

The Economics of Language: A Malaysian Perspective

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Abstract Recent research findings have shown that bilingualism and multilingualism are required by the current human resource market in Malaysia (Nik Hairi et al., 2012). However, the preliminary report of the Educational Blueprint (2013-2015) which focuses on Malay, the national language and English as a second language does not response to this new trend. This indicates that the economics of language has not been considered when the education policy is formulated. This paper adopts the perspective of language economy to review the language education policy in Malaysia and form the pattern of language proficiency requirement through comparing the previous and current market. The findings from this study will be referential to the stakeholders of language policy.

Keywords: Language policy, language economy, Malaysia.

Abstrak Hasil penyelidikan yang dilakukan baru-baru ini telah menggambarkan bahawa pasaran semasa di Malaysia memerlukan sumber manusia yang memiliki kemahiran dwibahasa dan berbilang bahasa (Nik Hairi et al., 2012). Akan tetapi, *Laporan Awal: Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia (2013-2025)* yang lebih berfokus kepada bahasa Melayu sebagai bahasa kebangsaan dan bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua di Malaysia, tidak membahaskan trend baharu ini. Situasi ini menggambarkan ekonomi bahasa tidak dipertimbangkan semasa perancangan dasar pendidikan. Kertas kerja ini menerima pakai perspektif ekonomi bahasa untuk mengulas dasar pendidikan di Malaysia dan membentuk corak keperluan kecekapan bahasa sumber manusia melalui perbandingan antara pasaran semasa dengan sebelumnya. Justeru, dapatan kajian ini akan diajukan kepada pihak berkepentingan yang terlibat dalam pembentukan dasar bahasa.

Kata kunci: Dasar bahasa, ekonomi bahasa, kemahiran berbahasa, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

There are 41,514 or 26.7 percent of the graduates unemployed in the year of 2009 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). Lack of good command in English among the graduates is one of the major factors of unemployment (Lai, 2011). 60 to 76 percent of the job recruitment advertised in the Jobstreet.com website between the months of January to March 2011 requested mainly English and Chinese language proficiency. 11 percent of the advertised job even requested the candidates competence in three languages (Nik Hairi et al., 2012). These findings have shown that the demand of polyglots in Malaysian human resource market is increasing.

Recently, the Malaysian students poorly performed in two international assessments, the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science study (TIMSS). Both the assessments are conducted in English as the medium of instruction. Furthermore, the employers are angry and disappointed with the graduates not being equipped with language proficiency as what they had expected (K. Ozog, 1993: 59). However, the ‘bilingual proficiency’ attribute of the preliminary report in Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 focuses on the teaching of Bahasa Malaysia, the national language and English as a second language. Education plays the role as a means of upward the social mobility, redress the economic imbalances in the country and to influence the young minds into targeted attitudes in the future (Gaudart, 1987: 529). Will the bilingual proficient graduates be able to conform the needs of the employability skills of future human resource market in Malaysia?

Besides the increasing demand of multilinguals in the web advertisement, how about the jobs advertised in the newspapers? Does the same scenario occur? What are the languages required by the employers in the human resource market nowadays? In which field of the advertised jobs highly demanded good command of language (s)?

This paper adopts the perspective of language economy to review the language education policy in Malaysia and identify the pattern of language proficiency requirement through comparing the previous and

current human resource market in the private sector. It is important to have this authentic research on the prerequisite of jobs in the human resource market. The findings from this study will be referential to the stakeholders of language-in-education policy according to the Malaysian context. They are the going-to-be candidates who need to well-equipped themselves before applying the jobs. And the policymakers are targeted as they are going to promulgate and implement education language policies which are fulfilling the needs of the society especially the private sector.

LANGUAGE ECONOMY

Language can be seen as cause or consequence of economic process (Grin, 2000). Language skills like other skills have to be acquired and will yield monetary returns in the form of higher labour income. Those have mastered second language will accrue (ditto).

Language economy stresses language as an explanatory factor of economic variables (Grin, 2003). It refers to the paradigm of theoretical economics to feature the relationships of linguistic variables and economics variables by using the concepts and tools of economics (Grin, 2006).

The concept of economics of language was firstly brought up by Jacob Marschak. His paper of 'Economics of language' was published in *Behavioral Science* in the year of 1965. This interdisciplinary research views Language as 'an object of choice' and reflects the value of language from the perspective of economics. He stresses language optimisation has close relationship with economics. Language has its economic characteristics of value, utility, cost and benefits (Zhang & Grenier, 2012: 3).

There were three groups of language economics. The Canadian group (1970 – 1985) was most active and published more papers. They examined the nature of language as an economic good and the socioeconomic status of the English and French speakers mainly in Quebec. The American group (1965 – 1985) focused on the returns differentials between Hispanics and Anglophones by learning English. And the European group (late 1980's) contributed papers on theoretical issues (Grin, 1997).

The early economists viewed language as an ethnic attribute by studying the effects of language skills on labour income. Raynauld and Marion found out there was earning difference between the black and white of United States residents where their mother tongue has effect on their socioeconomic status that is their income. During the later stage, language is analyzed as a form of human capital. This approach estimated the rate of return for Hispanics on English competence, and lately, Vaillancourt treated language both as an ethnic attribute and as an element of human capital. Language economics is centred by Grin on language-policy evaluation (Grin, 2006).

Language economics is a new research discipline in Malaysia. This multidisciplinary research identifies and investigates both the language and economy problems and variables. There is no research done under the concept of language economics before this research paper.

Human resource market

Manpower policy embraces all government policy towards labour (Tisdell & Hartey, 2008: 269). The value of resource depends on the value of what it produces. The demand for a resource derives from the demand for the final product (Mc Eachern, 2003: 241 – 269). A profit-maximising firm hires labour up to the point where labour's marginal revenue product equals to its marginal resource cost. Some individuals who are more able and talented earn more than others with the same education. Robert Frank and Philip Cook argue that breakthrough in communications is one of the development which will result someone gets a relatively higher pay (ditto).

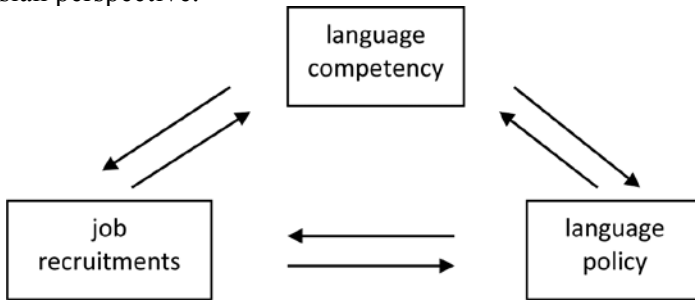
Language policy

Malaysian language-in-education policy and planning has taken a multi-pronged approach to co-exist Bahasa Malaysia and English based on historical, economical, social and political sensitivities and motivations (Nor Liza et al., 2011: 146). National curriculum has produced brilliant success in promulgating bahasa Malaysia as national language and as a tool for integration. At the same time, English is promulgated as the second language.

Bahasa Malaysia was introduced to bridge the ethnic differences after the occurrence of an ethnic clash in 1969. All the government schools introduced Malay-medium education. Malaysian legislature states bahasa Malaysia as the official language for communication purposes in the government domain and English is a subject taught in schools (Ting, 2003: 195).

Full implementation of bahasa Malaysia as a national language policy for 50 years changes the language-use behavior and language attitudes of Malaysians. They are more receptive to use it for official purposes.

This interdisciplinary research as a pilot test will apply the language competency as the language variable to explain the economic variable of jobs recruitment in order to examine the language policy based on the Malaysian perspective.



METHODOLOGY

This research is to collect the data on language requirement in the recruitment advertisements in a Malaysian newspaper, the *Sin Chew Daily*. The data is made up of the recruitment advertisements with the requirement of language proficiency from the date of 22nd to 28th February of the years of 1973, 1993 and 2013. Each set of data is with the interval of 20 years. *Sin Chew Daily* is the leading Chinese language newspaper in Malaysia with the most readers. Established in Singapore, it was moved to and fully operated in Malaysia after the secession of Singapore from Malaysia in 1966.

The rationale of these few years being chosen is because of 1973 is ten years after the formation of Malaysia, it may reflect the early stage of human resource market requirement of Malaysia while 2013 provides the latest information. The year of 1993 makes the interval of 20 years between 1973 and 2013. Whereas collecting the data for seven days are fixed randomly.

The recruitment advertisements within the above chosen date with prerequisite language proficiency and type of languages demanded are collected. These advertisements are compared according to the language requirement diachronically. The total number of languages required by the advertiser according to the job specification in each advertisement was analysed. Pattern of language requirements and jobs specification are formed. Pattern of language requirements is presented based on quantity of languages demanded and percentage are calculated.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis of this research consists of two parts namely the pattern of language requirement and the jobs required specific language proficiency.

Pattern of language requirement

The language requirement in the three different years is analysed and tabulated. Table 1 shows the pattern of language requirement in the human resource market.

Table 1 Pattern of language requirement for the years of 1973, 1993 and 2013 in *Sin Chew Daily*

	1973		1993		2013	
		%		%		%
Monolingual	3	12.5	17	11.18	4	4.40
Bilingual	15	62.5	61	40.13	35	38.46
Multilingual	6	25.0	74	48.68	52	57.14
Total	24	100	152	100	91	100

According to the table above, the potential candidates can be subdivided into three main groups based on the language requirement set by the employers. They are monolingual, bilingual and multilingual candidates.

In the year of 1973, the candidates required are mainly bilingual. This criterion constitutes more than 60 percents of the jobs offered then followed by multilinguals and monolinguals. The bilingual candidates demand reduces since 1973. However, the demand of multi-lingual candidates was found slightly higher than bilingual candidates in the year of 1993 and the difference becomes greater in the year of 2013.

This has shown the changes pattern of employees' requirement from bilingual as majority in 1973 to multilingual in 1993 and 2013. At the same time, the demand of monolingual candidates reduced rapidly to not more than five percents in 2013. The rapid growth of demand of multilinguals as shown in the above table reflects the changes of the languages required in the transaction domain from monolingual and bilingual to multilingual.

The demand of multilinguals grows rapidly but the preliminary report in Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 focuses only on training students whom are with bilingual proficiency. These graduates will be unable to accommodate the needs of the human resource market in the coming decade.

English is the language required by the employers for the monolinguals since 1973. This had shown the importance of English comparing to other languages during the period in the economy domain.

Table 2 Languages required for bilinguals for the years of 1973, 1993 and 2013 in *Sin Chew Daily*

	1973	%	1993	%	2013	%
English and Chinese language	14	93.33	50	81.97	20	57.14
English and Bahasa Malaysia	0	0	7	11.48	13	37.14
Chinese language and Bahasa Malaysia	0	0	3	4.92	1	2.86
Chinese language and Dialect	1	6.67	0	0	1	2.86
Dialects	0	0	1	1.64	0	0
Total	15	100	61	100	35	100

Chinese and English were the major languages required for the bilingual posts. Though the number of jobs required combination of these two languages was reducing since 1973, they were still highly demanded when comparing with the needs of Bahasa Malaysia and dialects in the private sectors.

In the year of 2013, the demand for Bahasa Malaysia was becoming more important not only as the official language in government domain but in the economy as well. There were increasing requirement of bilinguals with the combination Bahasa Malaysia with either English or Chinese language. The bilinguals required the combination of Chinese dialects were extremely low in demand.

Table 3 Languages required for multilinguals for the years of 1973, 1993 and 2013 in *Sin Chew Daily*

	1973	%	1993	%	2013	%
English and Dialects	1	16.67	1	1.35	1	1.92
English, Chinese language and Dialect	2	33.33	0	0	3	5.77
English, Bahasa Malaysia and Dialect	1	16.67	3	4.05	0	0
Dialects only	1	16.67	0	0	0	0
English, Chinese language and Bahasa Malaysia	1	16.67	68	91.89	47	90.38
English, Chinese language and Foreign language	0	0	1	1.35	0	0
Chinese language and Dialects	0	0	1	1.35	1	1.92
Total	6	100.01	74	99.99	52	99.99

The jobs advertised in 1973 also requested polyglots of knowing English, Chinese, Bahasa Malaysia and at least one of the dialects. The request of multilinguals who knew these three languages in 2013 increased from about 17 percents to 90 percents which is more than five times of the year 1973. The increment of demand reflects the business activities involvement changed from monoethnically to multiethnically.

The Chinese dialects are one of the important communication tools among the local society. The candidates who knew dialects had good chances to get a job in 1973 due to more than 60 percents of the jobs advertised were set with this criterion. But starting in the year of 1993, the dialects market was getting smaller. And in 2013, it was almost taken over by the three major languages in Malaysia which are English, Chinese and Bahasa Malaysia.

Types of job required language proficiency

Table 4 Jobs with language requirement for the years of 1973, 1993 and 2013 in *Sin Chew Daily*

1973	1993	2013
general and account clerks	general clerks, account clerks, counter clerks, receptionist operator	general clerks, account clerks, counter clerks, receptionist operator
typists	sales executives, promoters	engineers and graphic designers
tourist guides and shopkeepers	human resource managers and finance managers, secretaries	
drivers	arts teachers and computer teachers	

The types of job offered with language proficiency prerequisite increases since the year of 1973. In 1973, posts offered with language requirement were as clerks (the general clerks and account clerks) and the typists. Their job specifications were dealt with preparing documentations therefore good command of language(s) was required. Another group of employees who was on servicing line and those had direct contact with clients, for example the tourist guides and shopkeepers were requested with good command of specific language (s). The drivers, though delivering goods also needed to be proficient in set language criterion. The language proficiency prerequisite set to those jobs was due to candidates filling up those jobs were mainly from the grassroot groups who were might not be highly educated. There was a need to set the criterion to filter-off unqualified candidates.

General clerks and account clerks were required to have language proficiency since 1973. But there were new posts of clerk offered starting in 1993 required language proficiency, the counter clerks, receptionists and operators. The sales executives and promoters who were marketing the product had to be with good command of required language(s). Surprisingly, the executives, for example human resource and finance managers or even the secretaries were those new jobs offered with the requirement of language proficiency in 1993. These posts with language prerequisite were due to the involvement of the private business from monoethnically to multiethnically and at the same time, these reflected the organization development in Malaysian business domain.

Besides those jobs mentioned, the Arts and Computer teachers were required to be polyglots with good command of languages in 1993. This had shown that the teachers were needed to deal with students who studied Arts and Computer courses offered were not from one particular ethnic group.

However in 2013, more posts advertised with language prerequisite involved not only those in the line of servicing. But the professionals such as the engineers and graphic designers are set with the language criterion. This is in accordance with lacked of good communication skills caused unemployment among the local universities graduates in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Malaysian Government tries to construct the language behavior of the people by implementing national language policy in education domain since gaining independent from the British colonial. Bahasa Malaysia is engendering through the language planning not only becoming the language for national integration and for government procedures. It is affiliated by the non-government domain such as the economic agents.

The data analysis of this research has shown the changing trend from high demand of bilinguals since 1973 till 2013 to high demand of multilinguals. The dialects are important tools of communication among the Chinese community but their usage were taken over by the Chinese language which is taught and used as the medium of teaching in the Chinese-medium schools.

Those jobs which are set with language competency requirement did not focus on the servicing field but out spread to the execution and managing group. The academic qualification of a general clerk or receptionist normally is set with SPM (Malaysia Education Certificate) level but unfortunately in

the recruitment advertisements of 2013 had set the language competency requirement to the highly educated graduates such as engineers and designers as well.

There is a close relationship between the language competency requirement in the newspaper jobs recruitment with the field of economic in Malaysian perspective. At the same time, there is a need to revise the education language policy in order to upgrade the new generation whom master in more varieties of language and to avoid the happen of graduate unemployment among the future generation.

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