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Language Practice and Language Ideology of Students and Teachers in Malaysian Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on two components of language: - language practice and language ideology. The study aimed to look into details of the language practice of English, Malay, and Mandarin when used orally by students and teachers in Malaysian secondary schools; and their perceptions toward the three languages. Spolsky's (2009) framework of language management looking at language policy via language practices or beliefs was applied. 12 Malaysian secondary schools comprising one Chinese Independent secondary school and 11 National secondary schools while 347 students and 351 teachers were served as the research sites and participants. Questionnaires and interviews were used as instruments of investigation. The findings of the study showed that i) Malay is the language most practised by the students and teachers in National secondary schools; ii) students and teachers of Malaysian secondary schools agree on the importance of English, and, iii) the language ideology of English noted by students was not practised. The language policy makers are recommended to consider the gap between language practice and language ideology when designing and implementing new language policies.

Keywords: Language policy; language practice; language ideology; Malaysian schools

Introduction

Malaysian government initiated many language policies over the years since independence, to produce human resources with multiple language competence. One of the policies was the introduction of 'Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English' or *Pengajaran-Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris* (henceforth *PPSMI*), an educational language policy implemented in 2003. However, the intended 11-year programme has been short-lived as it was terminated after 9 years of implementation. This was caused by several factors including complaints from various sections.

The implementation of *PPSMI* unveiled the Malaysian Educational Ministry, which acted as the educational language policy maker might not have enough information about the needs of the targets and the values and attitudes of the targets they were serving. The former Deputy Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who is also former Education Minister of Malaysia, had given a statement during the dialogue session on the Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025, "I do not know the root of the problem ..." adding that "it could be due to the quality of teachers and interest of students." (*The*

Star, 2014). This showed that there is a gap between formulated language policy (*PPSMI*) and the situated stakeholders' sociolinguistic practice and attitudes.

In line with Spolsky's (2009) theory of language management, the focus of this study would be on the language practice and language ideology of students and teachers.

Definition of Terms

Language practice. Language practice refers to the habitual pattern selection among the varieties that make up its linguistic repertoire (Spolsky, 2004, p. 5). It is also the observable behaviours and choices of linguistic features in a language community (Spolsky, 2009, p. 4). Language practice is acquired through constant constructive interaction with the social environment (Spolsky, 2004, p. 7).

Language ideology. Language ideology is the general and consensual set of beliefs about appropriate language and language use, values or statuses shared by the members of the same speech community to the language or the varieties (Spolsky, 2004, p. 5; 2009, p. 4). This belief is derived from the belief about appropriate language practices and formed a consensual ideology. Values and prestige are assigned on the language varieties. Therefore, this may influence the language practice of the community (Spolsky, 2004, p. 14).

In the context of this study, language practice is defined as the habitual or regular language(s) used among the varieties by the community. The community is specifically the students and the teachers. The languages used refers to oral English, Malay, and Mandarin. Language ideology refers to the general and consensual view about language and language used (language practice), statuses by the community, specifically the students and the teachers towards oral English, Malay, and Mandarin.

Research Objectives

This study aimed to compare the language practice of English, Malay, and Mandarin among students and teachers orally in Malaysian secondary schools; and to compare the perceptions of students and teachers in Malaysian secondary schools toward English, Malay, and Mandarin. Research questions were derived from the research objectives. The following research questions were formulated. 1. How frequent do students and teachers practise the languages of English, Malay, and Mandarin orally in Malaysian secondary schools? 2. What are the students' and teachers' perceptions toward the three languages?

Research Design

The study adopted the mixed-method approach to look into the details of students' and teachers' patterns of language practice of English, Malay, and Mandarin; and their perceptions or language ideology towards the three languages. Quantitative data and qualitative data were collected concurrently; the qualitative data was the primary data and the quantitative data was the embedded data.

The Schools

The study was conducted in 12 Malaysian secondary schools. These schools comprised one Chinese Independent secondary school and 11 National secondary schools. These secondary schools were randomly selected from ten districts in the state of Selangor.

The Sample

The sample of this study comprised of 347 students and 351 teachers.

Table 1

Number of Student Respondents and Teacher Respondents in Malaysian Secondary Schools

Types of school	Student respondents	Teacher respondents
National secondary schools	299	340
Chinese Independent secondary school	48	11
Total	347	351

The respondents of survey comprised 227 female students and 120 male students; 292 female teachers and 59 male teachers. Furthermore, four students and six teachers were interviewed (N=10).

Table 2

Student Interviewees' Demographic in Malaysian Secondary Schools

Types of school	Student interviewees				
	Gender		Ethnicity		
	Female	Male	Chinese	Malay	Indian
National secondary schools	2	0	2	0	0
Chinese Independent secondary school	0	2	2	0	0
Total	2	2	4	0	0

Two student interviewees were randomly selected, one was from the 11 National secondary schools and the other was from the Chinese Independent secondary school.

Table 3

Teacher Interviewees' Demographic in Malaysian Secondary Schools

Types of school	Teacher interviewees				
	Gender		Ethnicity		
	Female	Male	Chinese	Malay	Indian
National secondary schools	3	0	1	1	1
Chinese Independent secondary school	3	0	2	0	1
Total	6	0	3	1	2

Though interviewees were randomly selected, the research encountered bureaucratic problem of being rejected by many administrators of the National secondary schools.

The instruments

The corpus of analysis in the study consisted of questionnaires and audiotape recordings of interview. Questionnaires were used to obtain the quantitative data whereas the interview recordings were used to gather the qualitative data.

Questionnaire. Two sets of questionnaires were used to investigate the frequency of language practice and the language ideology of the participants toward English, Malay, and Mandarin. Both sets of questionnaires were set in trilingual (Malay, English, and Mandarin languages) adopted from Models of Gao (2011), Vdovichenko (2011), Lee (2007), and Gardner (2004) to suit the condition of the participants. The translated

questionnaires were validated by one language teacher and two editors of a private publisher.

The five-point Likert scales to indicate frequency of language practice were ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (always) and the scale to measure agreement with language ideology ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Analysis of questionnaires was done through SPSS version 22.

Interviews. The protocol of interviews was designed parallel to the role of the interviewees in the education domain as a student or a teacher. The teachers were interviewed individually but the students were interviewed in pairs. The data was recorded and the average length of interviews with every student interviewees and teacher interviewees was about 25 minutes and 40 minutes respectively.

The interview recordings were transcribed and validated by the interviewees. Codes were given to the interviewees of the schools for the purpose of interviewees' secrecy. The student interviewees of the Chinese Independent secondary school are given the codes as CIS 1 and CIS 2; student interviewees of National secondary schools as NS 1 and NS 2; teacher interviewees of Chinese Independent secondary school as CIT 1, CIT 2 and CIT 3; and teacher interviewees of National secondary schools as NT 1, NT 2 and NT 3. The transcribed data was analyzed according to different themes.

Result and Discussion

The result comprised details of language practice and language ideology of students and teachers of Malaysian secondary schools.

Language Practice of Malaysian Secondary School Respondents

This section provides the findings of what Malaysian secondary school students and teachers say about their language practice of English, Malay, and Mandarin.

Language Practice of Students

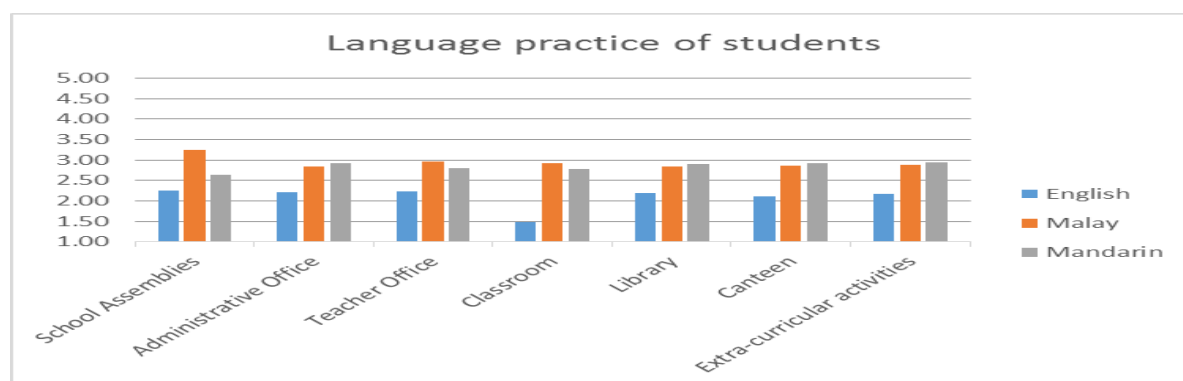


Figure 1. Language practice of students in Malaysian secondary schools

Analysis showed that English was the language that is least practised by the student respondents in the secondary schools, specifically in the classroom setting which held 1.5 (never) as the mean of language practice.

From the analysis, it can be deduced that the language most practised by the student respondents was Malay, followed by Mandarin. It appears that language practice between Malay and Mandarin by the student respondents was averagely similar with a means of between 2.5 and 3.0 (rarely to sometimes) in all settings. Of the three languages

noted, the language practice of English was the lowest with the means ranging from 1.5 to 2.5 (never to rarely).

Language Practice of Teachers

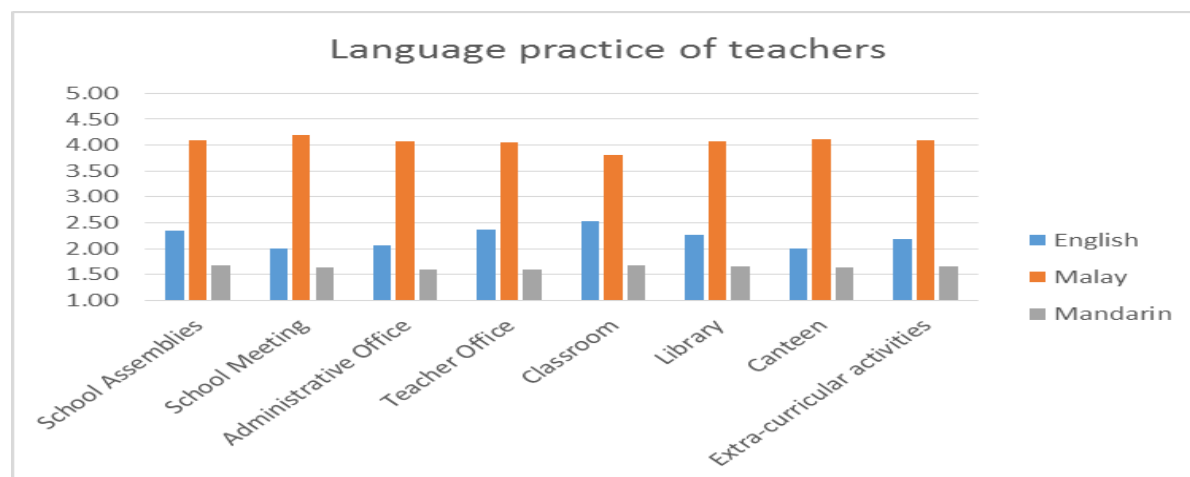


Figure 2. Language practice of teachers in Malaysian secondary schools

As Figure 2 illustrates, language practice of the teacher respondents showed that Malay was comparatively higher than the language practice of English or Mandarin. It appears that Malay was the most frequently practised language among the teachers in Malaysian secondary schools with a means of between 3.5 and 4.0 (sometimes to very often) in all settings.

Between English and Mandarin, the language practice of English was more frequent than Mandarin. From the analysis, the language practice of English by teachers was with a means ranging from 2.0 to 2.5 (rarely) and followed by Mandarin as the lowest, having the means of less than 2.0 (never).

Comparison of Language Practice of Student Interviewees in Malaysian Secondary Schools

Results noted from the analysis suggest that student interviewees from the Chinese Independent secondary school and National secondary schools practised the three languages - English, Malay, and Mandarin in different ways.

For instance, it was found that Mandarin served as the main language used by the student interviewees in Chinese Independent secondary school (see Extract 1).

Extract 1

CIS1、CIS2:一般上老师都是华语。除了非华裔的老师。英语中心的老师都是英语。

[CIS1, CIS2: Generally all teachers are (communicating) in Mandarin. Except those non-Chinese teachers. The teachers in the Just English Centre are (communicating) in English.]

As seen, Mandarin was used by the student interviewees in Chinese Independent secondary school with their teachers. This is highly the case because in Chinese Independent school, Mandarin would have served as the medium of instruction and also

the common language of communication among themselves, considering that they are all of the same ethnicity. Clearly, English is rarely used except in the English language centre, for educational purposes.

However, among student interviewees in National secondary schools, the three languages were used interchangeably by the student respondents with different interlocutors (see Extract 2).

Extract 2

NS1: ……就好像对着张老师，我们就会讲华语啦。如果是其他的华裔老师都是英语呀，国语呀，马来文。

[NS1: ...for example with Miss Chong, we communicate in Mandarin. If other Chinese teachers then English, Malay language.]

NS1: 因为上课的时候，跟他一起上课就用英语呀。在班上是用英文、马来文沟通。所以自然

NS1: because during the teaching and learning process, we use English. In class, use English, Malay language to communicate. So, it is natural.]

NS1: 讲马来文。

[NS1: communicate in Malay language.]

In National secondary schools, Malay was used by the students when communicating with their teachers and school mates. It is assumed that this is because the environment of these schools are more multilingual with teachers and students coming from different ethnic backgrounds as well as among themselves, again, depending on their ethnic backgrounds.

It also appears that there is more diversity in National secondary schools where English may also serve as the language of communication depending on the ethnic background of the students and other interlocutors. When English is used for educational purpose during the teaching and learning process, it is used by the students when they are communicating with their teachers.

Comparison of Language Practice of Teacher Interviewees in Malaysian Secondary Schools

From the analysis, ethnic backgrounds of the teachers serve as the determining factor of language practice of teachers in Malaysian secondary schools.

Extract 3

CIT1: 华语为主。

[CIT1: Mainly in Mandarin.]

研究员：也是只是华语。那么，比如说那教英文或者马来文的老师呢？

[Researcher: Also Mandarin only. So, for example those teachers who are teaching English or Malay?]

CIT1: 马来文咯。

[CIT1: Malay.]

CIT1: 然后英文老师用英文。

[CIT1: Then English teachers use English.]

It is found that Mandarin also served as the main language used by the teacher interviewees in Chinese Independent secondary school. This is highly because the ethnic backgrounds of the teachers, who are of the same ethnicity. However, Malay and English also served as common language when the teachers are communicating with Malay teachers and teachers who are teaching English (see Extract 3).

Extract 4

NT1: 如果是马来同事，我就会用马来文……华人同事我很自动也是华文咯。
就是我会根据你是什么种族的，才来用什么语言。

[NT1: If it is Malay colleague, I will use Malay language ... With Chinese colleague then I automatically use Mandarin. I will base on the ethnicity of the person to decide what language to be used.]

It also appears that the three languages were used interchangeably by the teacher interviewees with different interlocutors in National secondary schools. The ethnic backgrounds of the teachers served as the determining factor of language practice among teachers in National secondary schools (see Extract 4).

Language Ideology of Malaysian Secondary School Respondents

This section provides the findings of what Malaysian secondary school students and teachers think about the languages of English, Malay, and Mandarin.

Language ideology of Students

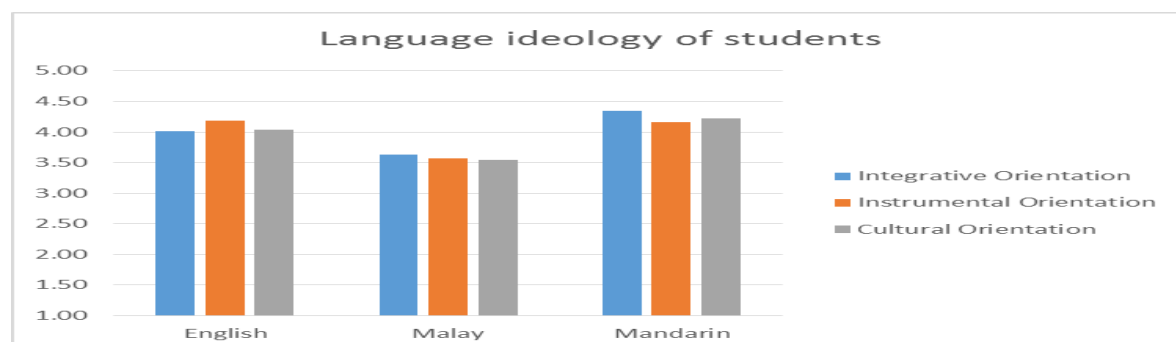


Figure 3. Language ideology of students in Malaysian secondary schools

The analysis showed that students of Malaysian secondary schools are neutral to strongly agree with the importance of the three languages. It appears that the language ideology towards English and Mandarin by the student respondents was averagely similar with a means of between 4.0 and 4.5 (agree to strongly agree).

Of the three languages, the student respondents are neutral to agree with the importance of Malay with a means ranging from 3.5 to 4.0. It can be deduced that the student respondents agree that English is more important compared to Mandarin and Malay.

Language Ideology of Teachers

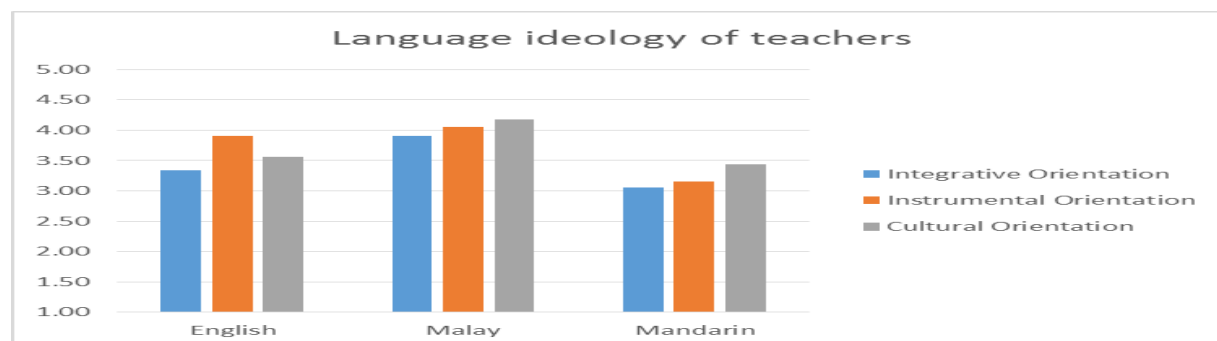


Figure 4. Language ideology of teachers in Malaysian secondary schools

From the analysis, the teacher respondents of Malaysian secondary schools perceived Malay as the most important language, followed by English and Mandarin as the lowest. The teacher respondents see Malay as the most important language with a means of language ideology ranging between 3.5 and 4.0 (neutral to agree).

As seen, English is also perceived as important language with a means of between 3.0 and 4.0 (neutral to agree). Of the three languages, the teacher respondents least agree on the importance of Mandarin. The means ranged between 3.0 and 3.5 (neutral).

Comparison of Language Ideology of Student Interviewees in Malaysian Secondary Schools

The analysis suggests that student interviewees from both the Chinese Independent secondary school and National secondary school have the same perception towards the three languages – English, Malay, and Mandarin.

English language ideology of student interviewees

It is found that English serves as an important language for educational purposes (see Extract 5).

Extract 5

CIS1: 重要啊英语！以后我们出国深造都是需要用英语，沟通的时候也是用英语。

[CIS1: Important, English! We need to use English when we go for further study overseas; for communication also use English.]

Extract 6

研究员:ok, 你们怎样看英文的咧?

[Researcher: Ok, how do you see English?]

NS1: 因为在通常, 在日常生活都会有关联到。就像跟人家沟通, 改天做工啊, 现在读书啊都会用到。

[NS1: because (it) is related to our normal life. It is used to communicate with family members, during work in future, and now study also use.]

NS1: 因为改天上了大学是要用英文。

[NS1: because English is used in university in future.]

The student interviewees of Chinese Independent secondary school and National secondary schools agreed on the importance of English being used as the educational language in their tertiary studies when they are either local or overseas. As seen, English is also perceived as important communicative language in the advancement of the students (see Extract 6).

Malay Language Ideology of Student Interviewees

The student interviewees of both schools agreed that Malay is important as the communicative language and educational language.

Extract 7

CIS1: 国语一般只在国内重要。如果我们离开马来西亚便不重要了。

[CIS1: Malay is generally important locally. If we leave Malaysia, (it) is no longer important.]

The student interviewee of Chinese Independent secondary school perceived Malay as an important communicative language locally. This language is no longer being practised once the student interviewee is not in Malaysia (see Extract 7). It is assumed that it is because of the diversity in Malaysia, Malay is used as the communicative language when communicating with multi-ethnic interlocutors.

Extract 8

研究员:……学校 science 和 maths 用什么语言教? 现在。

[Researcher: what language is used to teach the subjects of science and math(ematics) in school? Now.]

NS2: 啊, science 分 3 科。可是只有 bio 一科是用英文。

[NS2: Science is sub-divided into 3 subjects. But only bio(logy) is using English.]

NS1: 其他国文。

[NS1: Others are (in) Malay.]

From the analysis, Malay is practised as the educational language in National secondary school. The student interviewees explained that among the three pure science subjects and Mathematics, Biology is the only subject conducted in English by their teachers. Other Mathematics and Science subjects are conducted in Malay (see Extract 8).

Mandarin Language Ideology of Student Interviewees

The student interviewees of Chinese Independent secondary school have perceived Mandarin as common language in school. They used Mandarin when communicating with their teachers and school mates of the same or different ethnicity who have the competence of Mandarin.

Extract 9

CIS1、CIS2: 和同学? 在课室的时候我们也不讲英语。我们都用华语。除非我们在英语中心。

[CIS1, CIS2: With schoolmates? We also do not speak English when we are in the classroom. We speak Mandarin, unless we are at the Just English Centre.]

CIS2: 和非华裔同学我们都不用英语呀！他们都是会讲华语的。

[CIS2: with the non-Chinese schoolmates we do not speak English. They are able to communicate in Mandarin.]

As seen, Mandarin is not only used when communicating with their interlocutors of the same ethnicity. Mandarin is used when they are communicating with their school mates of other ethnicity. Mandarin is the dominant communicative language in school (see Extract 9). But Mandarin is perceived differently by the student interviewees of National secondary schools.

Extract 10

NS1: 团结种族的语言？

[NS1: Language to unite people?]

NS1、NS2: 华人。

[NS1, NS2: Chinese.]

The student interviewees have the perception that Mandarin played the role as the tool to unite the Chinese community (see Extract 10). As seen, Mandarin is to be used as communicative language by the student interviewees with interlocutors of same ethnicity. It is the common communication language by the student interviewees with the Chinese community though there are Chinese in Malaysia who are not competent in Mandarin.

Comparison of Language Ideology of Teacher Interviewees in Malaysian Secondary Schools

The teacher interviewees of Chinese Independent secondary school and National secondary school may have different perception towards the three languages.

English Language Ideology of Teacher Interviewees

The teacher interviewees of Chinese Independent secondary school and National secondary schools have the same perceptions towards English.

Extract 11

CIT2: Kalau bahasa Inggeris, sebagai bahasa antarabangsa, international language maka kita juga tidak boleh mengabaikannya.

[CIT2: If English, being the international language, therefore we cannot ignore it.]

Extract 12

NT2: Bahasa Inggeris, saya setuju, bahasa antarabangsa, bahasa perantaraan untuk bekerja apa.

[NT2: English, I agree, international language, the medium for whatever job]

Though the teacher interviewees of these schools are of different ethnicities, they agreed that English is an important international language (see Extract 11). This language is practised by the interviewees when communicating with their interlocutors worldwide.

English is also perceived as the career language or communicative language in the business field (see Extract 12). It is an important language for their students in this sector.

Malay Language Ideology of Teacher Interviewees

The teacher interviewees of Chinese Independent secondary school and National secondary school perceived Malay differently though they are teaching the language in their school.

The teacher interviewee of Chinese Independent secondary has the perception that Malay is the national language in Malaysia. This shows the importance of this language towards all Malaysians (see Extract 13).

Extract 13

CIT2: cadangan saya atau pendapat saya ialah pelajar, selain bahasa ibundalah, mereka sedikit sebanyak kena faham kedua-dua bahasa ini. Contohnya bahasa Malaysia. Sebagai seorang anak Malaysialah, mereka perlu menguasai tiga bahasalah. Contohnya bahasa ibunda tu mestilah kan? Dari sejak kecil, selepas itu, ei, bahasa Malaysia dan bahasa Inggeris.

[CIT2: (as) my opinion is the students, besides their mother tongue, they need to know these two languages, for example Malay language. As a Malaysian, they need to master three languages. For example, the mother tongue, right? Since young. Then Malay language and English.]

The teacher informant of National secondary school perceived Malay as her identity (see Extract 14).

Extract 14

NT2: akarnya kita ialah bahasa Melayu. Tanpa bahasa Melayu tak ke mana.

[NT2: Malay language is our root. Without Malay language (we) go nowhere.]

It is not only perceived as the communicative language among all Malaysians, it is the identity of the teacher interviewee who is of Malay ethnicity. Interviewees who are of different ethnicities have different perceptions toward this language.

Mandarin Language Ideology of Teacher Interviewees

From the analysis, Mandarin is perceived as the medium of instruction in Chinese Independent secondary school.

Extract 15

CIT3: I think in Chinese Independent Schools, yes, ah the Mandarin language should be considered as the main language or the target language.

As seen, Chinese Independent secondary school is emphasizing on the teaching of Mandarin. It is the main medium of instruction in school (see Extract 15).

Extract 16

NT3: But I do not discriminate among languages you see or not? That's why I explained it to you just now that I see all languages as in, as of the same

level. All languages are used for communication and therefore there is no small language or big language, or important language or less important language. Therefore for me all languages are the same.

The teacher interviewee from National secondary school does not rate the three languages. The interviewee did not perceive Mandarin as more important than English or Malay. Mandarin is perceived as a tool used for communication (see Extract 16).

Conclusion

Language planning is ‘a deliberate, systematic and theory-based attempt to solve the communication problems of a community...’ (Crystal, 2008, p. 268).

The study of the language practice of students and teachers of Malaysian secondary schools showed language practice of the language users in Malaysian secondary schools is different from how they perceived the languages. The language users perceived English as an important educational language in tertiary level as well as important international communicative language. However, English is rarely practiced by students and teachers in schools.

Malay is perceived as national language and important communicative language in Malaysia. It is rarely to sometimes practised by the students; and sometimes to very often practised by the teachers. Furthermore, students perceived Mandarin as the unity language of the Chinese community though there are Chinese who do not have the competency of Mandarin. It is rarely to sometimes practised by the students and never practiced by the teachers in the secondary schools.

The findings of this study revealed the gap between the language practice and the language ideology on the three languages by the students and the teachers. This should be one of the considerations to the policy makers of the country before designing and implementing new language policies in future.

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