

# ○ **CROSSING BORDERS: THE LINGUISTIC PRACTICES OF ASPIRING BILINGUALS IN THE MALAY COMMUNITY**

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This paper reports on a study of Malay learners of English in Malaysia as they attempt to extend their use of English outside the classroom and thus participate in new linguistic practices. Using a multiple case study approach, the study examines the narrative accounts of learners generated through student journals and focus group discussions. These are stories of conflict, tension, negotiation, and renewal as these aspiring bilinguals use English to contest language boundaries, transform social and linguistic resources, and express new identities. The analysis offers insights into how the norms of language choice and use are generated, preserved and changed, how language ideologies lend value to particular linguistic practices and stigmatise others, and what the consequences are of these practices in the lives and identities of people and the community as a whole.

**KEY WORDS:** English; second language; linguistic practices; Malay; ideologies; identities

## **INTRODUCTION**

This investigation is situated in multi-ethnic Malaysia and aims to understand the learning path of those who pursue higher levels of proficiency in English, and thus lay claim to a bilingual identity. While current trends in linguistics seek to challenge the global domination of English within the frameworks of linguistic imperialism or linguistic human rights (Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2001), linguists have often overlooked situations when local hegemonic discourses demonise global languages and vilify their speakers. This paper seeks to highlight the struggles faced by Malay learners of English in Malaysia through an analysis of their stories which are seldom heard and rarely heeded.

This study developed from the researcher's work experience in a TESL program that trained students of Malay ethnicity to become proficient users of English and subsequently competent teachers of the language. During these years, I had often been privy to my students' struggles. I had been allowed to enter into the inner world of their feelings, often of distress and despair at not being able to practice English in their home communities, and not being accepted as legitimate speakers of the language. There is a need to better understand how these learners and users of a second language participate and negotiate membership in

their communities. The questions that were pursued are: What linguistic practices are accepted and in what contexts are they deemed legitimate? How are linguistic practices and identities valued by competing ideologies? How is identity constructed and negotiated in L2 literary practices?

To elucidate these issues, the paper begins by describing the language situation in Malaysia. This is followed by locating language use and identity within a constructivist – poststructuralist paradigm. The research methods section describes the case study design: the participants, research instruments and data analysis. In seeking to understand stories of L2 use, the analysis and discussion section emphasises the learners' view, while drawing on macro-perspectives to triangulate the various viewpoints. Finally, the paper ends with a brief consideration of the sociological implications of the findings of this study.

## **LANGUAGE ISSUES IN MALAYSIA**

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, post-colonial nation where English has a long history of institutionalised functions and is used intranationally as a second language among fellow-citizens. The 2000 National Population Census<sup>1</sup> shows that the Bumiputera ('sons of the soil'), the vast majority of whom are Malays, comprise 65% of the population, the Chinese 26% and the Indians 7.7%. Consequently a number of languages flourish in the country, and these include the Malay language (the mother tongue of most ethnic Malays and the national language), English (introduced during the British colonial period and today regarded as a second language in the country), a number of Chinese dialects, Indian languages and other minority languages. In the midst of this complex linguistic setting, English continues to command considerable prestige, and demonstrates a range of intra- and international uses. Internationally, it is used as a vehicle of communication across diverse linguistic and cultural groups, and is clearly important to the educational endeavors of the people, and the technological, economic, and global aspirations of the nation. Intranationally, it is learnt early in life, and sometimes mastered to high levels of proficiency, it is considered a dominant language of the more educated segment, is spoken in almost every aspect of Malaysian life, and plays a lively part in Malaysian urban society.

This macro view, however, obscures the fact for segments of the population, especially those in rural areas or in the lower socioeconomic levels, English competence is a low priority, and this seems to be particularly true for the Malay community (David & Govindasamy, 2007; Gupta, 1997). Hence Fishman's (1980) distinction between multilingualism as a societal phenomenon and as an individual phenomenon is relevant here, as not everyone in 'multilingual Malaysia' is necessarily multilingual. It is easy to overlook the fact that

individual bilingualism is not a given in the country, nor is it always a desired goal or a welcomed practice. On the contrary, the quest for bilingualism may well be fraught with invisible tensions and unspoken misgivings manifested in subtle ways in learners' experiences and reproduced in larger policy decisions.

Historically, English in Malaysia began as an imposed colonial language. However, it quickly acquired power and prestige, and was regarded as a means to better jobs, higher education, improved living standards and social success. Lowenberg (1992) notes that the privileged recipients of an English education – the more prosperous and prestigious families of the three major ethnic groups, but particularly the Chinese and Indians – came to use English increasingly in their daily lives. By the end of the colonial era in the late 1950's, English had become a *lingua franca* among the more educated people of the country.

However, the rise of Malay nationalism, which eventually led to the independence of Malaya in 1957, saw a linguistic change in favour of the Malay language. Malay supplanted English as the medium of instruction at all levels of education, and it came to represent the language for nation building. One result of this language policy that downgraded the status of English was a dramatic decline in the standard of English in Malaysia. While falling standards in English were found nationwide, the problem was thought to be particularly serious in the rural areas, and especially acute among the Malays (David & Govindasamy, 2003). This dilemma resulted in a tension between promoting the Malay language as a symbol of Malay power and national unity, and at the same time ensuring that the Malays were sufficiently competent in English to compete with the other ethnic groups in the country and in the global economy.

In the 1990s, questions were asked about the relevance and sustainability of this language policy in the face of globalisation, and Malaysia's own aspirations of achieving developed nation status. This led to moves to prioritise English as a subject in the school curriculum and to teach mathematics and science in the English language. Nevertheless, within a few years, the government did an about turn and announced that the medium of instruction for mathematics and science will revert to Malay in national schools. This move upset many and some have accused the government of bowing to pressure from nationalistic groups that had decried the use of English claiming that it compromised the position of the Malay language and undermined the Malay culture (Lotbinere, 2009). At the time of writing, this is still a hotly contested issue in the country.

Underpinning these policy decisions are linguistic ideologies, "the values, practices, and beliefs associated with language use, which are subject to and influenced by socio-political interests" (Blackledge, 2008, p. 29). Within this ideological macro-context, the policy

changes described in Malaysia clearly illustrate the tensions between the local languages, and in particular, the national language, Malay, and the global language, English. Significantly, the official stand is that English should be a strong second language and that English competence is highly valued and encouraged. Yet, this public discourse does not always accord with or even prevail against long-held sentiments and deep-seated suspicions and hostilities that the language arouses. While English continues to be highly esteemed in public policy, private discourse, thoughts and practices sometimes reveal contrary and conflicted sentiments (see Martin, 2005), and nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than among the dominant ethnic group in Malaysia, the Malays.

Among the factors responsible for this are the Malays' historical resistance towards the British colonial government and by extension the colonial language, English, perceiving it as a threat to their own culture and language. In the words of the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, "In the struggle to uphold their language, the Malays were forced to oppose and cast aside the English language" (Mahathir, 1986, p. 43). In a study of ethnic identity and attitudes towards English conducted among Malaysian undergraduates (Malays, Chinese, Indians and 'others'), it was the Malays who most strongly felt English to be a threat to their ethnic and national identity, with the Indians perceiving this threat the least (Mardziah & Wong, 2006). Ultimately, perhaps, key to understanding the Malay's distrust of English is to understand their relationship to the Malay language and how it articulates their personal, collective and historical identities. The protection of Malay dominance by the Malaysian Constitution is executed primarily by protecting the three pillars of 'Malayness': language, religion and royalty (Shamsul, 1997). In this regard, promoting English is often regarded as a threat to the Malay identity and an erosion of Malay dominance. Compounding the situation is the religious, cultural and linguistic identity ascribed to the Malays in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, which defines them as people who practice Islam and the Malay culture, and who speak the Malay language. This fusion of ideology, identity, position and practice raises questions about how, where, when and with whom Malays are to use English, and what its consequences are.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This paper draws primarily on a constructivist-poststructuralist framework to conceptualise and understand identity and language learning as it allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of these constructs in today's world. In theorizing identity there is a clear move away from primordial, essentialist, unitary, and completely static definitions; rather identity is seen as constructed, fragmented, fluid and contradictory (Norton, 2000). Even facets of identity generally accepted as unproblematic and displaying clear boundaries, like ethnicity and

nationality, have been interrogated in the face of contemporary realities. In today's world, identity is better conceptualised as a lived experience linked to social and political discourses and discursive practices that are in themselves subject to change and fluidity.

The view of language learning as a complex social practice suggests that it engages the identities of learners and the ideologies of their communities. When it comes to language learning, the relationship between the language learner, his or her identity and social world is captured by Norton (2000, p. 11): "When language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world". Learners are seen as unique, complex and multidimensional, seeking for and creating meaning in the course of their interaction with their physical, historical and socio-cultural context. Language learning, therefore, hinges crucially on opportunities or access to uses of the language as well as to communities in which learners can participate in the target language. There is thus a shift away from focusing on individual learners to emphasizing their roles in the community, and in so doing, learners are regarded as simultaneously members of multiple communities. For L2 learners, these could include the L1 community, the target language community, the classroom or academic community, and even imagined communities (Anderson, 1991), defined as socially constructed communities to which learners belong, to which they aspire, and in which they invest their language learning behavior (Murphey et al., 2005).

On the one hand, constructivism and poststructuralism recognise that the speaker's subject position, defined as an intersection of factors that position individuals such as their race, ethnicity, class, gender, and other affiliations, can mediate their access to linguistic and interactional resources available in the L2 (Pavlenko, 2002). On the other hand, however, learners are far from being passively defined by ascribed identities and prior practices. Current research conducted among adult learners of English in countries like Canada, the United States, and Australia (e.g. Iddings, 2005; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2003) presents language learners as actively engaged with the world, making choices, challenging the inequalities of power, positioning themselves and constructing their own identities in interaction with others. There have, though, been fewer attempts to study how learners of English in Asian countries construct and navigate their identities in multilingual contexts. This paper seeks to explore language learning and use within this framework and context.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research explores the linguistic experiences of Malay learners of English in Malaysia through the narratives they use to describe themselves. A multiple case study approach was

employed to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of learners' lived experiences and perspectives. Congruent with the aims of the research, three main criteria were used for the selection of cases. First, participants had to be students of Malay ethnicity, second, they had to have attained a certain level of proficiency in English, and third, they should have the desire to use English in a variety of contexts outside the academic setting. These criteria were suitably met in a group of Malay TESL (Teaching of English as a Second Language) students of a public university as they could be expected to have some proficiency in English and would be more motivated to use English in interactions in the real world, given that English is their major. In total, twelve students participated in both phases of the research: the diary study as well as the focus group sessions. All students were between 20 and 22 years of age, of Malay ethnicity, Muslim, and L1 speakers of Malay; all but two lived in predominantly Malay neighbourhoods; and all but one were female.

The first phase of data collection involved the use of student journals. Privileging the voices of learners, they offer rare insights into learners' motivations, investments, struggles, losses and gains, as well as into language ideologies that affect their learning trajectories. Participants were asked to keep a reflective diary over a period of 3 – 6 months to record their experiences and feelings as they sought to learn and use English in daily life. They were particularly encouraged to write during semester breaks when they left the university and went back to their respective home communities. All diaries were collected at the end of the first data collection phase and analysed.

The second method of data collection involved the use of focus groups. Different from group interviewing, focus groups rely on insight and data produced by the interaction between participants. It enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences. It is through joint negotiation that plausible accounts of the social world inhabited by the participants and captured in the data were generated. Two focus group sessions were held, one with 5 students and the other with 7 students. Each lasted for about an hour and a half, with the researcher acting as moderator. All sessions were recorded, and the recorded data were later transcribed orthographically.

For each case study, all entries in the student journal were read carefully and repeatedly, as were the transcripts of the focus group sessions. Following the tradition in qualitative research, data analysis was primarily inductive: categories and themes emerged mainly from the collected data, and preliminary hypotheses about the settings and participants were devised. These were tested against the data about the particular student obtained from the journal and groups discussions, and were confirmed, revised or rejected as in 'within-case

analysis' (Merriam, 1998), leading to the creation of a comprehensive profile of each student. Emergent hypotheses were also tested across the individual students as in 'cross-case analysis'. This led to the formulation of conceptual categories and constructs, patterns and relations which formed the basis for the reports drawn up.

In the interest of space, the next section draws on data from only three of the participants – Farah, Amy and Nora (pseudonyms). It includes a number of excerpts from the journal entries as well as from the focus group discussions to allow for an examination of the narratives these learners used, and to enable the participants' voices to be brought into the analysis. All verbatim quotes, grammatical or otherwise, from the diary entries and interviews are italicised in this paper.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### LINGUISTIC PRACTICES

The data collected and analyzed repeatedly pointed to the dearth of opportunities for these Malay students to practice the English language outside the classroom setting and in their respective home communities. The first entry in Farah's journal reads as follows: *Holidays started, and I waited for the time when the opportunity for using English would occur. And I waited, and waited ... only then I realized that that has a small chance of ever happening.* This observation points to the fact that for these students, English is, unsurprisingly, not the language of choice in intra-group communication. At the same time it indicates that there is little opportunity to practise English in inter-group communication given the pervasiveness of communalism and ethnic polarisation in Malaysian society (David & Govindasamy, 2003). These circumstances led the TESL students to attempt to use English with members of their home community, only to be met with resistance. Amy, for instance, relates several incidents when her efforts to speak in English in the community were rebuffed. In one encounter at a photo-printing shop, she writes:

I asked for my photos in English and she continues to answer in Malay about them not being ready. I switched tactics and tried talking in Malay and she went to get my photos, which were suddenly ready! I'm confused. This could be nothing. I just didn't like the look she threw at me when I left the store.

Describing her attempts to use English, Nora writes about how she took driving lessons from an older Malay man during the semester break:

I heard him speak to the other Chinese and Indian learners in English. Even tho' it was broken English, I thought this is my chance. So I also talked to him in English.

At first I heard him mutter something that I cannot hear. But I persisted in English and saw him looking at me with disgust ... anger! Then he answered me in Malay. What a disappointment.

According to Farah, it is particularly the Malay community that refuses to use or even consider English as a means of communication. In the focus group sessions, she talked about how interactions in English were quite the norm when she went to an urban school, and had friends from different ethnic backgrounds. However, she points out that in any community that is homogeneous or Malay-dominated, *everyone makes it clear that this is a Malay-speaking environment*.

These three students also claimed that even in encounters and occasions when English could and would normally be used, the opportunity would likely be withdrawn if one interactant is Malay. Farah recalled an occasion when a Chinese salesgirl was speaking in English while promoting her product to the customers around. *But when she turned to me, she automatically spoke in Malay*. Analysing these incidents a little more critically, Farah writes that they seem to convey the impression that *Malays can't speak English*. Linguistic behaviour of this nature could be a signal of respect for the speaker's first language – Malay – which is also the national language. But, it could also be an unconscious face-saving gesture to spare the interactant the embarrassment of expected incompetence: of not being able to understand or respond in English.

Another possible explanation for the hostile reception accorded to these Malay speakers of English can be found in Bourdieu's (1977) view of language as a form of symbolic capital. By using English, these students are resorting to the use of a language widely seen as carrying symbolic capital. This is sometimes resented and it may be infuriating and unpalatable to the interlocutor especially if he or she is unable to respond in kind due to a lack of linguistic competence in the language of symbolic capital. To accept students' use of English would imply acceptance of the symbolic power and legitimacy of the language, and for interlocutors who are not themselves speakers of English, this would leave them unacceptably subject to symbolic domination.

An additional feature that emerged from the data was the ways in which all twelve students used aspects of interaction to sometimes transform linguistic norms and their own stigmatised social identities. Because the use of English was often unacceptable, these students also learned to code-switch into more 'acceptable' forms of English, including colloquial varieties and code-mixing, in order to accommodate to conversational partners, stake a claim for shared affiliations and identities, create goodwill and approval, and lend legitimacy to their speech. Amy, for example, writes about her fear of being thought of as

trying to be superior and supercilious when she speaks standard English. There is therefore a constant and conscious attempt on her part *to speak down, to talk in simple and often broken English*. She relates an incident when a group of girl-friends were talking about lingerie, and mispronouncing it as 'ling-ge-ree'. She writes about cringing at this gaffe, and yet being too afraid to correct the mispronunciation. In fact, she even considered mispronouncing it herself just so she *wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb*. Experiences of this nature are not uncommon. *Sometimes I don't speak proper English because I'm afraid to be thought of as a 'know-it-all' which is something I hate very much*. Displaying such 'incompetence', which includes speaking English deliberately overlaid with a heavy Malay accent may be seen as a move to signal solidarity, and to vie for and enact forms of ethnic identity (Rajadurai, 2007a, b). These strategies help to reduce the linguistic deficit between interactants, level the playing field somewhat, resolve the tension and deconstruct the position of English as "the linguistic other" (Saxena, 2009), thus leveraging its indigenous value and lending it some legitimacy.

### COMPETING IDEOLOGIES

Undergirding these language experiences and practices are linguistic ideologies. The language choices that these students make seem to signify a complex set of assumptions about their first language, their ethnicity, religious affiliations, linguistic competence, educational level, political position, even politeness and moral character, as seen in these excerpts from Nora's journal:

I live in a community where English is not spoken at all. The community perceives English as inappropriate and it is not valued at all. When we speak English here, we are seen as snobbish. It is very hard for me to begin to speak English here ... the community think that speaking English is a form of showing off. Sometimes some of the people are offended when you speak English to them because they think that you are underestimating them ... they perceive speaking English as a form of rudeness.

In one of her journal entries, Nora writes about how she attracts stares from her neighbors or even sales people in shops whenever she speaks in English. *They look at me as if I was some kind of alien*. It is not only among strangers that Nora feels alienated; even her friends in her home community give her the cold shoulder for speaking in English with them. She further records:

These hurdles and the feelings of uncomfortableness between me and my friends ... are very hard for me to handle. It is true that speaking English can alter one's relationships ... I just don't want my friends to think I've changed to a snobbish and arrogant person.

For the Malay student who desperately wants to use English in the outside world, the path towards learning and speaking English in their homes and in society at large is a difficult one, and the struggle is genuine. Similar to Nora, Farah too, had her share of difficulties because her quest for mastery of English and her desire to use the language has not gone down well with her peers and elders. *They say, you know, I'm such a show off, and that kind of stuff ... like this girl is either trying to, you know, trying to act as if she's better than her mates ... it makes it very hard.*

Clearly, the L1 community does not take kindly to one of its own using English as it is seen as a rejecting of one's roots and as a putting on of airs. The twelve students in this study talked about having to risk being misunderstood, stared at, made fun of, judged, alienated and given the silent treatment. They had endured being left out, being loners, losing face and even sacrificing valued relationships because of their investment in the English language.

By the same token, it is clear that community ideologies construct Malay speakers who choose to speak English as being rude, offensive, showing off, patronizing, and arrogant. This draws attention to what is appropriate, acceptable and legitimate in interactional contexts in the Malay community. It brings to light ways of using language and the kinds of language practices that are "valued and considered good, normal, appropriate, or correct in the framework of ideological orientations connected to social, economic, and political interests" (Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001, p. 2) These learners' forays to extend their use of English outside the classroom, thereby contesting language boundaries and projecting a bilingual identity are in direct conflict with the home community's linguistic identity founded on the L1, Malay. Students' use of English in Malay spaces problematises English, and positions it as the linguistic other. From the community perspective, these students are not merely drawing on social and linguistic resources, but they are inverting and transforming them in significant ways. Their use of English is misconstrued as their assimilating to former colonial powers or to contemporary western culture, rather than as an appropriation of a post-colonial language to express new social identities. In the eyes of their home community, their shifting linguistic allegiances imply shifting cultural identities, political affiliations and moral commitments. In a community that prioritises collective identity, loyalty and traditional values, the learning trajectories and aspirations of these students which see them crossing borders on a daily basis are consistently marginalised, ignored and constructed from an indigenous point of view, resulting in their new, evolving identities as bilingual speakers being snubbed or spurned. Clearly, the use of dual languages is problematic for both the speaker and the audience in communities where the L1 is zealously guarded and monolingualism is the norm.

If these Malay TESL students had endured being characterised unfavourably and often erroneously, they had reciprocated, consciously or otherwise, by positioning others in less-than-flattering ways. In their journals and discussions, these learners repeatedly verbalised the generalisation that in Malaysian society *Indians and Chinese speak English, but Malays speak Malay*. They also expressed the belief that speaking in poor, broken or halting English was typical of the Malay community. Furthermore, the participants had formed rather pejorative views of those who avoided speaking in English or who denigrated those who did speak in English. Such segments of their community were frequently labeled *conservative, very Malay, nationalists, close-minded, rural, village-ish, uneducated* and even *mad*. While these glib assertions and stereotypes may derive from a sense of self-preservation and act as a defense mechanism against perceived threats to their self-image, they also unintentionally and unfortunately function to reinforce charges of arrogance and separateness, and furthermore, they gloss over the reproduction of inequity. Attitudes of this sort only aggravate an already-tense and misconstrued relationship between the English-speaker and his or her Malay community, and perpetuate a negative culture of disparaging ‘the other’.

### CONFLICTING IDENTITIES

One aspect that emerges as significant in the analysis of the data is how the opportunities to use English are related to the subject positions and identities made salient at different times. All twelve participants in the study agreed that their position as TESL students was a facilitating feature as there was greater tolerance of their penchant to use English. Others were regarded as English teachers by their communities, albeit pre-service ones, and this too lent some latitude, paving the way for their use of English in certain domains in the community. While the Malay language is a marker of ethnic and national identity, English was seen as the language in which they performed their professional duties – separate and apart from their essential identity.

There was general consensus among all twelve students that the biggest obstacle to practicing English in their communities was their ethnicity. *Malays are expected to speak Malay* seemed to be the oft-repeated mantra. As Amy put it:

I realize that not everyone appreciates being talked to in English. Maybe they think I am showing off or something ... someone once told me that when you speak English, it's like you're trying to prove that you're good or better than others. But when one speaks Malay, no one will care, because that's who you're expected to be.

Aside from ethnicity, religion was identified as an important factor as students related several incidents when they were shunned and called *kaffir* (infidels, or unIslamic) for speaking in

English. The other associated feature that functioned to constrain the female participants was the scarf or head covering that some of them used as part of their Islamic beliefs. Female students who donned the scarf claimed that it seemed to act as an immediate signal to others that they could not or should not speak in English. Amy documents:

Because I'm wearing a shawl over my head, and I'm Malay, there are certain things people expect of me. Speaking Malay is one of them. When I don't meet those expectations, that's when the negative looks and whispers come.

During the group discussion, she asserts that living in a community that leans towards rather overt displays of religious behaviour does not encourage the linguistic practice of English:

They think speaking in English isn't good, you know... If I had been speaking Malay, then I might have been thought of as a better person by the Muslim community ... then I might have made more friends.

Clearly, there is a price to pay for being competent and comfortable in the English language while at the same time displaying an identity that is manifestly Malay and Muslim.

For these students, the pursuit of English competence requires that they use the language in their daily lives and not confine their bilingual status to the academic setting. Their desire to be practicing bilinguals - fluently comfortable in English whilst retaining their L1s - is fraught with tensions and conflicts. For instance, Farah's narratives show her wrestling with the notion of being bilingual (a word she never uses in her writings): she longs to be accepted as competent and comfortable in English whilst at the same time recognised as ethnically Malay with native mastery of her L1. The tensions implicated in this learning curve are reflected in her stories that capture her inner strife as she grapples with issues of belonging and affiliation. This is seen in various entries in her journal and is highlighted in the excerpt below through her shifts in pronoun use:

People – myself included - have this perception that Malays only speak in Malay. They are not comfortable speaking in English ... The truth is, we do not want to speak English ... So, perhaps people should not be so mad when others say that Malays can't speak English. What do you expect people are going to say when you don't speak it? That we're silent English geniuses? Perceptions, sometimes, arise from our own behaviour.

She accepts that she is socio-historically part of the L1 community of Malay speakers; yet her journal jottings capture her angst, and show her constructing herself at times as different, as alien, and discrepant. In her narratives, she resists established categorisations of language and identity, and rejects being constantly defined in relation to a dominant discourse and

ideology. *Why can't we speak proper English and still be Malay and Malaysian? Who decided that the two are mutually exclusive?*

This also reveals an interesting sub-text underpinning participants' narratives: their allusion to the theme of imagined communities (Anderson, 1991). In different ways and to varying degrees, these twelve students wrote and talked about their longing for communities where their ethnic, religious and linguistic identities could live and shift in harmonious interaction; where they could display competence in English while simultaneously affirming their mother tongue, religious beliefs, local affiliations and national histories. They aspire to be legitimate users of both the L1 and the L2, displaying multi-competence and thus acquire new possibilities for the self. They envision a time when declaring their Malay roots and donning a religious symbol do not ignite prejudices that dispossess them of their right to speak English. These students look forward to a world where participation in new linguistic practices is neither shunned nor condemned, and where multiple identities are routinely celebrated.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has illustrated the fact that in multilingual settings, like Malaysia, language choice, use and attitudes are embedded in power relations, language ideologies, culture, histories and people's views of their own and others' identities. The study has problematised the position of Malay learners of English in Malaysia, making visible the conditions under which they can speak English, the manner in which their identities are constructed by others, and the ways in which they perceive themselves, their histories and their desires for the future. In so doing, the study raises the question of whether the intense personal struggle of learners desiring L2 competence is typical and widespread.

Contrasting the experiences of Malay learners with those of the other ethnic groups in the country, it would appear that such struggles with dual linguistic allegiances are not a defining feature of all bilinguals. While Chinese and Indians in Malaysia may express some ambivalence and apprehension about English competing with and on occasion even displacing the L1, for the main part they have accepted the language and made it part of their already multilingual community. In contrast, Malaysia's language policies have made much of the Malay community largely monolingual, and this is especially true of the non-urban population. In addition, for many the promotion or use of English is construed as a threat to the mother tongue, and by extension to the sovereignty of the Malay community, culture and race. Perhaps unlike the other ethnic groups in the country, the category 'Malay' is still moored as an essential identity in Malaysia, implicating non-negotiable linguistic, religious and cultural loyalties. Such a stance constructs speakers' use of their L1 as unmarked and

normal, and naturalises the connections between language, national origin, culture and ethnicity. This could be one reason for the kind of angst described by the learners portrayed in this study. Pavlenko (2006, p. 28) suggests that “anxieties over an inner split may stem from the lack of social acceptance of bilingualism and may disappear once bi- and multilingualism are accepted as the norm, rather than an exception”.

In many parts of Malay society, but not all, ethnic identity is still currently conceived in Malay monolingualism, where the construct of an ‘authentic Malay’ is pitted against an undesirable English-speaking other. While we should champion linguistic human rights and the preservation of heritage languages, concern needs also to be expressed about linguistic nationalist movements and local hegemonic discourses which suppress bilingualism and linguistic diversity, resulting in the unequal distribution of economic and social capital within any given speech community. Ultimately, this debate is not a struggle over language alone, but over the kind of society Malays imagine themselves to be: monolingual, homogeneous and cloistered or multilingual, pluralist and diverse.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 The next national population census is scheduled to take place in 2010.

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