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9^B **Maintaining Cultural Values and Identity: The Case of Malay Language Teaching in Singapore**

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INTRODUCTION

Not long ago being a Malay means firstly being a Muslim and secondly, being able to speak Malay or use Malay as the main language of communication. These cultural characteristics perceived of the Malays is reflected in the well-known Malaysian definition of the "Bumiputera" or the indigenous people of the country. Such a definition may not hold true any more; for while the Malays are still almost 100% Muslims, their political and sociolinguistic circumstances had undergone subtle changes over the years. Presently they have already developed a unique identity of their own, quite different from the other ethnic Malays in the archipelago. In this paper the cultural values and identity of Singaporean Malay will be discussed in relation to the sociolinguistic and educational perspective.

The Malays are the largest minority group in Singapore, forming about 15% of the population. Their language is the official national language since 1959 when the country gained its independence and it had stayed that way even after Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1963. For practical reasons, and being an international, commercial and financial centre, the English language had since gained more ground. It is now the predominant language used within the official, administrative, commercial and educational domains.

Although presently the function of Malay language is more symbolic than real, it is still an important media of communication within the country and in the wider region. Geopolitically Singapore is surrounded by Malay speaking countries like Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia and as Malay language is the lingua franca of the region and also for economic reasons, an understanding of the language will continue to put Singaporean in an advantageous position.

In the republic, Malay had been widely understood by a majority of the Indians and is the mother tongue of the "baba Chinese". Among the Malay dialects, the colloquial version of the language known as Bazaar Malay had been the main language of communication among the Javanese, Boyanese, Bugis and others. The retention rate of the Malay language according to the 1957 population census was 99.8%, compared to only 40%, 64% and 29.5% to that of Javanese, Boyanese and Bugis dialect respectively.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND MALAY LANGUAGE POLICY

The history of Malay language teaching and learning dates back to the colonial era where the Malay schools were established and ran parallel with the mission schools, mostly English, the Chinese and the Tamil schools. These Malay primary schools (no secondary Malay school were available until after independence) were able to provide some kind of basic education for the bulk of the Malay population, and over the years had established a core of Malay education group and activists who were predominant during the fifties and sixties.

The language policies during pre-independence were characterised by the different language streams of the schools with Chinese, English, Tamil and Malay schools separated along language and racial lines. Few Malay children attended the English medium schools which were better staffed, well-equipped and better funded, as they were initially run by Christian missionaries. Malay education was only possible up to Primary seven.

During the early phase of independence no major changes to educational policies were implemented until after 1963 when rapid frequent policy changes characterised the education system. Most of these changes were directed at or involved language policies and implementation.

The most important change as far as Malay education is concerned was the establishment of Malay secondary schools which received a tremendous response from the Malay population who had desperately sought for an opportunity to have at least a secondary school education. Thus the period under Malaysia saw a rapid rise in the number of schools and enrolment in those Malay medium schools. At the same time Malay, the national language was taught throughout the English medium schools and encouraged to be taught to the whole population. Consequently passing the Standard One Malay examination became the requirement of the civil service. Malay language

development in terms of numbers and percentages of the population seeking instruction in Malay peaked in this short period.

The next phase saw the decline in the enrolment of Malay school students as rapid as its rise, with the last cohort of Malay school pupils in 1978. The demise was caused by a number of factors, one of which was the inability of the Malay school leavers to obtain employment within the public and private sector in comparison with their English and Chinese educated peers. Unlike the Chinese-medium school graduates, the number of Malay-Muslim businesses were minimal and therefore unable to provide the necessary support. Furthermore it was not a time of full-employment.

In the 1976 Primary One enrolment 98.7% of Malay students were admitted to English medium schools compared of 0.2% of Malay children enrolled in *all* Malay medium schools. Nevertheless although the Malay school was no more in existence, Malay was offered as a “second language” (inappropriately termed, for the learners were mostly native speakers of the language) for them in these English medium schools.

The period after the Goh Report 1978 saw major changes made in the education system. The most important change was the compulsory bilingual language policy which is still in operation today, although with slight modification effected since last year and to be fully implemented in 1993. Instead of becoming an unimportant school subject, the learning of a second language, that is, Chinese for the Chinese pupils, Tamil for the Tamil speaking Indians and Malay for the Malays was made compulsory at the primary and secondary schools. Furthermore the passing of a second language was made as a special entry requirement into pre-university and higher educational institutions. For the Chinese pupils, nine Chinese schools were to be maintained as a bastion of Chinese culture, offering both Chinese and English at the first language level. In addition pre-school education, known as pre-primary classes were established, offering Chinese as a second language but these opportunities were not extended to Indian and Malay pupils until the scheme was scrapped in the last two years.

For the majority of the Malay pupils the outcome of the policy is that every Malay child undergoing their schooling in the government schools, in effect, learns English as a first school language, or the language of instruction, and Malay as the second school language or as one of the subjects in the school system. The initial impact of the new policy was that the number of Malay language learners at first dwindled due to the scrapping of the national language from the curriculum and the inadmission of the Chinese and other races who were made to learn their own language, instead of learning Malay as a second language as they used to. Nevertheless Malay language was ensured of a place

in the curriculum, at least for the Malay children, as the Malays themselves were also not admitted to learn other ‘second languages’ like Mandarin or Tamil.

As the years went by, recognising the need to acquire proficiency in the language for regional communication, and potentially smaller pool of leaders who at least understand Malay, the language was offered as a third language along with other third languages such as French, German and Japanese, but this opportunity is to be made available to only the top 10% of each school cohorts. Thus besides being taught as a second language Malay is also taught as a third or foreign language as well as at the first language level to those Malay students who are in the top 10% bracket.

In the modified new education system implemented in 1993 the term second language is now changed to *mother tongue* along with other small modification in the labelling of the academic streams. Therefore, in the primary school, after streaming at Primary four, depending on the general ability of the Malay pupils, Malay language can be taken as the first language or higher Malay for those pupils who are in the top ability category, as the mother tongue or second language by the majority of the pupils and also at the basic level to the weakest student population. The same three teaching levels will also be implemented at the secondary schools where Malay will be taught as *Higher Malay*, *Malay Language* and *Malay as a third language* to those who are eligible. This feature is not available for the Tamil and Mandarin.

It is apparent that in effect, language competency formed the basis of the bilingual language policy and streaming into the different kind of streams or course that pupils undergo during their schooling years. It was assumed that higher ability pupils were more competent to take two languages at the first language level excluding a foreign language; for the weaker pupils instructions in the second languages will be made easier, since they will need to pay more attention to the study of the English language. But although instruction for the different subjects were not conducted in the second languages, upon demand they will be made available.

In addition the mother tongue is also used as the medium through which another subject is being taught – Moral Education for pupils taking Malay language in the primary schools. Along the same principle, religious knowledge was taught in the second languages of the pupils until it was scrapped off from the ordinary secondary school curriculum, (it is still available upon demand outside the normal curriculum).

MALAY LANGUAGE, CULTURAL VALUES AND IDENTITY

Language is closely related to culture; it is both the symbol and an expression of cultural vitality. It creates for its speaker a social personal identity, a sense of the community they belong to. "It is never easy for other's to get the same "feel" for the language as those who grew up with it have". Halliday (1978).

In the new curriculum mother tongue learning had been entrusted as the main medium through which cultural transmission and imbibement would take place. The main motivation behind this statement was the wish to inculcate good positive Asian values to the young and to prevent them from embracing the negative side of 'western' life styles such as lacking in work ethics and hippism which was rampant at that time. This concern was actually directed more towards English-educated Chinese who were fast becoming culturally uprooted and ignorant of their own culture, but it also applies to a lesser extent to the Malays and Indians who hitherto seemed to be more conservative and had adhered more to their traditional customs and religion.

With this policy, all pupils will learn their own ethnic languages through which their own culture will be inculcated. There will be no fear of one's own cultural values being eroded or dissipated; each culture could therefore be preserved as it is assumed that the best "tool to unlock the treasures of a culture and civilization attached to it" Lee, C (1978) is language.

For the Malays the translation between policy and practice means that it is the *Malay language class* that has become the main media for cultural transmission in the schools as neither the Malay medium schools nor the 'superschools' or special assistance schools are in existence. The time for the potential transmission of cultural values are also limited to the 4 or 5 hours a week contact between Malay pupils and their Malay teachers.

Hence indirectly, the Malay teacher becomes the source of cultural heritage, bearing the responsibility as value transmitter, mediating between the traditional value system and the new pluralistic, or other dominant Singaporean value, at the same time they are also mediates between the values of parents and of the school. The role of the Malay teacher becomes more important when an increasing number of housewives joined the workforce, thus leaving their school-going children to be shaped by their teachers and peers.

Within such a scenario how does Malay language function in society, and what is the effect on the Malay values and identity? One of the observable consequence on the Malays is that, inevitably most of them have been bilingual in English and Malay. English which hitherto was only available to a fraction of the population is now the common language of the masses. The 1990 statistics

on the most frequent language used at home by Primary One cohorts shows English to be the most frequent language spoken by 10.6% of Malay households.

Bilingualism had not only been instrumental in opening more opportunities and access to areas which hitherto was unavailable but had displayed a positive impact on racial integration and communication. There is now a selection of languages that could be used for inter-ethnic communication and for the development of the pluralistic Singaporean identity.

Nevertheless one undesirable but unavoidable consequence is the inevitable loss of mother tongue competence among the Malays. Code-switching and code-mixing is rampant not only among the young but also among the adult population. While the phenomenon is common for bilinguals, the restricted domain for Malay usage in the formal domain had presented the problem in a negative light. Formal occasion for the use of the standard register is limited to very few intra-ethnic occasions and even among the Malay-educated such as that of the Malay teacher's association where more opportunity for its use should be present, it is English or a mixture of English and Malay which is normally used. This phenomenon added to the perception the community's lack of proficiency in the command of their own language.

Based on these factors it has to be acknowledged that language shift among Malays has been quite drastic and this had lead to the unwarranted perception of Singaporean Malay being more proficient in English rather than their own language and consequently the fear that the young will abandon their own cultural values.

As far as Malay language examination results are concerned there is no basis for concern, the pass rate of the subject is the highest of the Primary School Leaving Examination, the 'O' and the 'A' Level Examination. Therefore study was made specifically to examine the relationship and effect of several factors on Malay and English language proficiency.

THE STUDY

A study was carried on a sample of 580 Malay students from 5 grade levels. Five variables were selected these were bilingual language background, or the amount of English used with members of the family, socio-economic status as represented by mother's educational level (because when compared to a

composite of socio-economic variables like parent's income, father's educational level, type of housing etc, it was found that mother's education had the closest correlation with academic ability and language ability); gender and critical thinking.

Table 1 presents the result of the correlation analysis which indicates the relationship of the variables with Malay language competence as compared to English language competence. Non significant negative correlations was obtained between socio-economic status and bilingual background with Malay language competency. On the other hand, the correlation between English language competency and the same variables show significant positive correlation. In the case of gender, it was shown that positive correlation exists between gender and the same variables including language competency, with the girls performing significantly better than their male counterparts.

TABLE 1

Inter-Correlations of Selected Variables on Malay and English

	ML	EL	GA	CT	MEDN	BIL	SEX
ML	1	.22*	.39*	.06	-.06	-.08	-.16*
EL		1	.70*	.15*	.23*	.27*	-.17*
GA			1	.17*	.17*	.11*	-.16*
CT				1	.07	.07	-.11*
MEDN					1	.24*	.08
BIL						1	-.14*
SEX							1

* significant beyond .01 level

The same set of variables were analysed using path analysis procedure where it is possible to quantify the differential effects of the variables on both language competencies. General ability was used as the mediating variable for both path

models as it is envisaged that this variable will be considerable effect on both language ability. The independent variables like socio-economic background, bilingual language background, critical thinking and gender were thought to have an effect on the criterion variable. In the model all the independent variables were assumed to be exogenous in nature.

The initial procedure required Malay language to be regressed on the set of variables to obtain the direct effects of the variable on Malay language, that is, to obtain the standardised beta value. Then general ability, the mediating variable was regressed on the remaining variables where the indirect effects of the variables could be quantified. The results shown in Table 2 reveal that general ability had the largest effect, followed by critical thinking, gender, bilingual language background and mother's education. What emerged from the analysis is a small negative effect of bilingual background and mother's education on Malay language performance.

Similar statistical procedure was conducted in order to specify the causal effect of the same variables on English language competency. The results as presented in Table 2 reveals the opposite effect regarding bilingual language background and socio-economic status. These two variables clearly exerted significant positive effect on English proficiency.

TABLE 2

Effects on Malay Language Competency Using Path Analysis

	Malay Language			English Language		
Variables	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
General Ability	.4426	0	.4426	.6629	0	.6629
Sex	-.1093	-.0128	-.1221	-.0516	-.0202	-.0718
Bilingual	-.1466	-.0496	-.1950	.1276	.0778	.2054
SES	-.1045	.0358	-.0687	.0902	.0561	.1463
Critical Thinking	.0061	.2063	.2124	-.0083	.3236	.3153

Comparison of the two models seems to suggest the small detrimental effect of bilingual background and socio-economic status on Malay language. For every unit of increase in Bilingual language background, it seems that there will be .07 decrease on Malay Language competence, for every unit increase in socio-economic status there will be .1 decrease in Malay Language competence. For English language, the pattern of causal relationship is just the opposite, for every unit increase in bilingual language background there will be .2 unit increase of English language proficiency and for one unit increase in socio-economic status there will be .14 unit corresponding increase in English language competency. Without the mediating effect of general ability the two variables would have exerted greater effects.

It is fair to suggest that as Malays become more effectively bilingual, use more English in their homes, and as they move higher up in the socio-economic ladder, the higher will be their competency in English but the lower will be their competency in Malay. Hence socio-economic status and being bilingual had a subtractive effect on Malay language competence which is the foundation of cultural identity.

Reference to Table 1 and 2 shows a causal relationship between language competency and an aspect culture, critical thinking disposition. Critical Thinking was measured by a newly constructed instrument called the Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory and was used to represent the critical dispositions of the learner. It is hypothesized that critical thinking is to a larger extent an expression of western cultural values as being critical is the basis of a democratic social institution Marzano (1988). In the analysis mentioned before, critical thinking was shown to have a larger effect on English language competency than on Malay language competency which indirectly confirm the hypothesis; but no significant pattern of relationship exists between the variable and Malay language competency. Critical thinking, as the result suggests, had not emerged in the value system of the Malays as yet, but this construct might gain in importance as the society becomes more open or adopt western way of thinking.

The same situation did not apply to general academic ability which is shown to produce a large effect on ability in both languages. The larger effect on English language when compared to Malay seems to suggest a more 'academic component of English language than Malay, but this is expected as it takes more effort to learn a non-native language.

The effect of gender on language competency is also quite significant. Girls seem to be more proficient in both languages than their male counterparts, but this variable will not be discussed further.

CONCLUSION

The main question of the relationship between language, culture and identity seemed to be partly answered. There is cause for concern, especially if fluency in the mother tongue is associated with those in the lower ability group. The effect of narrow confines where Malay values could potentially be transmitted (within the Malay language classroom), if not supported by the home is detrimental.

Hence additional efforts should be made to make Malay language teaching, an effective instrument for cultural transmission. The learning content should be made culturally-rich, not culturally barren or neutral. More literary materials such as fables, folk-lore and legends should be incorporated in the language content. In addition, as Malay teachers are the main cultural agent, they should be equipped with the necessary knowledge of cultural heritage besides having the motivation and ability to pass it on to the pupils.

Another aspect is the matter of religion which is still the principal pillar of Malay culture. The closeness of Malay culture and religion is aptly demonstrated by a well-known principle provided by the maxim of the Minangkabaus which says that "*teguh kaun kerana adat, adat gugur kerana syara*" which means that the strength of the tribe depends on their adherence to customs and traditions but whereupon these customs come in conflict with religion then it is the custom that must be discarded.

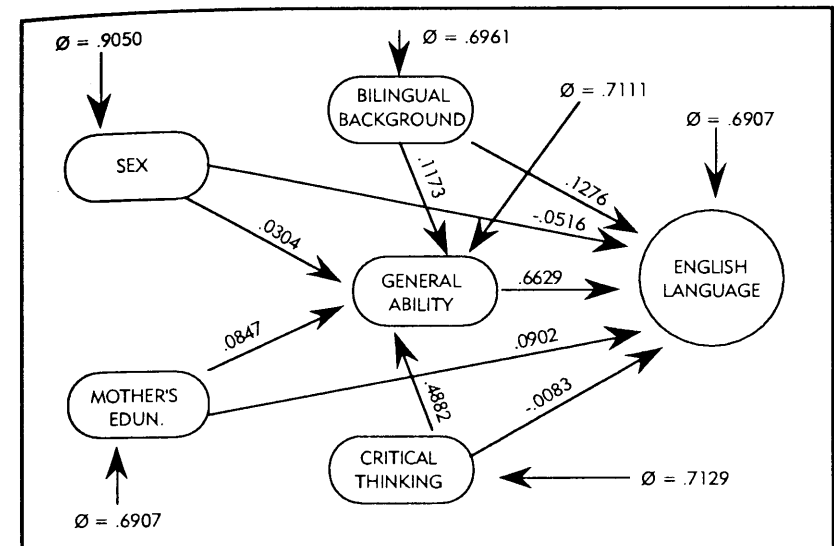
It follows that as Malay culture is so closely entrenched in religious practices, it is not rational to subtract relevant traces of religious aspects from Malay language teaching just for the fear of encroaching on religious sensitivities of other communities. Surely there must be a way of presenting this salient feature of Malay culture that is acceptable to the well-being of a pluralistic society. Otherwise Malay language teaching will be dry and unrealistic.

Recent developments regarding education of the Malays had pointed to the tendency of parents to send their children to the 'Madrassah' or Islamic religious schools which had also offered English, Malay and Arabic. This signifies the need of a section of the community for a more substantial inculcation of cultural values. If this need of the community cannot be met through Malay language teaching in the government schools then it is likely that more such schools will be established and a different picture will emerge.

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Appendix 1A – Path Diagram for English Language Competency



Appendix 1B – Path Diagram for Malay Language Competency

