

CHAPTER 1

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

1.0 Back Ground of the Study

The issue of language and schools has been a key issue in the evolution of education in Malaysia which began as early as in the 19th century. This is largely, due to the multi racial country construct of the nation state. The history of education in Malaysia began with the opening of the first Malay medium school in Bayan Lepas, Penang in 1855. Two years later, two more Malay schools were opened in Singapore, one in Teluk Belanga and the other in Kampung Gelam. Education then was restricted to religious education, which was Islam in particular. At the same time, Chinese immigrants to Malaya (the name before Malaysia) established their own form of education, financed by the Chinese themselves. On the other hand, small Tamil schools mushroomed alongside with the opening of rubber estates as well as other plantations. English schools, conversely were established by the Christian missionaries and was fast to connect almost all races in west Malaysia and Singapore.

In the quest for uniting all the races, Barnes Report, a British proposal in 1951 put forth the idea of using the colonial language by developing a national education system. This report's recommendation of English-medium national schools was implemented by the 1952 Education Ordinance. However, the implementation did not meet the Chinese approvals, who were upset by the lack of provision for non-Malay vernacular schools. This group favoured the Fenn-Wu Report which on the other hand, did not meet the Malays' approval.

To replace the 1951 Barne's Report was the educational proposal by the name of Razak Report, written in 1956. Its goal was to reform the education system in Malaysia. It forwards the Malay language as the main medium of instruction in national schools. The Report suggests two types of secondary schools with one using Malay as the medium of instruction to be called 'national schools' while those using Chinese, Tamil or English language to be called 'national-type schools'. Regardless of the differentiation, both schools are identified as 'national' schools that receive government aids. This report has been in used until today in the Malaysian education system.

The report is incorporated in Section 3 of the Education Ordinance of 1957. It provides for the:

- Formation of a single system of national education
- Recognition of the eventual objective of making Bahasa Malaysia the main medium of instruction
- Commencement of a Malaysia-orientated curriculum
- Conception of a single system of evaluation for all.

The development of the bilingual system in Malaysia can be discerned in three stages (see David & Govindasamy 2003, Hashim 2003, Pandian 2003, Solomon 1988, and Watson 1983);

1. The pre independence period
2. The post independence period
3. The 2002 education policy of teaching mathematics and science in English.

Phase one would be the pre-independence period. Immediately prior to independence in 1957, primary school was operated in four mediums in the then, Malaya. The earlier English vernacular school label had been done away with. 'Standard schools' used the Malay medium, whereas 'standard-type schools' employed English, Mandarin Chinese or Tamil as their mediums. At this stage, Malay-medium, Mandarin Chinese-medium and Tamil-medium schools catered almost exclusively to ethnic Malay, ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indian pupils respectively. As the ethnic groups tended to be geographically distinct, the schools were also geographically distinct. English medium schools were mainly found in urban areas, and the pupils were mainly ethnic Chinese, although Indians and Eurasians were also represented. There were not many ethnic Malays in English schools because of the schools' urban location and also because many of them were Christian mission schools, which the Malays, being Muslims, were suspicious of. Nonetheless, it is the English-medium schools which had more of an inter-racial character. Secondary education was mainly through English or Malay, and tertiary education was through English.

The second phase of the development of the bilingual system in Malaysia, is during the post independence period. The situation immediately after independence was seen to remain largely the same. However, in 1967 Malay was declared the sole national language. (English had been another official language prior to this.) The severe race riots in Kuala Lumpur in May 1969 resulted in the then Minister of Education, Dato Haji Abdul Rahman Ya'akub, declaring in July that beginning from January 1970, English-medium schools would be phased out in Malaysia and by 1985 all former English-medium ('national-type') schools would become Malay-medium ('national') schools. Pupils in the transitional period might have a mixed medium education:

English for science and mathematics; Malay for history and geography. Tertiary institutions also became Malay-medium. Mandarin Chinese-medium and Tamil-medium ('national-type') primary schools were still available. David & Govindasamy attribute the switch also to 'nationalistic fervour' (2003: 223). Asmah (1996) suggests that within the above framework, English is still available in tertiary education through pre-university and university studies abroad and the various twinning programmes in Malaysia. She asserts that with these, 'local English-medium education has made a comeback, and with great vigour' (Asmah 1996: 519).

Finally, the third phase would be the events of 2002, when the education policy of teaching of mathematics and science in English was implemented. The policy was then employed during the reign of Mahathir b. Mohammed due to the concerns about the falling standard of English and the resultant lack of competitiveness, the unemployment rate of the ethnic Malays who are largely monolingual and the continued segregation of the races. These issues prompted the then Minister of Education, Musa Mohamed, to declare that beginning from January 2003 a Malay-English mixed-medium education would be implemented in national schools.

However, the policy was heavily criticized especially by Malay linguists and activists, fearing that the policy might corrode the usage of Malay language in science and mathematics, which led to a massive rally in Kuala Lumpur on 7 March 2009. On the other hand, the existence of vernacular schools is used by non-Malays components of *Barisan Nasional*, the ruling coalition in the country, to indicate that their culture and identity have not been infringed upon by the Malay people. This is often a key issue as it is considered important by many. Dong Jiao Zhong (the association of Chinese vernacular school boards and teachers) and other such organizations still shape much of the views of the Chinese educated community.

A recent study by the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study in 2007 ranked Malaysia in 20th place in the world in 8th grade Mathematics, behind Singapore which was ranked third but ahead of Thailand which ranked 29th. Malaysia was also ranked 21st in the world in Science, similarly behind Singapore but ahead of Thailand which got 1st and 22nd respectively. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2007 is an international study centre dedicated to conducting comparative studies in educational achievement. It serves as the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) studies, an international organization of national research institutions and governmental research agencies, based in the USA.

On July 8, 2009 the government decided to end the policy of teaching mathematics and science in English or PPSMI in both primary and secondary schools effective from 2012. The two subjects will be taught in *Bahasa Malaysia* in national schools and Tamil and Chinese for vernacular schools. Despite the language switch, the government will maintain the high standard of syllabus in Science and Maths education in Malaysia.

1.1 Statement Of The Problem

The issue of teaching mathematics and science in English has been studied as an issue solely in pedagogy, although the phenomenon is largely an interdisciplinary construct, that is, pedagogy, nation-building and policy making issues are juxtaposed altogether. The interdisciplinary construct involves another level of complexity when it occurs in the space of the media. The discourse of the media is aimed at articulating, representing and re-presenting the notions of pedagogy and so on. Hence, the nature of the problem becomes interdiscursive, which can be seen as a quick leap from interdisciplinary to interdiscursivity. This study analyzes the

language medium issue articulated in the opinion editorials, which were published by the *New Straits Times*, from a discourse-analytical perspective (Fairclough 2009).

1.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are to study:

1. The construction of the discursive field of teaching mathematics and science in English articulated in the editorials published by the *New Straits Times*.
2. The various moments of interdiscursivity (i.e pedagogic, political, and perception of national interest) as they intersect with the discursive field of teaching mathematics and science in English.

1.3 Research Questions

In attaining the research objectives, the following questions were aimed to be answered:

1. How do the editorials published by the New Straits Times construct the discursive field of teaching of mathematics and science in English?

This research question involves identifying ideologies and ideological strategies in the selected editorials. The linguistic choices identified in these editorials could reveal what is foregrounded and what is backgrounded.

2. How do the various moments of interdiscursivity (i.e pedagogic, political, and perception of national interest) intersect with the discursive field of teaching of mathematics and science in english?

This research question involves an investigation into what are the moments of interdiscursivity within the discourse structure of these editorials. This is established on the

strength of analysing the editorials, using the tools Dialectical Relational Approach (Fairclough, 2009)

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study of editorials and opinion editorials has received a special attention in critical discourse analysis (van Dijk 1981, 1991 and 1999), which is, predominantly, an issue based analytical framework. However, there is a dearth in studying editorials in countries like Malaysia. Very often the power of the local media may sustain a debate on various national issues, while these issues are mostly matters of discourse, has been ignored. Hence the researcher in this study combines the insights of CDA, specially, the interdisciplinary and interdiscursive nature of CDA, in order to show the strength of a discourse analytical framework (Fairclough 2009) in illustrating ‘medium of instruction’ issue in the country.

This research is significant as it contributes to the field of study, which is critical discourse analysis, by explicating an issue, hence providing a foundation to future researchers to see the intricate and complex relations in the construction of a discursive field involving various moments with regards to language and power.

1.5 Limitation of the Study

The genre used for this small scale discourse study, is the opinion editorials in the News Straits Times. The corpus used is not an extended one. Furthermore, only one sensitive issue was looked into, which is the issue of the Education policy in Malaysia. For this study, the issue analyzed was only for a short period of time (2007-2009). Recommendations for future studies based on these limitations will be discussed elaborately in the final chapter.