students viewed the English language as important for both national agendas, i.e. unity and education; while BM is mainly valuable for national unity. Meanwhile, VL scored rather poorly on the education and national unity scales.

The findings demonstrate university students' strong preference for the English language in practice and usage for instrumental purposes of education and employability. This is in line with Liu (2019, p. 15) who explained that "... fluency in English boosts employability considerably has become a strong incentive for higher education institutions, since they are responsible for educating the workforce for a knowledge-based labour market and improves mobility in terms of rising global trade relations and collaborations". Dass (2018) substantiated this by stating that the private sector functions almost entirely in English and candidates must be proficient

in the language to be employed. Relatedly, Ting et al. (2017) discovered that Malaysian employers differentiated language proficiency and communication skills as separate qualities; whereby candidates with average English proficiency would be considered if they had good communication skills. Good communication skills increase employability and opportunities for career advancement, thus must be emphasised for graduates to perform well in the future (Ting et al., 2017).

Therefore, based on the advent of English as the language for modernisation and communication; as well as university students' reliance on English and BM for national unity and education, this study refutes How et al.'s (2015) earlier conclusion that rated BM and English as having a low vitality compared to VL. The usage of English in Malaysia does not show any signs of slowing down, especially in a highly globalised, connected world. A downside, however, on the emphasis of English is the widening socio-economic gap for those who can afford to send their children to English

medium schools, and those who attend national government schools with BM as the MOI (David, et al., 2017).

The findings that the English language is prioritised by Malaysian university students for both education and national unity resonate with many existing studies that underline the importance of revising the NLP to reflect the current need and socioeconomic wellbeing of its citizens (Coluzzi, 2017). Furthermore, Wong (2017) claimed the language medium policy as dysfunctional due to its failure in creating a united nation, plus the strong resistance from the Chinese community who ran the vernacular schools. Based on the data, perhaps, the NLP should consider prioritising the English language as MOI, and for official purposes. However, arguing against Coluzzi (2017), the suggestion to confer official status to minority languages as subjects in schools is not quite relevant in the current education and national agenda milieu, as the participants of this study disregard VL for education and national unity.

Ang et al. (2015) however, suggested that the key to integration was by creating an ethnically neutral national identity, compatible with diversity, instead of harmonising the various ethnic as practising a common culture. Likewise, Md. Yusof and Esmacil (2017) in their reconstruction of Malaysian plural society through visual culture, raised the issue of whether Malaysians needed a collective identity? The findings of this study showed that

university students identified with the national language, BM, for national unity, as well as education; hence emphasises that to a large extent, Malaysians desire a national identity and a sense of belonging to a country. Substantiating this, Liu (2019) argued that local languages were important symbol of national/regional solidarity, were necessary to access public service positions, and facilitated the learning of a second language.

Based on the findings, this study proposes that the English language is emphasised for educational and instrumental purposes, plus national integration. Furthermore, as BM is still highly respected and acknowledged as the national language, Malaysians should preserve their sociocultural identities and values but inculcate and practise a high sense of nationalism and integration. BM should be treated as a tool to unite Malaysians, rather than viewed as a vehicle propagating a certain ethnic or community, exclusively belonging to one race. Therefore, overt strategies and frameworks are needed to promote the usage of BM nationwide. As a national language, BM should be learned, mastered, and used equally by all Malaysians to foster national unity (Education Malaysia Hub, 2019). Likewise, Lee et al. (2013) identified the role played by university in promoting national unity through dialogue, and a more interactive and proactive way of teaching and learning that pushed policies and ideologies of national unity via practices. This is because, the multilingual character of an institution

such as university could be perceived as the national identity in itself (Ting, 2013).

Though it is acknowledged that the English language is taking the prominent lead as the language for communication and internalisation, BM is still very much respected as the national language. This shows that while some youths may grapple with a sense of a collective identity (Ang et al., 2015), they still highly value their national language, and held an instrumental view of the English language for education and careers.

The earlier findings are indeed valuable in shaping Malaysia's educational landscape and pointing the nation in the right direction for national unity. Despite the saturation of similar suggestions, issues that involve ethics, languages, education, and cultures are always provocative, delicate, and sensitive to many; hence, require much deliberation, before any enactment. Nevertheless, to reiterate Coluzzi's (2017) propositions for better policies to improve socioeconomic standings of the citizens, and BM's status as a language; as well as to emphasise the importance of English, and national unity, a quote by Tun Mahathir in 1979 is relevant:

"... True nationalism means doing everything possible for the country, even if it means learning the English language." (Mahathir, 1999).

This study is limited by the number of participants, and the context of where the questionnaire was distributed. Future studies might want to explore the relationship between the plural society of Malaysia and the language they perceive suitable

for education and national unity with a much bigger sample to obtain more valid, significant results.

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