



## LANGUAGE CHOICE IN EDUCATION IN A MULTILINGUAL SETTING: THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

A. R. M. Mostafizar Rahman\*<sup>1</sup>, Chan Swee Heng<sup>2</sup> and Ain Nadzimah Abdullah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Discipline, Khulna University, Khulna 9208, Bangladesh

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, University Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM, Malaysia

KUS: 09/02-100209

Manuscript received: February 10, 2009; Accepted: October 27, 2010

---

**Abstract:** A state of multilingualism allows people to grow up with access to two or more languages which results in exercising choice of languages for different purposes in different domains. Even within a single domain, education for example, the choice of language varies according to contexts, topics and participants. Since Malaysia is a multilingual country, it is not surprising that everyone in this country speaks at least two or more languages. What languages the Malaysians choose in the education domain constitutes the focus of this paper. It also investigates what influences the choice. The issues were investigated through a questionnaire survey administered to a sample of University Putra Malaysia undergraduates who are seen as representative of Malaysian undergraduates. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings revealed that language choice in education varies according to sub-domains. It was also found that language proficiency, ethnicity, and gender influence the choice of languages.

**Keywords:** Language choice, education domain, multilingualism, proficiency, ethnicity, gender

---

### Introduction

Multilingualism allows people to have access to two or more languages and this allows people to choose languages for different purposes in different contexts. As Fishman (1972) has suggested, one language may be more appropriate than another in certain domains and usually it is the standard or prestigious language that is used in high domains, while the vernaculars are selected in low domains. He also asserts, "Proper usage indicates that only *one* of the theoretically co-available languages or varieties *will* be chosen by particular classes or *interlocutors* on particular kinds of *occasions* to discuss particular kinds of *topics*" (cited in Dil, 1972). Coulmas (2005) also quotes Chatterjee who says, "Ridiculous or sometimes comical will be the effect if the norms of situational selection between the two are violated". Thus, it is of relevance to know what languages are chosen in the Malaysian education domain as it is a multilingual country. This paper, therefore, investigates Malaysian undergraduates' patterns of language choice and use in the education domain. It also investigates the role of proficiency in languages, ethnicity, and gender on the language choice and use. As Bangladesh is also a multilingual country (though with a varied degree), findings of this paper may inject fresh insights into language planning and policy making for education in this country.

---

\* Corresponding author: <mostafiz123@yahoo.com>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53808/KUS.2010.10.1and2.0902-A>

***Linguistic situation in Malaysia:*** The multilingual situation in Malaysia came about primarily due to trade and other economic reasons. Historically, the European languages that came earlier to Malaysia were Portuguese and Dutch. This was followed by English, with British colonization. As a British colony, the use of English in Malaysia occupied both formal and informal domains. During this period, Chinese and Indian languages were also introduced because of the migration of Chinese and Indian labour to Malaysia. The use of English spread rapidly molding an elite group of local users among the Malays, Chinese and Indians who attended English medium schools. This helped increase the number of English speakers. At the same time it was also noted that the number of English medium schools in Malaysia was on the rise and it was linked inextricably to the increasing popularity of the English language. At this stage of development, English was clearly identified as having a distinct advantage over other languages and its status was confirmed by the emphasis given to the education system. Rewards were clearly economic in terms of job opportunities and career advancement. The ability to use English proficiently was perceived by most citizens as a necessity which did not clash with existing values or practices. Though it was a foreign language to most citizens, the education system emphasized the language in the curriculum by using it as a medium of instruction. The result was a generation of competent users of English. This “colonial experiment” went on a trial basis for more than three decades. However, the British raj also allowed ethnic schools—Indian, Chinese and even Punjabi (Gaudart, 1987).

In 1957, with independence, Malaysia inherited an education system that was considered to be a colonial leftover that had to be changed to reflect the new identity of the nation. The National Language Act (1963) saw the demise of the use of English as a medium of instruction when it was officially replaced by Bahasa Melayu (BM). BM became the medium of instruction used in national schools and an exclusively BM medium public university called National University of Malaysia was established in 1970. However, the vernacular languages (Mandarin Chinese and Tamil) survived as mediums of instruction in vernacular primary schools as provided by the Malaysian Federal Constitution (2002). At the secondary level, BM was used as the sole medium of instruction. The decision for the use of the vernacular languages at the primary level was an attempt to appease the ethnic minorities (Indians and Chinese) who essentially felt the need to safeguard their identities. This unique arrangement led to a language situation which is complex and intricate. The new language situation led to diminished importance of English. However, while this was so, its status as a super-ordinate language remained and English continued to enjoy a high esteem. Asmah (1994) sees this situation as a consequence of nationalism and “nationism”. The distinction lies in nationalism attending to the national aspirations of a united race, while “nationism” is seen as important in developing Malaysia as an industrial nation taking its place in globalization.

By the mid-1990s, tremendous changes influenced greatly the language choice in education. A milestone change here was the green light given by the government to start teaching science subjects in English at tertiary education (Ridge, 2004). Moreover, the then Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad declared in 2002 that mathematics and sciences would henceforth be taught in English. This led to greater emphasis on Malays becoming at least bilingual (with BM and English) and non-Malays being trilingual or multilingual (with BM, English and their respective ethnic languages).

***Literature review:*** Language choice is a sociolinguistic phenomenon. The choice of languages might be conscious or unconscious but it does not happen in a vacuum; rather, language operates in a context provided by a speech community. This community may be diglossic, bilingual or multilingual where languages have functional and contextual allocations. For instance, the classical or standard or high variety (H) of Arabic is used for literacy, formal, public and official uses whereas the vernacular, local or low variety (L) is used for informal purposes. Chatterjee

Rahman, A. R. M. M., Heng, C. S. and Abdullah, A.N. 2010. Language choice in education in a multilingual setting: the Malaysian context. *Khulna University Studies* 10 (1&2): 9-22

(1986) shows that the allocation of the two varieties of Bengali to different functional domains is very strict, with no overlapping (cited in Coulmas, 2005). Fasold (1984) however talks about a diglossic situation that involves one H and several L varieties, and he also mentions the possibility of having different 'layers' of varieties where H and L forms overlap.

Multilingual societies inevitably face conflict over language choice, but what makes this language choice an obvious issue and concern? Is the choice natural or forced? What are the intentions of an individual when making a choice? What are the factors that influence a specific choice? In multilingual societies, language choice takes place at two levels: macro and micro. This paper considers only micro constraints which include language proficiency, ethnicity, gender, profession, socio-cultural background and in particular, the domain in which language is used.

Languages can be categorized according to status and domains of use. Domain, in its simplest terms, refers to the context of language use, for instance, that of family, friendship, education, and transaction. Fishman (cited in Dil, 1972) observes:

Domains are defined in terms of institutional contexts or socio-ecological co-occurrences. They attempt to designate the major clusters of interaction situations that occur in particular multilingual settings. Domains enable us to understand that language choice and topic...are...related to widespread socio-cultural norms and expectations.

Several studies have been conducted to investigate the effects of domain on language choice. A pioneering study was that by Greenfield (1972) which reports that in a bilingual Puerto Rican community in New York, Spanish, the low language, is favored in intimate domains such as family, and friendship while English, the high language, is chosen for employment and education. Another well-cited study by Parasher (1980) shows that people in India use the mother tongue and another language in the family whereas English dominates high domains such as education, government and employment besides some low domains, for instance, friendship and neighborhood. Yeh *et al.*, (2004) similarly reports that each individual non-Mainlander group tends to use the national language, Mandarin, more in the high domains than in low domains, and their native languages more in low domains than in high domains. The domain allocation of language choice and use was also found in the works of Nercissians (2001), Arua and Magocha (2002) and Goebel (2002). The concept of domain and domain analysis, however, has been criticized. Pascasio and Hidalgo (1979) and Scotton (1979) have found partial effects of domain on language choice while Gal (1979) and Lu (1988) strongly deny the influence of domain on language choice. Gal (1979) opines that whatever the social situations, only the identity of the participants determines language choice. Other situational factors such as audience, setting, occasion, and purpose have each been shown to influence the form of speech in other communities, and it is necessary to demonstrate rather than to assume the irrelevance of those factors to the Oberwart case in Austria. Lu (1988) also supports Gal with reference to the use of language in Taiwanese family (cited in Yeh *et al.*, 2004).

Constraints of proficiency, ethnicity, and gender on language choice have also been reported. With reference to proficiency, McClure (1977) argues that children start switching when they acquire considerable linguistic proficiency in that language (cited in Appel and Muysken, 1990), whereas David (1999) reports that lack of proficiency in the ethnic language can account for a shift. Hakuta (1991) has investigated the relationships of language choice, proficiency and attitude in a Puerto Rican bilingual education programme in New Haven, Connecticut. She reports that language shift in Hispanic communities in the United States is usually characterized by a combination of processes related to proficiency, choice and attitude.

As far as ethnic identity is concerned, Gal (1979) says that the choice of language can be predicted if one knows the identity of the informant and of the interlocutor. Ferrer and Sankoff (2003) found an equally strong relationship between ethnicity and language choice in their study in Valencia, Spain. The study reports that ethnic identity is most closely related to the motivation for language choice. Similarly, Burhanudeen (2003) reports that the ethnicity of the participants was a contributing factor to the Malays' language choice in Malaysia. Pool (1979) also indicates the effect of ethnicity on language choice when he says that the language to which a speaker shifts is a better predictor of his/her ethnic background than is the language from which he/she shifts.

In relation to the influence of gender in shaping the patterns of language choice, Lu (1988) reports that differences in age, education, gender and residence show different attitudes towards maintenance and legitimate status for the native languages. Chan (1994), however, finds no significant gender difference in the language use of the Minnanrens, a community in Taiwan (cited in Yeh *et al.*, 2004). While there is a continuing debate about language choice, it can still be said that language choice is influenced and constrained by different factors, particularly domain, ethnicity, gender, and proficiency in languages in a multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural society. Coulmas (2005) says that among the many social variables which can influence speakers' choice of language in conversation are community norms and values, ethnicity, speaker's level of education and fluency, proficiency, social relations, relative prestige of the languages involved, and setting.

#### **Methods and Materials**

The study is descriptive and non-experimental. It is grounded on the conceptual framework advocated by Fishman (1972) on domain analysis which in its simple terms, refers to "*who speaks what language to whom and when*" (our italics). It analyzes language choice in the education domain from social and socio-psychological perspectives. The data of the study were collected through a questionnaire survey administered to a sample of three hundred University Putra Malaysia (UPM) undergraduates in November and December, 2006. The sample was selected through "multistage cluster sampling". The questionnaire comprised three parts: Part I-the demographic profile of the respondents; Part II-level of proficiency in languages; and Part III-patterns of language choice and use in the education domain. The questionnaire was prepared by the researchers who adapted items from instruments of previous studies (e.g. Yeh *et al.*, 2004; Hohenthal, 2003). A pilot survey was conducted to study the feasibility of the instrument. A reliability index of 0.74 (Part II) and 0.84 (Part III) were obtained (Cronbach Alpha). The overall reliability was thus 0.79. This is deemed an acceptable figure for the research instrument. Upon the completion of the data collection, these were coded, classified and tabulated for computation and analysis. Eighty questionnaires were found to be incomplete and therefore they were excluded from the final analysis. The analysis was carried out using SPSS to obtain percentage values, frequencies and correlations among the variables.

#### **Results and Discussion**

**Demographic profile of respondents:** Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents as per ethnicity and gender. This table shows that the majority of respondents were Malay (61.82%) followed by Chinese (30%), and Indian (8.18%). As can be seen from the table, the percentage of males was higher than that of females among the Malays whereas the percentage of females was higher than that of males among the Chinese and Indians.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents as per ethnicity and gender

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Total Respondents</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>%</i>
Malay	136	61.82	30	71.43	106	59.55
Chinese	66	30.00	10	23.81	56	31.46
Indian	18	8.18	2	4.76	16	8.99
Total	220	100	42	100	178	100

**Respondents' level of proficiency in languages:** Respondents' proficiency in languages was obtained through the use of a five-point Likert scale with 5= very fluent, 4= fluent, 3= satisfactory, 2= unsatisfactory, and 1= cannot use. Respondents were then categorized as having a low (1-6.7 points), mid (6.71-13.4 points) and high (13.41-20 points) level of proficiency. Data in Table 2 show respondents' proficiency in languages as per ethnicity. Table 2 shows that those who were highly proficient in BM were Malays and Indians (100%). A majority of the Chinese (73%) were also highly proficient. In the case of Chinese languages, the Chinese (93.9%) claimed to be highly proficient in the language. The other ethnic groups did not claim high proficiency in the use of the Chinese languages with the exception of a very small number of Malay respondents (1.5%) having high proficiency in Chinese. For the mid-level proficiency, a range of 10-25% of the respondents reported that they had the ability to use the Chinese languages (Malay 11.8% and Indian 22.2%). In the case of the Indian languages, only Indians reported being highly proficient in these languages. A majority of the other respondents (Malay 97.8% and Chinese 97%) reported themselves as to be in the low category as far as proficiency in the Indian languages was concerned. In the case of English, the pattern that follows is: high proficiency (Indians 94.4%, Malay 40%, Chinese 40%). What is interesting is that the Indians reported that they are equally proficient in using English and Indian languages (94.4% as high and 5.6% as mid proficient in both languages).

Table 2. Respondents' proficiency in languages as per ethnicity (%)

<i>Language</i>	<i>Level of Proficiency</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>		
		Malay	Chinese	Indian
B M	High	100	72.7	100
	Mid	-	27	-
	Low	-	-	-
Chinese	High	1.5	93.9	-
	Mid	11.8	6.1	22.2
	Low	86.7	-	77.8
Indian	High	-	-	94.4
	Mid	2.2	3	5.6
	Low	97.8	97	-
English	High	40.4	40.9	94.4
	Mid	59.6	59.1	5.6
	Low	-	-	-

**Language choice and use in education domain:** Respondents' choice and use of languages in the education domain was obtained through a five point Likert scale with 1= frequently (F), 2= sometimes (S), 3= not applicable (NA), 4= rarely (R) and 5= never use (NU). Respondents marked their choice of languages in seven sub-domains of education (see Table 3).

Table 3. Sub-domains of education

a	Talking to primary school teachers
b	Talking to secondary school teachers
c	Talking to lecturers
d	In classroom peer discussions and talking to classmates of the same mother tongue
e	In classroom peer discussions and talking to classmates of different mother tongues
f	Writing assignments for tertiary studies
g	Reading up for tertiary studies

The sub-domains were related to language choice and use of the undergraduates prior to entering tertiary education and the current language choice and use at the tertiary level. The first two sub-domains attempt to provide the education background that has a bearing on the current patterns of language choice and use at the tertiary level. The details of the patterns of language choice in education are presented below:

**(a) Talking to teachers in primary schools:** Respondents' choice of languages while talking to teachers in primary schools is presented in Table 4. The table shows that the Malays chose BM more (97.1% F) followed by English (6.6% F, 30.2% S). They also reported very negligible (1.5% F, 0.7% S) choice of Chinese languages and nil choice of Indian languages. Chinese respondents naturally chose Chinese languages more (89.4% F) followed by BM (19.7% F, 25.8% S) and English (9.1% F, 36.4% S) but they never chose any Indian language. This could indicate that a majority of them went to Chinese vernacular schools and therefore felt more comfortable in using Chinese languages when talking to their teachers. The Indians chose BM more (66.6% F, 16.7% S) followed by English (61.1% F, 22.2% S). They chose Indian languages also, though not so frequently (33.3% F) but they did not use Chinese languages. In comparison to the data obtained from the Chinese respondents, it would seem that vernacular Tamil schools were not a significant choice for the Indians. The Indians chose English more than any other ethnic groups in this domain. For them the frequency of choice between BM and English was almost same (66.6% and 61.1% respectively). What was apparent in this data was that the Malays and Indians chose BM more whereas the Chinese chose Chinese languages more in this sub-domain. Other than the vernacular Chinese schools being a popular choice among the Chinese, it could be said that the other ethnic groups were likely enrolled in the BM-medium primary schools.

Table 4. Language choice and use in talking to teachers in primary school (%)

f	BM			Chinese			Indian		English			
	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I
F	97.1	19.7	66.6	1.5	89.4	0	0	0	33.3	6.6	9.1	61.1
S	2.2	25.8	16.7	0.7	3	0	0	0	0	30.2	36.4	22.2
R	0	22.2	5.6	0	3	0	0	0	11.1	21.3	21.1	0
N	0.7	31.8	11.1	97.8	4.6	100	100	100	55.6	41.9	33.3	16.7

Note: f = Frequency, M = Malay, C = Chinese, I = Indians, F = Frequently, S = Sometimes, R = Rarely, N = Never

**(b) Talking to teachers in secondary schools:** The choice of language of the respondents while talking to teachers in secondary schools is presented in Table 5. It is shown in the table that the Malays reported to choose BM more frequently (94.1% F) than English (8.1% F, 45.6% S). Though they also reported very negligible frequency of choice of Chinese languages (1.5% F, 0.7% S), they never chose Indian languages. The Chinese chose BM more (62.1% F, 27.3% S) followed by English (59.1% F, 36.4% S) and Chinese languages (46.9% F, 21.2% S). Again they did not use Indian languages. The Indians also used BM more (83.3% F, 16.7% S) followed very

closely by English (83.3% F, 11.1% S). They chose Indian languages as well, though less frequently (11.1% F, 16.7% S) but they did not choose Chinese languages at all. It is interesting to note that the percentage of choice for BM increased among non-Malays when they were talking to teachers in secondary schools compared to primary schools. This could be attributed to the fact that after completing primary education in the vernacular, they receive their secondary education in BM. The pattern of use for English reveals that the use of English varies considerably among ethnic groups. Indians reported the highest frequency for the use of English followed by the Chinese and Malays. The data also shows considerable use of Chinese languages among the Chinese while low frequency of use of Indian languages among Indians. It could be summarized that the multilingual Malaysians show different preferences for language choice and use for this sub-domain in education. Malays strongly preferred the use of BM while there was a balanced choice for BM, Chinese and English for the Chinese at the secondary level. Indians appeared to maintain a balance between the use of BM and English while the use of the Indian languages was far less frequent.

Table 5. Language choice and use in talking to teachers in secondary school (%)

<i>f</i>	BM			Chinese			Indian			English		
	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I
F	94.1	62.1	83.3	1.5	46.9	0	0	0	11.1	8.1	59.1	83.3
S	3.7	27.3	16.7	0.7	21.2	0	0	0	16.7	45.6	36.4	11.1
R	0.7	4.5	0	0	9.1	0	0	0	16.7	16.9	1.5	0
N	1.5	6.1	0	97.8	22.8	100	100	100	55.5	29.4	3.0	5.6

Note: *f* = Frequency, M = Malay, C = Chinese, I = Indians, F = Frequently, S = Sometimes, R = Rarely, N = Never

**(c) Talking to lecturers:** Language choice of the respondents while talking to lecturers is presented in Table 6. It can be seen from the table that the Malays predominantly chose BM (89.7% F) when speaking to lecturers. Only a small percentage of Malays used English frequently for this activity (19.9% F, 45.5% S) but none chose Chinese and Indian languages. Chinese respondents used English (59.1% F, 36.4% S) more than BM (56% F, 30.3% S) and Chinese languages (16.7% F, 13.6% S). They did not use Indian languages. Indians also used English (83.3% F, 11.1% S) more than they used BM (50% F, 22.2% S) or Indian languages (16.7% S). They did not choose to use Chinese languages at all. It seems that BM and English are the two dominant languages used in this sub-domain. Malay respondents generally favoured BM more than English when speaking to lecturers. However, this pattern of choice was reversed for the Chinese and the Indians. These two groups preferred using English over BM. At the tertiary level, it could be said that English has gained dominance over BM for the Chinese and the Indians while the Malays continue to use BM as an extension from the language experience in school.

Table 6. Language choice and use in talking to lecturers (%)

<i>f</i>	BM			Chinese			Indian			English		
	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I
F	89.7	56.0	50.0	0	16.7	0	0	0	0	19.9	59.1	83.3
S	8.9	30.3	22.2	0	13.6	0	0	0	16.7	45.5	36.4	11.1
R	0.7	7.6	16.7	2.2	28.8	5.6	0	0	0	14.7	1.5	0
N	0.7	6.1	11.1	97.8	40.9	94.4	100	100	83.3	19.9	3.0	5.6

Note: *f* = Frequency, M = Malay, C = Chinese, I = Indians, F = Frequently, S = Sometimes, R = Rarely, N = Never

**(d) In classroom peer discussions and talking to classmates of the same mother tongue:**

Respondents' choice of language in classroom peer discussion and talking to classmates of the same mother tongue is presented in Table 7. The table shows that, as expected, Malays chose BM more frequently (97.1% F), followed by very small percentage for the use of English (0.7% F, 43.4% S), and a very negligible use (0.7% S) of the Chinese languages. Following the earlier patterns of language choice, ethnic groups other than Indians did not use Indian languages. As equally expected, Chinese also stated a strong preference for the use of Chinese languages (87.9% F, 10.6% S) in this sub-domain. However, English was more frequently used compared to BM. Indians chose English more frequently (66.7% F, 16.6% S) followed by Indian languages (66.6% F, 11.1% S) and BM (11.1% F, 27.8% S) but they did not choose Chinese languages at all. What is interesting here is that Malay and Chinese respondents favoured their own ethnic languages while Indians showed a much more balanced choice between their ethnic languages and English. The preference for the ethnic languages by the Malays and the Chinese could be linked to the influence of ethnicity while the patterns of language choice by the Indians could be attributed to influence of ethnicity as well as a positive attitude towards English.

Table 7. Language choice and use in classroom peer discussion & talking to classmates of the same mother tongue (%)

<i>f</i>	BM			Chinese			Indian			English		
	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I
F	97.1	9.1	11.1	0	87.9	0	0	0	66.6	0.7	37.9	66.7
S	2.9	18.2	27.8	0.7	10.6	0	0	0	11.1	43.4	54.5	16.6
R	0	25.8	38.9	0.7	1.5	0	0	0	5.6	26.5	4.6	11.1
N	0	46.9	22.2	98.6	0	100	100	100	16.7	29.4	3.0	5.6

Note: *f* = Frequency, M = Malay, C = Chinese, I = Indians, F = Frequently, S = Sometimes, R = Rarely, N = Never

**(e) In classroom peer discussions and talking to classmates of different mother tongues:**

Respondents' choice of language in classroom peer discussion and talking to classmates of different mother tongues is presented in Table 8. Table 8 shows that Malays chose BM more frequently (82.4% F, 11% S) followed by English (18.4% F, 41.9% S) and very negligible choice of Chinese languages (0.7% F, 1.5% S). Chinese also chose BM more (57.6% F, 24.2% S) followed by English (37.9% F, 54.5% S). Though Chinese chose BM with lower frequency compared to Malays, their frequency of choice of English was higher than Malays. Chinese also reported to choose Chinese but with low frequency (12.1% F, 19.7% S). Indians however showed strong preference for the use of English (72.2.7% F, 16.6% S) followed by BM (55.5% F, 27.8% S), but they did not choose Chinese languages in this sub-domain. Indian languages were not chosen at all by the respondents irrespective of ethnicity. From the figures discussed, Malays used BM the most. Chinese preferred to use BM over English while Indians appeared to be most comfortable using English to communicate with classmates of different mother tongues. The data indicates that for inter-group communication, the two most dominant languages used in this sub-domain are BM and English. The increased choice for BM among respondents irrespective of ethnicity could be due to the fact that BM is the national and official language of Malaysia and therefore, respondents had gained more proficiency in this language.

Table 8. Language choice and use in classroom peer discussion & talking to classmates of different mother tongue (%)

<i>f</i>	BM			Chinese			Indian			English		
	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I
F	82.4	57.6	55.5	0.7	12.1	0	0	0	0	18.4	37.9	72.2
S	11.0	24.2	27.8	1.5	19.7	0	0	0	0	41.9	54.5	16.6
R	2.2	10.6	11.1	0	22.7	0	0	0	5.6	16.2	6.1	5.6
N	4.4	7.6	5.6	97.8	45.5	100	100	100	94.4	23.5	1.5	5.6

Note: *f* = Frequency, M = Malay, C = Chinese, I = Indians, F = Frequently, S = Sometimes, R = Rarely, N = Never

**(f) Writing assignments for tertiary studies:** Choice of language of the respondents in writing assignments for tertiary studies is presented in Table 9. The table shows that Malay respondents were reported to choose BM more frequently (78% F, 11% S) followed by English (32.4% F, 36% S) but they never chose Chinese or Indian languages when writing assignments for tertiary studies. Chinese respondents, on the other hand, chose English more (71.2% F, 21.2% S) than they chose BM (42.4% F, 27.3% S) or Chinese languages (4.5% F, 12.1% S) but they never chose Indian languages in this sub-domain. English was most frequently chosen (88.9% F) by Indian respondents for writing assignments followed by BM (27.8% F, 11.1% S). They also indicated that they never chose Chinese and Indian languages for this purpose. What can be seen here is that BM is preferred by Malays when writing assignments while other ethnic groups preferred using English. This phenomenon appears to reflect a change in the policy of using only BM as a dominant language for tertiary classroom learning. Though BM is the officially designated language in the education domain, preference for English in writing assignments for tertiary studies could be attributed to the easy availability of materials in English. The disinclination to use Chinese and Indian languages could however be linked to the fact that these languages are not used as the medium of instruction at the tertiary level.

Table 9. Language choice and use in writing assignments for tertiary studies (%)

<i>f</i>	BM			Chinese			Indian			English		
	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I
F	78.0	42.4	27.8	0	4.5	0	0	0	0	32.4	71.2	88.9
S	11.0	27.3	11.1	0	12.1	5.6	0	0	0	36.0	21.2	0
R	5.9	12.1	22.2	0.7	15.2	0	0	0	11.1	14.0	3.0	11.1
N	5.1	18.2	38.9	99.3	68.2	94.4	100	100		88.9	4.6	0

Note: *f* = Frequency, M = Malay, C = Chinese, I = Indians, F = Frequently, S = Sometimes, R = Rarely, N = Never

**(g) Reading up for tertiary studies:** Respondents' choice of languages in reading up for tertiary studies is presented in Table 10. It can be seen from the table that the Malays chose BM more (78.7% F, 11% S) followed by a small frequency of use of English (36.1% F, 37.5% S) and nil choice of Chinese and Indian languages when reading for tertiary studies. Conversely, Chinese and Indians indicated that they preferred using English (68.2% F, 30.3% S; 88.8%F respectively)

for the same purpose. Chinese and Indian respondents chose BM at a low frequency (31.8% F, 36.4% S; 33.3% F, 16.7% S respectively) and their choice for respective ethnic languages were found to be almost negligible for tertiary studies. The data point to the relative difference in language choice and use between ethnic groups for reading materials which could be available in English, BM and other languages. Malays are likely to prefer translated works while the Chinese and Indians are open to reading works in English. Such a pattern of language choice could be linked to several factors which include the nature of the domain, level of education, availability and unavailability of materials in different languages, language policy and planning, attitudes towards languages, and language proficiency to large extents revealing that the almost negligible choice of Chinese languages by Malays and Indians and choice of Indian languages by Malays and Chinese could be attributed to lack of or no proficiency.

Table 10. Language choice and use in reading up for tertiary studies (%)

<i>f</i>	BM			Chinese			Indian			English		
	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I
F	78.7	31.8	33.3	0	16.7	0	0	0	0	36.1	68.2	88.8
S	11.0	36.4	16.7	0.7	6.0	0	0	0	0	37.5	30.3	0
R	5.9	12.1	11.1	0	16.7	0	0	0	22.2	13.2	1.5	5.6
N	4.4	19.7	38.9	99.3	60.6	100	100	100	77.8	13.2	0	5.6

Note: *f* = Frequency, M = Malay, C = Chinese, I = Indians, F = Frequently, S = Sometimes, R = Rarely, N = Never

**Relationship between patterns of language choice and use in education and gender, ethnicity, and proficiency:** Chi-square tests were conducted to determine the relationship between variables. Test results are presented in Table 11. It could be seen from the table that language choice and use in education was correlated significantly with ethnicity ( $p < 0.05$ ) in all the sub-domains investigated. This means that ethnicity constrains language choice of respondents. This could be elaborated with reference to the choice of Chinese and Indian languages, for example. Chinese and Indian languages were chosen only by Chinese and Indian respondents respectively. It could also be mentioned that English was chosen by respondents irrespective of ethnicity as English was not attached to ethnicity. The choice of BM among Malays was also due to the constraint of ethnicity but among Chinese and Indian respondents, this might be due to the status of BM as a national and official language.

Language proficiency is also positively correlated with language choice ( $p < 0.05$ ) in all sub-domains except for the use of BM in writing assignments for tertiary studies ( $p > 0.05$ ). This shows that language choice is constrained by proficiency, i.e. the language choice depends on the levels of proficiency in the languages concerned. Sometimes it is high proficiency which constrains language choice and sometimes it is low proficiency that constrains language choice. It is found, for example, that the nil choice of Indian languages by Malays and Chinese could be attributed to lack of or no proficiency in these languages while choice of Indian languages by Indians could be attributed to their gained proficiency in these languages. Similarly, the figures confirm that it is proficiency which constrains the choice of BM as a dominant language for all ethnic groups as far as using the language for academic discourse is concerned.

As far as correlations between gender and language choice and use are concerned, significant correlations were not found across languages. BM, Chinese and Indian languages were found not to correlate significantly with gender. This means that the choice of respective ethnic languages,

Rahman, A. R. M. M., Heng, C. S. and Abdullah, A.N. 2010. Language choice in education in a multilingual setting: the Malaysian context. *Khulna University Studies* 10 (1&2): 9-22

and national and official language was not influenced by gender difference among respondents. However, there is a correlation between gender and the use of English ( $p < 0.05$ ), though not a highly significant one, in all sub-domains, except in reading for tertiary studies ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Table 11. Relationship between patterns of language choice and use in education, and gender, ethnicity, and proficiency

Language	Context	Gender			Ethnicity				Proficiency				
		$\chi^2$	df	Sig.	C	$\chi^2$	df	Sig.	C	$\chi^2$	df	Sig.	C
BM	a				NR	134.130	9	0.000	0.612	30.945	3	0.000	0.348
	b					35.156	9	0.000	0.368	23.465	3	0.000	0.308
	c					45.758	9	0.000	0.412	11.525	3	0.009	0.221
	d					176.711	9	0.000	0.664	24.971	3	0.000	0.317
	e					21.841	9	0.009	0.298	10.427	3	0.015	0.211
	f					45.530	9	0.000	0.411				NR
	g					57.378	9	0.000	0.452	8.225	3	0.042	0.188
Chinese	a				NR	194.083	9	0.000	0.684	186.969	6	0.000	0.677
	b					144.718	9	0.000	0.626	145.870	6	0.000	0.628
	c					97.790	9	0.000	0.551	91.534	6	0.000	0.539
	d					214.044	9	0.000	0.702	198.378	6	0.000	0.688
	e					90.539	9	0.000	0.537	96.566	6	0.000	0.549
	f					50.889	9	0.000	0.430	46.980	6	0.000	0.416
	g					66.811	9	0.000	0.479	69.988	6	0.000	0.488
Indian	a				NR	94.947	6	0.000	0.546	101.020	4	0.000	0.558
	b					94.947	9	0.000	0.546	101.020	6	0.000	0.558
	c					34.799	3	0.000	0.367	37.025	2	0.000	0.377
	d					183.987	9	0.000	0.672	218.263	6	0.000	0.703
	e					11.496	3	0.009	0.221	12.231	2	0.002	0.228
	f					23.095	3	0.000	0.306	24.572	2	0.000	0.314
	g					46.610	3	0.000	0.415	49.591	2	0.000	0.426
<b>English</b>	a	9.080	3	0.028	0.197	49.771	9	0.000	0.426	32.639	3	0.000	0.357
	b	11.911	3	0.008	0.225	58.808	9	0.000	0.456	44.926	3	0.000	0.409
	c	8.198	3	0.042	0.188	56.631	9	0.000	0.449	45.226	3	0.000	0.410
	d	9.066	3	0.028	0.197	59.309	9	0.000	0.458	20.547	3	0.000	0.290
	e	10.161	3	0.017	0.208	42.308	9	0.000	0.399	49.746	3	0.000	0.426
	f	8.808	3	0.032	0.195	44.713	9	0.000	0.408	29.947	3	0.000	0.343
	g				NR	39.683	9	0.000	0.388	28.671	3	0.000	0.337

Note: a = Talking to teachers in primary school, b = Talking to teachers in secondary school, c= Talking to lecturers, d= In classroom peer discussion and talking to classmates of the same mother tongue, e = In classroom peer discussion and talking to classmates of different mother tongues, f = Writing assignments for tertiary studies, g = Reading up for tertiary studies, C = Contingency Coefficient, NR = No Relation Found

## Conclusion

The study obtained a profile of language choice among undergraduates in the education domain in the multilingual ecology of Malaysia. Malaysia's language policy and planning for education experienced different dimensions and marked catalyst impact in the education domain. The findings of the study indicate that irrespective of ethnicity respondents claimed to have high proficiency in all four skills in BM. This is in line with Malaysian national aspirations and the nation's objectives of establishing primacy of use for national and official language. The majority of respondents reported that they had a mid-level proficiency in English. Besides, respondents were reported to have high proficiency in respective ethnic languages. Above all, the data shows that there is a positive outlook towards the use and development of BM and English in the education domain. BM is used in almost all the sub-domains of education while the use of English is increasing in the sub-domains particularly in talking to teachers in secondary schools, talking to lecturers, writing assignments and reading for tertiary studies. However, in certain sub domains, such as when talking to teachers in primary schools or speaking to classmates of the same mother tongue, respondents preferred ethnic languages. This language behaviour in choice and use illustrates that preference patterns are often tied closely to notions of identity. Ethnic language is also often seen as an identity marker, particularly among Malay and Chinese respondents. These two groups show strong preference for the use of ethnic language, more so than Indians. Indians appear to show a more marked preference for English over other languages, including, surprisingly their own mother tongue. As a result, it is not uncommon for Malaysians to perceive the Indians as having a better command of English.

The data appear to confirm that BM and English are the two dominant languages used for tertiary studies in Malaysia. In addition, BM appears to be the language for inter communication between ethnic groups resulting from its status and role as official and national language. The data also shows that at the primary school stage of language contact with teachers, English was not prevalently used while at a later stage of language choice and use in the education domain, there seems to have been a language shift from BM to English particularly, among Chinese and Indian ethnic groups.

A number of correlations were found significant between language choice and use, and gender, ethnicity, and proficiency. Generally, choice and use of all the four languages had significant relationship with ethnicity and proficiency. Gender was correlated with the use of English only. A study of this nature is able to provide a profile of the multilingual user in a particular domain and a particular situation. While the Malaysian multilingual shares some common characteristics in language choice and use, there were also many divergent features that characterized individual language choice and use. This situation is unique to the Malaysian language context.

## References

- Appel, R. and Muysken, P. 1990. *Language contact and Bilingualism*. London : Edward Arnold.
- Arua, A.E. and Magocha, K. 2002. Patterns of language use and language preference of some children and their parents in Botswana. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 23 (6): 449-461

- Rahman, A. R. M. M., Heng, C. S. and Abdullah, A.N. 2010. Language choice in education in a multilingual setting: the Malaysian context. *Khulna University Studies* 10 (1&2): 9-22
- Asmah, H.O. 1994. English in Malaysia: A typology of its status and roles. pp 240-260. In: Kandiah, T. and Terry, J.K. (eds.) *English and language planning: a Southeast Asian contribution*. Centre for Advanced Studies, Singapore and Times Academic
- Burhanudeen, H. 2003. Factors Influencing the Language Choices of Malay Malaysians in the Family, Friendship and Market Domains. *Journal of Language and Linguistics* 2(2). <[http://www.shakespeare.uk.net/journal/2\\_2/hafriza\\_ling2\\_2.htm](http://www.shakespeare.uk.net/journal/2_2/hafriza_ling2_2.htm)> Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2004
- Coulmas, F. 2005. *Sociolinguistics: The Study of Speakers' Choices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- David, M.K. 1999. Trading in an Intercultural Context: The Case of Malaysia. *The International Scope Review* 1 (2): 1-32
- Fasold, R. 1984. *The Sociolinguistics of Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Federal Constitution. 2002. International Law Book Services, Kuala Lumpur
- Ferrer, R.C. and Sankoff, D. 2003. Identity as the Primary Determinant of Language Choice in Valencia. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7 (1): 50-64
- Fishman 1972. The relationship between micro- and macro- sociolinguistics in the study of who speaks what language to whom and when. pp 244-267. In: Dil, A. S. (ed) *Language in Sociocultural Change*. Stanford University Press, California
- Gal, S. 1979. *Language Shift: Social Determinants of Linguistic Change in Bilingual Austria*. Academic Press, New York
- Gaudart, H. 1987. English language teaching in Malaysia: a historical account. *The English Teacher* 16: 17-36
- Goebel, Z. 2002. Code choice in interethnic interactions in two urban neighborhoods of central Java, Indonesia. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 158: 69-87
- Greenfield, L. 1972. Situational measures of normative language view in relation to person, place and topic among Puerto Rican Bilinguals. pp 17-35. In: Fishman (ed.) *Advances in the Sociology of Language* (vol. 2). Mouton, The Hague
- Hakuta, K. 1991. *Distinguishing between proficiency, choice, and attitudes in questions about language for Bilinguals*. SCCR Working Papers Series, No. 32. Stanford University, Stanford
- Hohenthal, A. 2003. English in India: loyalty and attitudes. *Language in India*, 3. <<http://www.languageinindia.com>> Accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2006
- Lu, Li-jung. 1988. *A Survey of Language Attitudes, Language Use and Ethnic Identity in Taiwan*. Master Thesis. Fu Jen Catholic University, Taipei, Taiwan
- Nercissians, E. 2001. Bilingualism and Diglossia: Patterns of language Use by Ethnic Minorities in Tehran. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 148: 59-70
- Parasher, S.N. 1980. Mother-Tongue-English Diglossia: A Case Study of Educated Indian Bilinguals' Language Use. *Anthropological Linguistics* 22 (4): 151-68
- Pascasio, E.M. and Hidalgo, A. 1979. How Role-Relationships, Domains, and Speech Situations Affect Language Use Among Bilinguals. pp 111-126. In: McCormack, W. C. and Wurm, S.A. (eds.) *Language and Society: Anthropological Issues*. Mouton Publishers. The Hague
- Pool, J. 1979. Language planning and identity planning. *International Journal of Sociology of Language* 20: 5-21

- Ridge, B. 2004. Bangsa Malaysia and Recent Malaysian English Language Policies. *Current Issues in Language Planning* 5 (4): 407- 423
- Scotton, C.M. 1979. Codeswitching as a “Safe Choice” in Choosing a Lingua Franca. pp 71-87. In: McCormack, W. C. and Wurm, S. A. (eds.) *Language and Society: Anthropological Issues*. Mouton Publishers, The Hague
- Yeh, H., Chan, H. and Cheng, Y. 2004. Language use in Taiwan: language proficiency and domain analysis. *Journal of Taiwan Normal University: Humanities & Social Sciences* 49 (1): 75-108