



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***VITALITY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN COMPARISON TO OTHER MAIN  
LANGUAGES AMONG MALAYSIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS***

**HOW SOO YING**

**FBMK 2016 24**



**VITALITY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN COMPARISON TO OTHER  
MAIN LANGUAGES AMONG MALAYSIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL  
STUDENTS**

**By**

**HOW SOO YING**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,  
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts**

**October 2016**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment  
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**October 2016**

**Chairman : Associate Professor Ain Nadzimah Abdullah, PhD**  
**Faculty : Modern Languages and Communication**

Due to the previous British colonization, language contact in the local context is accentuated. The environment in the nation, be it the education system or the local speech communities, has encouraged bilingualism or multilingualism. The language syllabi in the school system has given recognition to the learning of two languages (English and Malay languages) in national school and the learning of three languages (Mandarin or Tamil, English and Malay languages) in national-type school. In this multilingual milieu, Malaysians in the early age are given selection and choices to use particular language in the various domains of use. As such, it is rather common to have Malaysians speaking at least three if not more languages. Bringing the attention to the English language, despite its status as the second most important language in the nation and is known as the second language, the language is gradually slanted towards a foreign language more than a second language (Platt & Weber, 1980; Nunan, 2003). Thus, it is of interest to examine the vitality of languages evident in the linguistic repertoire of Malaysians at the primary level of education as indicative of an early stage of the reflection of language vitality. Specifically, this study aims to determine the language vitality of the English language vis-à-vis the other Malaysian languages in view of the language experiences. Vitality is referred to as the strength of a language. Although the studies of language vitality is often linked to minority and indigenous languages, language vitality in the present study has broadened to encompass the main languages in the nation. A combined qualitative and quantitative methodological approach was employed. Data were collected through questionnaire to a sampling of primary level students from urban and rural areas. Interviews were also conducted with primary school teachers to obtain additional insights on the vitality issues. The construction of the instruments (questionnaire and interview protocol) was guided by vitality indicators – language preference, language dominance, language choice, language use, language attitude and motivation, language proficiency. The data were analyzed using SPSS software and NVIVO 10 software. Results showed that English has

lower vitality as compared to Malay language, Mandarin, and Tamil among primary school students at such early stage in the learning of English. Results point to the dominance of Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil among these Malaysian students in the language experience. However, these school children have early awareness that English plays key part in terms of communication, financial gain and prestige. Moreover, it is discovered that there is vitality difference in English language between rural and urban setting. In the case of national-type Chinese and Tamil school students, the vitality of the English language in rural areas is lower than that in urban areas. However, among national school students, it is interesting to find out that there is no vitality gap bridging in English language stretching from rural to urban setting. National school students regardless of the location possess similar vitality perception, which is at moderate level. The present result raises the possibility that it might relate to their strong claim to the Malay identity more than other groups do. The study also identified possible higher vitality of English language in the later age, which is supported by the data from the interviews. From the interviews with the teachers, it is seen that there are many folds of the vitality of English language that it cannot be measured by scale let alone. It is found that social milieu (in the sense of urban area versus rural area), socio-economic background and language policies contribute to the differences in the experience of the English language among students and thus influencing the vitality of the language. Results and findings revealed varied indications of importance and values attached to languages and different dimensions of the vitality of the English language in the defined context of use.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

**DAYA HIDUP BAHASA INGGERIS BERBANDING DENGAN BAHASA  
UTAMA YANG LAIN DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR SEKOLAH  
RENDAH MALAYSIA**

Oleh

**HOW SOO YING**

**Oktober 2016**

**Pengerusi : Profesor Madya Ain Nadzimah Abdullah, PhD**  
**Fakulti : Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi**

Disebabkan penjajahan British terdahulu, pertembungan bahasa dalam konteks tempatan telah menjadi jelas. Persekitaran dalam negara kita, biarpun sistem pendidikan negara ataupun komuniti pertuturan tempatan, telah menggalakkan bilingualisme atau multilingualisme. Sukatan pelajaran bahasa dalam sekolah telah memberi pengiktirafan kepada pembelajaran dua bahasa, iaitu bahasa Inggeris dan bahasa Melayu di sekolah kebangsaan dan pembelajaran tiga bahasa (bahasa Cina atau Tamil, bahasa Inggeris dan bahasa Melayu) di sekolah-sekolah jenis kebangsaan. Dalam persekitaran berbilang bahasa ini, rakyat Malaysia pada usia awal telah diberi pilihan untuk menggunakan bahasa tertentu dalam pelbagai domain bahasa. Dengan ini, adalah kebiasaan untuk rakyat Malaysia bertutur sekurang-kurangnya tiga jenis bahasa. Menumpukan perhatian kepada bahasa Inggeris, walaupun ia dikenali sebagai bahasa kedua penting di negara kita dan dikenali sebagai bahasa kedua rakyat Malaysia, bahasa Inggeris, secara beransurnya, telah mencondong ke arah bahasa asing lebih daripada bahasa kedua (Platt & Weber, 1980; Nunan, 2003). Oleh itu, kajian ini berminat untuk mengkaji daya hidup bahasa-bahasa yang ketara dalam repertoire linguistik rakyat Malaysia pada tahap pendidikan rendah yang dapat menunjukkan daya hidup pada peringkat awal. Secara spesifikasinya, kajian ini bertujuan untuk menentukan daya hidup bahasa Inggeris berbanding dengan bahasa-bahasa Malaysia yang lain sebagai gambaran pengalaman bahasa. Daya hidup merujuk kepada kekuatan bahasa. Walaupun kajian-kajian lepas tentang daya hidup bahasa adalah berhubungkait dengan bahasa-bahasa minoriti dan asli, dalam kajian ini, definisi dan konsep daya hidup bahasa telah berkembang dan meliputi bahasa-bahasa utama dalam negara ini. Gabungan pendekatan metodologi kualitatif dan kuantitatif telah diggunakan. Data dikumpul melalui soal selidik yang ditujukan kepada pelajar-pelajar sekolah rendah dari kawasan bandar dan luar bandar. Temu ramah juga telah dijalankan dengan guru-guru sekolah rendah untuk mendapatkan pandangan tambahan berkenaan dengan isu-isu daya hidup. Instrumen (soal selidik dan protokol temu ramah) telah dibentuk mengikuti indikator daya

hidup – bahasa kegemaran, dominasi bahasa, pilihan bahasa, penggunaan bahasa, sikap dan motivasi terhadap bahasa dan penguasaan bahasa. Data telah dianalisis menggunakan perisian SPSS dan perisian NVIVO 10. Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa bahasa Inggeris mempunyai daya hidup yang kurang berbanding dengan bahasa Melayu, bahasa Cina dan bahasa Tamil dalam kalangan pelajar-pelajar sekolah rendah pada peringkat awal pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris. Keputusan menuju kepada dominasi bahasa Melayu, bahasa Cina dan bahasa Tamil dalam kalangan pelajar dari segi pengalaman bahasa mereka. Namun, didapati bahawa pelajar-pelajar sekolah ini mempunyai kesedaran awal bahawa Bahasa Inggeris memainkan peranan yang penting dari segi komunikasi, dapatan kewangan, dan prestij. Tambahan pula, daripada kajian ini, juga dikesan bahawa terdapatnya perbezaan daya hidup dalam Bahasa Inggeris antara lokasi luar bandar dan bandar. Untuk kes pelajar-pelajar sekolah jenis kebangsaan Cina dan sekolah kebangsaan jenis Tamil, daya hidup Bahasa Inggeris di lokasi luar bandar adalah lebih rendah berbanding dengan dalam bandar. Walau bagaimanapun, dalam kalangan pelajar-pelajar sekolah kebangsaan, ia adalah menarik untuk mengetahui bahawa tiada jurang daya hidup Bahasa Inggeris antara kawasan luar bandar dan bandar. Pelajar-pelajar sekolah kebangsaan tanpa mengira lokasi mempunyai persepsi daya hidup yang sama, iaitu pada tahap sederhana. Hasil kajian ini menimbulkan kemungkinan bahawa ia mungkin berkaitan dengan pengenalan identiti Melayu yang lebih kuat berbanding dengan kumpulan-kumpulan lain. Kajian ini juga mengesan kemungkinan daya hidup bahasa Inggeris yang lebih tinggi pada peringkat umur yang lebih tinggi, disokong oleh data daripada temu bual. Daripada temu bual dengan guru-guru, didapati bahawa terdapatnya banyak lapisan daya hidup Bahasa Inggeris yang ia tidak boleh diukur sekadar dengan skala. Didapati bahawa persekitaran sosial (kawasan luar bandar dan bandar), latar belakang dan dasar bahasa menyumbang kepada perbezaan dalam pengalaman bahasa Inggeris yang didedahkan kepada pelajar dan dengan itu mempengaruhi daya hidup bahasa tersebut. Keputusan dan penemuan kajian ini mendedahkan pelbagai indikasi tentang kepentingan bahasa-bahasa ini dan nilai yang berkait rapat dengan bahasa-bahasa ini. Kajian ini juga mendedahkan dimensi daya hidup bahasa Inggeris yang berlainan dalam konteks penggunaan bahasa tertentu.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to God for rendering me strength and for answering my prayers. This research journey has been a meaningful journey because of Him.

Overflowing thankfulness to my current main supervisor, Prof. Madya Dr. Ain Nadzimah Abdullah, my previous main supervisor, Prof. Dr. Chan Swee Heng, and my current co-supervisor, Dr. Helen Tan for their immense help and guidance in assisting me to perfect my thesis. I would like to express my greatest attitude to them. From them, I have learned a lot and have gained knowledge in terms of doing research and in the field of study – linguistics. I will remember the advices and ideas rendered to me and will apply them in the present moment and in the future. Many thanks to Prof. Chan especially for allocating time to read my thesis though she is retired.

A special thanks to my grandpa in heaven who had always emphasized on the importance of education when he was still alive. Also, I would like to attribute my thesis to my family members who have always been supporting me from the back scene – Grandma (Chong Ah Chu), parents (How Wee Jong & Chin Set Fah), uncles (Ricky Ng, Chow Thiam Soon, Low Kok Hua, Chong Lip Min & Chin Kong Pin @ Ridhuan Chin) and aunties (Penny Chin, Chin Set Kiun, Chin Seet Yong, Chin Set Chew, & Rohayati), siblings (Soo Chyi & Lian Jie), and cousins (Ee Lynn, Eugene, Chong Xun, Xin Jie, Wei Zhe, Raikal, & Mei Mei). They have been my impetus and momentum to complete my thesis.

Thanks to the lecturers from the department of English language, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, UPM for imparting linguistic knowledge to me, for stimulating my interest in the linguistics area, and for telling me that “the quality of the thesis shows whether you are a good academician or otherwise”. Many thanks to precious friends who encouraged and motivated me throughout the thesis-writing.

Gratitude to Ministry of Education and Selangor Education Department for allowing me to conduct such research in primary schools in the Selangor state. I am thankful to the schools that have agreed to participate in my research. Nevertheless, due to the confidentiality agreement, the schools’ identity could not be exposed.

Gratitude to each and one of you who supported and helped me throughout this journey. Nothing could be compared to a beautiful conversation with a beautiful mind.



This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

**Ain Nadzimah binti Abdullah, PhD**

Associate Professor

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication

Universiti Putra Malaysia

(Chairman)

**Helen Tan, PhD**

Senior Lecturer

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication

Universiti Putra Malaysia

(Member)

---

**BUJANG KIM HUAT, PhD**

Professor and Dean

School of Graduate Studies

Universiti Putra Malaysia

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of Supervisory  
Committee: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Member  
of Supervisory  
Committee: \_\_\_\_\_

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

This chapter begins by introducing the history of multilingualism in Malaysia, the setting of where the research is conducted. The section discusses how the languages were brought into Malaya, presently known as West Malaysia and how they were linked to language vitality. Then, the chapter presents the concept of vitality that provides definitions of the concept. Next, it discusses the purposes of the research, the problem statement, and the significance of the research. Finally, the chapter concluded with the summary of the main content discussed.

#### **1.2 History of Multilingualism in Malaysia**

Throughout history, colonization and migration have been the factors that triggered the movement and relocation of people worldwide. A direct result of migration is ethnic groups are no longer peculiar to a particular location but become disseminated to various places. Movements of people from diverse racial backgrounds later form the basis of multi-ethnicity in countries around the world that we see today. As language is an important part of ethnicity and racial identity, it also becomes transplanted in the new land and continues to be used by descendants of the migrants. Thus, a multi-ethnic and multilingual country is formed. Malaysia, which was known as Malaya before 1963, is one such nation. Once a land inhabited by the Malay and indigenous people such as Ibans and Kadazans, Malaysia is now home to several major ethnic groups with the three main races being Malay, Chinese and Indians. The British colonial government which ruled the Malay Peninsula and some parts of Borneo Island in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had a major role in transforming the once mono-ethnic country into the vibrant multiracial as it is today. The British brought with them English, which was later destined to become the world's most important lingua franca, displacing Spanish, French and even Dutch which had an earlier start as a medium of communication. The British colonization of Malaya had an economic motive i.e. to enrich the Crown and Britain. Malaya, which was then made up of several warring sultanates, was rich in natural resources such as tin ore, rubber, and spices. To work the tin mines and rubber plantations the British imported cheap foreign workers from China and India. These economic migrants brought along with them their distinctive culture and mother tongue language to Malaya. Therefore, from just being a land where only Malay is spoken, Malaya had now become a Tower of Babel, so to speak. English, by virtue of it being the language of the colonial master became the language of government, commerce, politics and education. The British, to their credit, however, did not attempt to eliminate the languages of the people they ruled over. Vernacular education was encouraged, Malay was the language spoken on the streets and kampong, Chinese and its dialects ruled the market place, while Tamil was the major medium of communication in the



rubber and oil palm estates. Schools were set up using mother tongue as a medium of instruction. Smaller in size and budget they flourished alongside the schools run by the British masters which uses Received Pronunciation (RP) English as medium of instruction. However, the vernacular schools could not compete with the many advantages British-run schools provide – prestige, employment opportunities, and upward economic and social mobility.

English schools receive continuous government aid and support, and in addition, their graduates were guaranteed a wide range of professions, either in the government or private sector, as compared to vernacular schools, which produced only literate labourers (Chan & Tan, 2008). In contrast to English, Malay language development was restricted, and its usage was narrowed to that of a home language and the language of instruction in Malay-medium primary schools (Karim, 1981). Meanwhile, Chinese and Tamil immigrants regarded vernacular education as a perpetuation of loyalty towards their respective motherland to which they harboured thoughts of returning to. Therefore, the linguistic environment in Malaya during British rule was very fragmented and segregated to the extent that all four languages (i.e. English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil) rarely came into contact with each other.

After the Second World War, colonialism was fast losing its lustre and romance. The British, tired out on both fronts of the war, planned to return authority and power to the people of Malaya over which they had dominion for nearly 100 years. The eventual plan was for full self-rule (independence) by the Malaysians themselves. The future of English and the other languages was now in the hands of the Malaysian people. By this time many Chinese and Indians had decided to stay permanently in Malaya. Independence meant a common language had to be chosen and agreed to by everyone. That language has to play several important roles, chief of which is uniting the people and nation building. Malay, as it is the language of archipelago and the language of the largest ethnic group in the country, was chosen as the national language to be used in all official and government matters. Malaya's Founding Fathers, themselves from various ethnic backgrounds also determined that the Chinese and Indian languages were also to be protected and respected post-independence. Prior to independence (Merdeka) in 1957, several reports were formulated to seek this linguistic balance. It was not an easy task as any decision made had to take the speech community into consideration. The Barnes Report of 1951 (Federation of Malaya: Central Advisory Committee on Education, 1951), for instance, was deemed unsuitable in that, while supporting bilingualism in Malay and English, the preference over English as a medium of instruction in secondary and higher education would have had a detrimental effect on the position of Malay as the national language. The Barnes Report also alluded to a possible abolishment of vernacular schools. The Fenn-Wu Report (Federation of Malaya: Central Advisory Committee on Education, 1951) commissioned the same year as the Barnes Report, showed that the Chinese preferred trilingual learning, rather than be subjected to any restrictions that prohibited them from learning more than two languages. In 1956 and 1960 respectively, the authorities commissioned the Razak and Rahman Talib Reports. These two reports later became the basis of the Education Act 1961

(Federation of Malaya, 1961). These two landmark reports provided for a healthier development of the languages under the objective of building a “national system of education acceptable to the people of the federation as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic and political development whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of other communities living in the country” (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1956, p. 1). Though emphasis was given to the national language, wherein primary and secondary schools were converted into national (Malay-medium) and national-type (Chinese-medium & Tamil-medium) distinguished by their medium of instruction, the recommendations did not threaten diversity, but provided for the flexibility and encouragement of using more than one language. One of the results of the mandates emerging from these reports was the requirement of English as a compulsory subject to be taught in every school. Thus, even after independence, English remained salient as an educational language while Malay language was elevated from vernacular to national language status. This change in status scenario was mentioned by Thomason (2001) who stated that the status of a language are in the hands of those in power and authority — a gain in power entails a gain in their language’s status and vice versa.

After independence in 1957, Malay became entrenched as the medium of instruction in national secondary schools. Vernacular languages were seen as being jeopardized by Section 21 (2) of the Education Act 1961, which stipulated that the government “may at any suitable time convert all national-type primary schools to national primary schools” (United Chinese School Committees’ Association of Malaysia, 2013). Meanwhile, the English language was viewed with suspicion and a likely obstruction to national unity (Dumanig, David, & Symaco, 2012). Nonetheless, the use of English language as the main medium of instruction was still allowed in Malayan (Malaysian) schools. However, the racial riots of 13 May 1969 provided the impetus to the authorities to convert English-medium primary and secondary schools to the Malay-medium (Darus, 2010). By 1983, the conversion to Malay-medium of instruction in English schools in Peninsular Malaysia was completed (Omar, 1993). The conversion in Sabah and Sarawak schools were on a piecemeal basis by 1985 (Solomon, 1988).

Many activities were put in place to promote Malay language as the national language. For example, *Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka* and the Language Institute (LI) that were established in 1956 and 1958 respectively aimed “at developing the language to perform its new functions and roles” (Hassan, 2004, p. 4) and also to train Malay language specialists. Two high school examinations which were created by the British i.e. the Higher School Certificate (HSC) and the School Certificate (SC) examinations were replaced by Malaysian versions, which are Malaysian Higher School Certificate (Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia) and Malaysian Certificate of Education (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) respectively (Dumanig et al., 2012). These public examinations, as well as academic courses in Malaysia public universities, were by now conducted in Malay (Dumanig et al., 2012). A pass in Malay became a requisite for obtaining the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia and a chance at securing employment with the government. In addition, a credit in BM is also a

requirement for admission into public universities. With these transformations, the position of Malay was fore-fronted as the national language. Singh and Murkerjee (1993) said that “in the face of a highly competitive situation in the labour market, common sense dictates that full attention be paid to the national language, while mother tongue and often English take a secondary place” (p. 94).

Although English was relegated to a second language status in post-independence Malaya, its usage did not noticeably diminish especially in the private sector and in science and technology. Globalization and the Information Age input have strengthened the need for English. Realizing that these developments were happening, the Malaysian government, through the Education Act 1996 (Laws of Malaysia, 2006a) and the Private Higher Education Institution Act 1996 (Laws of Malaysia, 2006b), allowed the use of English as the medium of instruction in certain courses offered by private higher educational institutions here. The government even went further by introducing the Teaching and Learning of Maths and Science in English (the policy has since been rescinded) and making it compulsory for students wishing to pursue tertiary education in Malaysia to sit for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Despite these efforts, the present English proficiency level among present day students is not on par with the levels seen prior to the conversion of English-medium education (Chapman, 2007; Hassan & Selamat, 2002; Hwang & Embi, 2007; Nunan, 2003; Platt & Weber, 1980; The Star Online, 2006; Yong, Tan, & Yong, 2012).

Presently, Chinese and Tamil language supporters are also demanding that attention and recognition be accorded to their languages. As a result, greater efforts have also been made to promote the learning of mother tongue as a supplementary subject in schools. Chinese and Indian students are also able to continuously learn their mother tongue as a subject at the secondary school level through Pupil’s Own Language (POL) programmes. The importance of Chinese language has even attracted the attention of non-Chinese Malaysians. Many Chinese schools are seeing increasing enrolment by non-Chinese (Muthiah, 2015). The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012) reported that enrolment of Chinese students in the Chinese primary schools increased from 92% in 2000 to 96% in 2011. However, enrolment in Tamil primary schools declined from 97,000 students in 2013 to 92,000 in 2014 (The Star Online, 2014).

Although linguistic diversity was already in existence here in the Malay Archipelago during the Malacca and Johor Riau Sultanate era, it is the British who initiated the path towards linguistic diversity officially in Malaya and later the people of Malaya/Malaysia sustain this country’s linguistic landscape and determined its dynamics of importance and value. In regards to the context of use and values in influencing the existence and the vitality of the language, this study proposes to investigate Language Vitality (LV), especially that of the English vis-à-vis Malaysian languages (Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil). This study seeks to find out whether English, which is a compulsory subject in school, plays a significant role in

Malaysian lives. It would be of interest to seek an early sign of vitality construction among primary school students through the use of LV indicators.

### **1.3 The Concept of Vitality**

In tracing vitality, reference is often made to seminar findings made in the 1960s and 1970s. Among them is Stewart (1962, as cited in Bell, 1976) who defined vitality as “whether or not the language possesses a living community of native speakers ... A language may lose its vitality as its L1 community dies out” (p. 148). According to Stewart (1962), language is guaranteed its vitality as long as it has speakers who use the language as their first language. A strong L1 community intrinsically establishes strong vitality of a language. Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) meanwhile constructed three indicators dealing with status, demography and institutional support which are the basis of another type of vitality which is known as Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV). EV refers to that “which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations” (p. 308). A group that has little or no vitality would cause the group members to shift to using another language. Both definitions of vitality from Stewart (1962) and Giles et al. (1977) imply that the speaker is an important factor in determining the vitality of a language. The United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2003 declared that a language without speakers has low or no vitality and this situation will cause a language to die out. In short, LV is the ability of a language to live and survive. In order for a language to do so, its speech community has to ensure maintenance and sustainability; otherwise, in the long run, language shift could occur, resulting in a language being in danger of extinction. Karan (2000), however, sees vitality as “motivations and opportunity – a language uses motivations and opportunity to learn and use the language” (p. 71). In other words, there is a wider interpretation of the term ‘vitality’. As vitality could be interchangeable with the notion of ‘strength’ (Harwood, Giles, & Bourhis, 1994; Rudwick, 2004), vitality in the present study, is a construal of strength evaluation of English relative to the other languages that coexist in the same linguistic sphere where there is ongoing interaction in the use of first, second or third language. In assessing the vitality of a language, designed indicators must be created. These indicators will be further elaborated in Chapter Two of this study.

### **1.4 Purpose of the Study**

In the Malaysian multilingual society where Malay, English, Mandarin and Tamil are the main languages spoken, undoubtedly, these languages are ‘safe’ according to the definition given by Krauss (2007). Safe languages are the languages taught as compulsory subjects or used as a medium of instruction in primary schools, are learned as mother tongue by children, have the support of the government and have speakers around the world. English is recognized as an international language and is used in Inner, Outer and Expanding Circle countries (Note: Inner Circle countries are where English is native language, Outer Circle countries use English as a second language, while Expanding Circle nations use English as foreign language). This



study seeks *another* type of vitality that is an evaluation of the strength of English language relative to other languages that coexist in the same linguistic sphere with ongoing interaction in the use of these languages.

This study aims to use the various vitality indicators: language use, language preference, language dominance, language choice, language attitude and motivation and language proficiency to investigate the vitality of the English language among other languages in Malaysia. With the objectives to examine the English language vitality among primary school students, to examine the difference in English language vitality between rural and urban primary school students, and to find out teachers' perception of English language vitality among primary school students, the following questions will be asked during investigation work:

- 1) What is the English language vitality among primary school students in national and national-type schools in Malaysia?
- 2) Is there a difference in English language vitality between rural and urban primary school students?
- 3) How do teachers perceive English language vitality among primary school students?

### **1.5 Statement of the Problem**

The learning of English has gone through a number of changes in terms of language policy in Malaysia. Historically, the vitality issue of English language is situated when the language, during the British colonization, had been given a high status when it was the medium of instruction in schools. Thereafter, the education policy changes and it has relegated the learning of English language to merely becoming another subject in school. The policy has had direct impact on vitality as the emphasis and the importance were suppressed and the focus of attention would indirectly shift to other languages, specifically Malay language used in Malaysia. Yet, recently, various policies are carried out to give emphasis on the importance of learning English language again. Subsequent to the Strategic Education Plan 2011-2020 that emphasized the 'Upholding the Malay language and strengthening the English language', this was followed by Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 which gives an even greater emphasis on the role of English as the language of education, communication and knowledge. The blueprint, among others, stresses on the empowerment of English language proficiency among students beginning from an early age at a primary one to the secondary level. However, years of policy changes has, however, affected Malaysian students' ability to use the English language (Chapman, 2007; Hassan & Selamat, 2002; Hwang & Embi, 2007; Yong et al., 2012). The declining standard of English in this country has also been reported by the media such as The Star Online (2006). The vitality of the language was also affected by other factors such as the establishment of national and national type schools and urban and rural schools. In the context of language change, it is important to obtain information about English language vitality in order to give a

realistic and empirical assessment of the way the language has gone in terms of the development. Moreover, it is not certain to what extent English plays a role in the lives of Malaysian primary school students. This motivates the study of vitality of the language at this level of language development upon whether extensions and entrenchment could be made to the learning. This also brings to the forefront the extent other languages are used in comparison to English language as the use of other languages would have a bearing on the vitality of the English language.

Malaysian students are either bilingual or multilingual because they are taught many languages since young. According to the Malaysian Ministry of Education in 2013, there were a total of 5,233,286 pre-school, primary school and secondary school students in this country. Of that total, 2,743,237 are primary school students. As primary schoolers are the biggest group of students in Malaysia, the Report on Education Reform and Process of Consultation suggests the government to invest in them by raising the standard of English among them rather than concentrating on secondary school or university students (ASLI-CPPS, PROHAM & KITA-UKM, 2012). This means the foundations of vitality should be built at an early age and become entrenched in their life. As vitality is mouldable (Abrams, Barker, & Giles, 2009), rectification in effort could be carried out to improve the vitality of English if it be found to be low at primary school level.

Related to the issue of language vitality is the question of language choice. In other words, it is human agency that determines a language's vibrancy in daily experiences of linguistic contexts. Within the ecology of multilingual Malaysia, the use of languages is seen as a 'competition' to establish importance or status. The most significant current attention is the "shared reality" behind the use of the four main Malaysian languages (i.e. English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil). In this sense, this vitality study attempts to establish the importance and status of the English language in relation to the other languages.

As for the theory of vitality, it is in dire need of new directions. Although Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV) or Group Vitality (GV) has been the highlight and precedent of many research studies, it is contended that the Theory of Vitality has advanced very little during a span of more than 30 years (Yagmur & Ehala, 2011) since its inception, except for few extensions of the notion, such as Age Vitality (Giles, Kutchukhides, Yagmur, & Noels, 2003) and vitality as a belief system (Allard & Landry, 1986). Moreover, with the language vitality assessment proposed by the UNESCO's Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (UNESCO, 2003), many studies have concentrated on indigenous and minority languages in order to examine the survival and endangerment of these languages with the idea that they should be preserved. Vitality, in this researcher's opinion, should become more encompassing, involving not only the indigenous or minority languages. In line with these developments, vitality should be interpreted distinctively in line with the languages that are used by the majority. In other words, vitality is given a new interpretation as to how a major language is faring in terms of its current use.

This study attempts to capture the vitality of English language in this new direction, with consideration given to local constraints such as type of schools, their location and competing vitalities of other languages in Malaysia.

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

Historically, the theory of vitality has always been aimed at the study of endangered languages, indigenous languages, and minority languages, but was never considered a suitable theory for major languages in a nation. Hence, the present study intends to re-define language vitality as updated by current times. The contribution specifically involves the main languages used in Malaysian schools which are Malay, English, Tamil, and Mandarin.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012) aims for bilingual or multilingual proficiency, in which “every student will be proficient in Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and in English as a second language and the international language of communication” (pp. 2-7). While this is the policy, it remains to be seen how languages are actually developing at ground level. In other words, it is a question to be answered as to whether a language would have equal vitality along with other languages. In addition, what could be some of the contributing factors that could affect the strength of the vitality? These questions are significant if we are to understand and keep track of language developments especially in a multilingual country such as Malaysia. This study attempts to answer the relevant question raised to add to the knowledge about language issues occurring in a country blessed with linguistic diversity. In particular, data obtained on the exploration of the strength of English language vis-à-vis the other languages could be used to inform on the effects of education policies and provide directions towards steps that can be taken to moderate or monitor the current language situation or even to help improve on the deficiencies inherent in implementing a language policy.

## **1.7 Definition of Terms**

### *Main languages*

In this thesis, terming English, Mandarin, and Tamil as main languages along with Malay language in the country could be disputable, thus the definition and the reason behind are covered. On account that a main language has to be a language with importance and statuses as well as a dominant language with huge numbers of speakers, it is an undeniable fact that Malay language fulfils the characteristics above as a main language. It is a major language in the nation as supported by Omar (1993). The first feature of being a main language is having a large population of native speakers. In this case, Malay as a dominant group that constitutes 54.5% of the population in the nation speaks the language as their mother tongue. The language



also fits the second and third feature of being a major language which are to serve as an official language and as the language of education at the secondary level. Into the bargain, Tamil as language spoken by smaller but substantial number of speakers and as medium of instruction at primary level, is nailed as a minor language. However, Mandarin is not classified as minor language given that it “clearly has been given a status quite apart from the minor language” (p. 100). With the status as language of instruction and subject in secondary Chinese schools, Mandarin is therefore a language of a special status instead of a minor language. Along with Mandarin, English language is also acknowledged as language of a special status since it is taught as a subject in secondary schools. However, based on the reason that Malaysia is a country which is composed of three main ethnics (Malays, Chinese and Indians) and other indigenous groups, Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil are included as the main languages in this thesis. Due to the historical attachment with English language, it is also included as one of it.

### *Language Vitality*

Stretching from Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV) that focuses on the vitality of a group, Language Vitality (LV) put ‘language’ as the centre of the attention. Language vitality, in this present study, is defined as the strength evaluation of language relative to other languages that coexist in the same linguistic sphere where there is ongoing interaction in the use of first, second or third language. In other words, the present study seeks strength evaluation of English language in comparison to Malay language, Mandarin, and Tamil language. The strength (vitality) evaluation is based on the *indicators* (or in another term called *determinants* which is used alternately in the study) such as language preference, language dominance, language use, language choice, language attitude and motivation, and language proficiency.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

In a multilingual environment, each co-existing language should be present simultaneously in the daily experience of language users with each language playing varied functions and values. Ideally, they should complement and not contradict each other. In a complementary relationship, the vitalities of these languages should be in counterbalance and there is no language suppression. However, we have seen that in some cases, the preference for one language causes a competition between it and the other languages for importance or status. As a consequence, this causes some languages to be marginalized or become detached from linguistic community. Therefore, it is hoped that the designed vitality indicators in this research (language use, language choice, language dominance, language preference, language attitude and motivation, and language proficiency) can provide answers on the vitality as well as language experience of the Malaysian citizens at their early age. The information on the background of the research in relations to the concept of the language vitality has been provided in this chapter. Clearer picture of the concept will be forwarded in the next chapter.

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