Linguistics and Environment in English Language Learning: Towards the Development of Quality Human Capital

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Abstract
One of the aims in the decision to change the language of instruction in teaching Mathematics and Science is to improve the English proficiency of the students because the inability or limited ability to communicate in English has been identified as one of the reasons of the high unemployment rate among Malay university graduates. In the recent 2006 UPSR results, it was reported that 70% students are weak in English (Utusan Malaysia, 16th November 2006 - however, no reasons and elaborations on students’ profile were given). The same findings were also recorded in a research entitled “English as a Second Language: Problems and Solutions” where 70% of the respondents were found to be weak in English. Among the reasons that have been identified are linguistics and environment factors. Structural differences between English and Malay have also been identified as another problem faced by the students in learning English. In addition, weaknesses in morphology and syntax, which are part of the main thrusts in language learning, further exacerbate the problem. Environment that is not conducive to language learning further add to the problem. Hence, efforts to improve the pedagogy, linguistic knowledge of teachers and learning strategies should be stepped up in line with the nation’s aim to build and accelerate the development of quality human capital.

Keywords: Linguistics knowledge, Environment factors, English proficiency, Quality human development

1. Introduction
Fifty years after independence, the problems educators faced in the domain of teaching and learning of English have continued to be a frequently debated topic. Language policy which is intended to satisfy the needs of the nation continues to be questioned. Failures among college graduates to secure jobs
after graduating are often linked to their inability to communicate effectively in English. We are often reminded that to successfully compete in today’s globalized world, mastery of the English language is a necessity. Globalization appears to promote homogeneity when in fact heterogeneity in acquiring knowledge should be encouraged. In this context, English is often assumed as part of this homogeneity.

In our compelling efforts to introduce the notion of language homogeneity as global language, we have to take stock of the situation and examine our readiness to face the challenges. A statement by the Director-General of the Education Ministry of Malaysia that the overall students’ performance in English in the recent 2006 UPSR¹ is below average (70% is considered weak in their achievement) should be given due attention. Logically, a weak performance or achievement in English would also influence two other subjects, namely, mathematics and science as these two subjects are taught in English. This paper seeks to examine the link between the reason behind the decline in performance in English with language policy and the ultimate aim of the country to achieve quality human capital. This paper will attempt to provide a glimpse of the present scenario and efforts that could be taken by relevant authorities.

2. English in Malaysia Today
A lot of researches have been conducted on the performance of students in English in Malaysia. Most of the research tried to explore the reasons behind students’ poor command of the English language by looking at factors such as attitude, perception and environment. Noreiny Maarof (2003) found that Malaysian students are embarrassed to use English. The fact that their environment did not promote the use of English fueled their hesitation to use the language. This problem persists when the medium of communication among students continue to be their mother tongue and not English. However, they do watch English movies and listen to English songs. A few researches that specifically focused on the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English have been carried out. Nor Hashimah (2004) showed that teachers and students are more confident in using Malay language as a medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics. More than 75% students and 90% teachers believed that they can comprehend the two subjects if they are taught in Malay. A research with bigger samples was conducted by Juriah Long et.al (2005) which focused on the issue of teaching and learning Mathematics and Science in English. 8000 samples were taken as respondents proved that the policy is not benefitting the students in general. The urbanites, who are generally rich and non Malays are the ones who gain most from this policy. On the other hand, those who come from rural and mostly poor and Malays are the ones who lose out most in this new policy. The latest research under the leadership of Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin (research code SK01/2006) on Form Two students in urban, semi-urban and rural areas shows that they too, face the same problems. The students agree that English is important; however, their environment does not promote the use of English. In addition, they too, feel that learning English is difficult and structural differences between English and Malay have further added to the constraints in mastering the language. This paper will explore further the link between language policy, environment, perception and language acquisition in developing quality human capital.

3. Language Policy and Education in Malaysia
As an independent country, Malaysia has a well coordinated education system that is frequently debated in the Parliament. There are a few reports that served as the basis for national language policy and in implementing reforms to ensure that students receive the best education possible. This chapter

¹ UPSR (Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah; translation: Primary School Evaluation Test) is a national examination taken by all Standard Six (12 year old) students in Malaysia.
will divide further discussion into two, namely, Language Policy during Razak’s era and Post-Razak era.

3.1. Education during Razak’s Era

Education system in the Razak’s era is an education system that was based on the Razak Report. Razak Report was endorsed and passed in 1965 and implemented until 1995. The report states that language is an important vehicle to unite the nation, more so in a multi-racial country like Malaysia. The effort to unite the country through a national language has its own complicated history. The authority felt that unity will be achieved through the implementation of a common policy. The Razak Education Committee was made up of representatives from every race in Malaya (including a few senior officers from the British government who were posted to Malaya then). The committee received 164 memorandoms, suggestions and letters from various associations (including 13 from foreign governments) and individuals. Two important formulas were formed:

i. school system in Malaya is to have a common content syllabus
ii. education system post-independence must have a common language, that is a national language as the main medium of instruction in the education system

The Razak Report continues to emphasize:

‘[Education in Malaya should aim] to bring together the children of all races under a national education system in which the national language is the main medium of instruction though we realize that progress towards this goal cannot be rushed and must be gradual’

It continues:

“it is hoped that this concerted use of the National Language … will inculcate in all citizens the habit of using it regularly. It is only in this way that they will feel they belong to this country, and that the National Language is a real living force that binds them together”

(YM Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, 2007).

The above quotation from the Razak Report shows that the national language policy has a single aim, which is to unite the various races in Malaya under one language banner which is the Malay language. It also aims for a common content syllabus – a national syllabus – that will lead to a common goal in education; which ultimately and hopefully produce human capital with national image and identity, united and able to live in harmony regardless of ethnic background. The Razak Report (1956) is the brainchild and vision of Tun Abdul Razak (the Education Minister then) that surpassed ethnic boundaries for the sake of national unity.

The issues surrounding the notion of nationhood that Tun Razak tried to overcome in a way is quite similar to the United States. America is often labelled as a melting pot nation that has always attracted people from various parts of the world. With various races living together, America realized the importance of a single language to unite them. In this case, America has chosen English as the language to foster loyalty, identity and national security in nation building as stated by Dennis Baron (1990) in their attempt to formulate a legislature on language policy:

“Americanism, they argue, loses something in the translation, while English offers the only key to the nation’s democracy, history and culture. Language thus becomes a literal shibboleth of nationality, a badge of true Americanism, and anything less than fluency in English - a foreign accent, let alone the maintainence of a minority tongue – is perceived to threaten national security and subvert the national ideal”

(Dennis Baron; 1990).

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2 Tun Abdul Razak was the second Prime Minister of Malaysia who served from 1970 to 1976.
3 There are a few reports that serve as the basis for the education system in Malaya, for example the Barnes Report. However, this paper will only focus on the Razak Report.
4 1995 was the year the education Ministry granted permission to institutions of higher learning to use English as medium of instruction.
It is therefore, obvious that language is the vehicle to unite various races. If America has chosen English, Malaysia then has chosen Bahasa Melayu. Bahasa Melayu is the native language and as such should be the national language and by the same token, should be the medium of instruction in school, as has been the practice for the past 37 years.

3.2. Education in Post-Razak Era

1995 is the beginning of a new practice in Malaysian education system – private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia were given the permission to use English as the medium of instruction. Its aim or purpose is to turn Malaysia into an education hub in Southeast Asia. This act, seen as relaxing the rule, has in turn affected the national education system.

In 2003, another radical policy was introduced. This time it involved the medium of instruction for two subjects in primary and secondary schools. Science and mathematics that are beginning to capture the interest of the Malay students are now being taught in English. 2006 SPM\(^5\) exam takers are the last cohort of students to use Malay as the medium of instruction for science and mathematics. As recent as April 2007 while officiating the International Conference on Smart Schools, Deputy Prime Minister wants efforts to improve the standard of English in Malaysia to continue while not forgetting the national language (New Straits Times, 2007). The government also wants students to be well versed in the field of science and technology. The year 2007 is also the year where the idea of cluster schools is introduced by the Minister of Education. However, only a few schools have been selected for the implementation of cluster schools. These schools have the authority to decide on their specialization whether to be a sports school, music school and etc. The purpose is to produce students who are capable in the area chosen. The school principles are authorized to appoint teachers they have selected.

What is obvious in the post-Razak era is various continuous measures `have been taken to improve the national education system. Among these are the implementation of smart schools, vision schools, cluster schools and the move to change the medium of instruction for science and mathematics to English being the highlight – a move that was also opposed by Chinese educationist (Dong Jiao Zong\(^6\)).

The most evident difference in the policies between Razak era and post-Razak era is the vision to unite the people through the education system and through language is missing. Vision school is a concept where two or three schools (in areas that have been identified) with different medium of instruction are to share facilities with the aim of fostering integration. These schools could be sharing playing field, laboratories and basic facilities. On the other hand, smart schools are selected schools that are given computer facilities and more advanced teaching facilities. The same can be said of cluster schools. The new education policy not only bypassed the Parliament for approval but also lack the vision and mission to unite all the various races as was done in Razak era. Smart schools, vision and cluster schools only comprise a few select schools in Malaysia. Where is the fairness in these policies? The change in the medium of instruction is only beneficial for those in urban schools and indirectly denying those from rural areas of quality education. All these are against the spirit instilled in the Razak Report.

4. Nation Building Through Language

Rahman Embong (2003) says that nationhood is about the society, not institution of power even though both are inter-related. He says, “It is about bringing the diverse peoples together with a commitment to a common or shared destiny, and an identification to that cause, normally within a shared geo-political

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\(^5\) The Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), or the Malaysian Certificate of Education, is a national examination taken by all fifth form students in Malaysia. Generally, the SPM is taken at the age of 17, though students who attended pre-secondary school class would take it at the age of 18.

\(^6\) Dong Jiao Zong is the association that governs Chinese Independent Schools in Malaysia.
space” (Rahman Embong 2003: 13). However, there are competing notions on nationhood and he has identified the five competing notions. They are:

i. Developmentalist doctrine – Bumiputras\(^7\) who give prominence to English as they consider it as the gateway to development, prosperity dan future progress. They are the elites and enjoy the support of non-Bumiputra too.

ii. Bumiputras who are convinced that the Malay language as the defining identity. They are the Malay cultural and literary elites. They maintain that Malay serves the link to history

iii. This group advocates the promotion of bilingualism and even multilingualism. They want Malay as the national language but at the same time other languages are also allowed to flourish.

iv. The fourth group propagates racial equality in the name of democracy and universal human rights and advocates education in mother tongue but are rather vague on their stand on the Malay language.

v. This group is of the opinion that language serves as a vehicle, but Islam is the real real identity of a person.

The most appropriate notion is notion 3 and it is obvious because it runs parallel with the notion put forward in Razak Report. Everybody should be encouraged to learn more than one language, however, that pursuit should not be at the expense of the Malay language. Malay should or must remain as the national language; a language that has been able to unite the people. There two important elements – language policy and the notion of nationhood - in developing quality human capital. Admittedly, Tun Razak did not specifically mention or use the term “human capital” explicitly as is the practice now. Nevertheless, the language policies introduced have the same purpose – to maintain national harmony in a multi-racial country.

5. Human Capital and the Standard of English Language

On March 31, 2006, when the Prime Minister presented the 9th Malaysian Plan to the Dewan Rakyat he outlined five main thrust of the National Missions. One of the missions is enhancing knowledge and innovation to instil a “first class mind”. The Prime Minister states that it can only be achieved with quality human capital. Quality human capital is not only about intellectual capacity but also individual character. Therefore the government will implement efforts to improve the overall national system, from pre-school to the the highest level and vocational. At the same time, emphasis will also be given to efforts to nurture a cultured society with strong moral values.

The Prime Minister also stresses that the development of human capital should be conducted holistically with the emphasis on knowledge, competence, intellectual knowledge which includes science and technology dan interpretarship and at the same time possesing a high moral and ethical values – human capital with first-class mindset.

Three strategies have been identified to nurture a first-class human capital and they are:

i. improve the ability and capability to gain knowledge

ii. strengthen the cability in science, R & D and innovation

iii. nurture a cultured society with strong moral values

One of the steps to be taken is to promote national school as the choice school. Schools are seen as the most appropriate place to sow the spirit of national integration. The racial composition between teacher and students needs to be balanced. The quality of teaching needs to be improved – the curriculum and co-curriculum activities need to be re-assessed to ensure a strong foundation for basic competence and in accordance with current needs. Languages such as Mandarin and Tamil will be offered as elective.

\(^7\) Bumiputera or Bumiputra is a Malay term widely used in Malaysia, embracing ethnic Malays, Javanese, Bugis, Minag and other indigenous ethnic groups, such as the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia, and the tribal peoples in Sabah and Sarawak.
The concept of human capital proposed is about quality human capital. What is clear is that education policy has become the focus; however, efforts taken to improve the national education system to nurture quality human capital is still somewhat hazy. The focus is on science and technology and to inculcate noble values. These are noble aspirations indeed. Great emphasis is given to English but not Malay as was the practice during Razak’s era. It begs the question – will we be able to nurture quality human capital through English when 70% of the population are weak in English. Results of 2006 UPSR indicate that students are weak in English when 70% of them scored “C”, “D” or “E” for English (New Straits Times 16 Nov. 2006). The real scenario can be seen from the MUET (Malaysian University English Test) results. In 2007, 96% of MUET candidates scored band 1-3 that is, moderate and weak (NST. 17 July 2007). This is not a good indicator for the effort to nurture or train quality human capital. Globalization has always been the reason for the need to give priority to English over Malay. Nevertheless much effort have been given to address the weakness of English language not only among students but also among teachers.

The first step taken is to make the teaching of Mathematics and Science compulsory in English. Teachers must try their best to use the language. Secondly, the ministry has created a ‘buddy’ system among teachers. The English language teachers will become tutors to Mathematics and Science (MS) teachers. Besides that MS teachers are exposed to many courses that can help them to improve their teaching in English. In addition, incentives are given to teachers who are willing to teach MS in English. The school infrastructures have been upgraded to assist the teachers in teaching MS. Computers and softwares are provided to make the teaching of MA more interesting and interactive. Will all these efforts able to improve the students’ English proficiency?

It must be mentioned that efforts to improve the standard of English should not be through complex subjects such as science and mathematics. Efforts to improve the students’ competence in English must be geared in the environment and the pedagogy in teaching the language itself.

6. Environment Factor
There are a few factors that can be viewed as the cause for the decline in the students’ competence in English. They are language contiguity between English and Malay, environment and students’ perception of English and students’ competence in English as their second language.

6.1. Language Contiguity - English and Malay
Asmah Hj Omar (1985) states that if we are to know the geneology of the Malay language, we have to look at the origin of its speakers. There are a few opinions on the origin of the Malays.

According to Asmah, the Malay language is categorized under Austronesian languages. Austronesian languages are divided into four groups namely, Indonesian, Malanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian languages. The biggest language group is Indonesian and its area consists of Farmosa in the north to the Philipines islands and Maluku in the east, Timor Timor in the south and Magdagascar in the west. This language group has the highest number of speakers and the Malay language is in this language group. The Malay language is the most developed language in this group and is the national language in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei. In Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, Malay is the medium of instruction in education up to tertiary level and this itself served as the catalyst for the development of the language.

English, on the other hand, is classified as Germanic language from the Indo-European group. The early history of Germanic languages is based on the reconstruction of Proto-Germanic which has evolved into Jerman, English, Dutch, Afrikaan, Yiddish and Scandinavian languages. English was influenced by two waves, first by Germanic language of the Scandinavian descent which occupied various parts of Britain in the 8th and 9th centuries. This was later followed by the Normans in the 11th century.
The Jermanic people occupied native speakers of Celt in Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Ireland. The language of the invaders helped form what is later known as Old English. English was also heavily influenced by Norse, language of the Vikings in the east.

Based on the brief genealogy description of English and Malay above, it is evident that these two languages are not related and do not come from the same cognate. Therefore, there are a lot of structural differences especially in terms of morphology and syntax. These structural differences in turn, become the constraints in acquiring English among students in Malaysia. This paper will justify the claim based on the findings of a research that has been conducted.

6.2. Environment (Social Surrounding) and Students’ Perception

A research on problems in acquiring English language has been conducted in the southern part of Malaysia. A total of 313 students from urban, sub-urban and rural schools were selected as the respondents. The three schools are:

i. Sekolah Tunku Abdul rahman Putra (STARP) – urban school
ii. Sekolah Menengah Senai (Senai) – sub-urban school
iii. Sekolah Sultan Alauddin – rural school

The classification of urban, sub-urban and rural schools is based on the location of the schools. All the respondents are Form Two students which means that they have gone through seven years of formal English education. The breakdown of students’ gender and racial composition is presented in Table 1 and Chart 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chart 1: Gender (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of Respondents</th>
<th>Senai</th>
<th>STARP</th>
<th>SSA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Gender Composition (%)

The number of male respondents is larger than female respondents in Senai and SSA, while in STARP the number of girls exceeded the boys. Ethnic composition reveals an interesting pattern. In Senai the numbers of Malay and Chinese students are almost equal ie 41.4% and 43.4% respectively while Indian makes up only 14.1% of the total. In STARP however, 60.9% of the respondents are
Malays and 39.1% are non-Malays. In SSA, Malays make up 100% of total respondents. This is because SSA is a FELDA\textsuperscript{8}-based school whose community comprises Malay FELDA pioneers. Table 2 displays the composition of ethnic groups.

**Table 2:** Composition of Ethnic Groups (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Senai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STARP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>60.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of respondents come from families who are earning below RM1000.00 per month. 83% of SSA students belong to low-income families. This is followed by Senai with 63.3% and STARP with 52.8%. If the level of income is a factor that can influence and contribute to a conducive learning environment, then their UPSR result is a manifestation of this correlation. Their achievements may have been affected by this socio-economic factor. 2004 UPSR results show that 66% of Senai, 50% of STARP and 70% of SSA respondents are weak in English. This is further backed by a low number of students attending tuition i.e. 25%. A combination of factors ranging from poverty, lack of tuition facility, social surrounding, interest and attitude may have contributed to low-level English proficiency among these students.

Apart from background and social surrounding, students’ perceptions need to be examined. More than 80% of students think that English is important but unfortunately almost 50% see it as a difficult subject to master. According to the theory of Relevans (1995), information that is difficult to be understood cognitively will result in higher degree of miscomprehension. This will lead to misinterpretation, boredom and ultimately total isolation from the subject. This is what is happening to the majority of respondents. From the questionnaire, 70%-90% students revealed that they do not understand English literature. English literature is a compulsory component in the English syllabus and this apparently is not helping the existing problem. At the same time, 50% of students like their teachers’ methods of teaching and current English language activities in classes. However, these two factors are not enough to remedy the situation or to improve their proficiency level. Unfortunately, the push factors are stronger than the pull factors. Chart 2 displays students’ perception towards the target language.

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\textsuperscript{8} Federal Land Development Authority, better known as FELDA is the foremost land development agency in Malaysia. FELDA was established on 1st July 1956 under the Land Development Act 1956 as a result of recommendation of Government Working Committee.
To relate the history of language, social surrounding and perception, a linguistic test was administered to the students. Linguistic, as a scientific subject, is able to measure the level of strength or weakness of English through a validated test. A cloze test was administered to 315 respondents as a way of gauging their level of English competence. Our contention is that structural differences between English and BM could have contributed to the failure in mastering the target language and therefore must be given serious consideration.

6.3. Linguistic Factor

Apart from the above factors, the crux of the problem lies in the failure to acquire the target language. When we talk about language acquisition, the topic of grammar will naturally be a part of the discussion. In this research 20 questions related to morphology and syntax were tested on the students. Some of the areas tested include affixes, adverbs, plural form, and superlative. It became clear through the analysis that questions relating to plural inflection posed a problem for the respondents. Nearly 70% of students in all three schools experienced the same difficulty. 68%-74% of respondents failed to correctly answer the question on superlative. It is interesting to note that the majority of students in all three schools, regardless of location, experience the same problem. Table 3 summarises the findings.

Table 3 below displays the overall percentages of errors committed in the 4 areas of morphology tested. Students appear to have the greatest difficulty in identifying the correct plural marker for a given word, despite the fact that plural inflection is one of the basic and earliest elements to be taught in school. Superlative adjectives rank second with percentages of errors committed ranging from 68%-74%. Different structural systems between English and Malay may have contributed to the high frequency of incorrect answers.
Table 3: Percentage of Morphological Errors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammatical Category</th>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
<th>SENAI</th>
<th>STARP</th>
<th>SSA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADVERB</td>
<td></td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFFIXES</td>
<td></td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLURAL FORM</td>
<td></td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUPERLATIVE</td>
<td></td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, percentages of errors in the four tested categories (except for the adverb word class in STARP) exceeded 60%. The numbers demonstrate students’ failure to understand and correctly use these grammatical items. What follows is a question taken from cloze test 2:

Adam, however, was a very ________________ boy.
A. disobedient  
B. obedient  
C. unobedient  
D. inobedient

Morphology questions highlighted the respondents’ failure to understand the target language. Findings are shown in the following chart:

Chart 3: Respondents’ Morphological Errors

Chart 3 above displays the differences in percentages of incorrect answers given by the respondents in 4 different morphological areas. The height of each bar indicates the level of mastery the subjects possess. The high percentages for plural inflection and superlative point to their limited abilities and level of knowledge in the understanding and application of items mentioned above. Note that the differences among the three schools in 3 aspects of morphology i.e. affixes, plurality and superlative are very minimal but become more pronounced with adverb. The fact that majority of students have failed to understand and correctly use these grammatical items that form the foundation for other complex structures is most worrying. This is significant considering the fact that these fundamental areas form the basis for intermediate and advanced level of grammar. Examples of copious errors committed include changing the singular form of noun into plural form such as ostrich to ostriches, adverb suffix swift to swiftly, comparative and superlative suffixes such as slow to slower and slowest.
Plural suffixes –s, -es, and –ies are also found to pose problems among the learners. These suffixes are influenced by the phonological environment of a word. Phonology is a system of sounds that recognizes the influence of preceding and following sounds on a particular sound. For example, *ostrich* ends with a /h/, therefore the suffix that follows is –es, forming *ostriches*. While the plural inflection rule for words ending with plosive consonants /t, d, k, g/ require the addition of the suffix –s to the stem, words ending with /y/ require the addition of –ies. Therefore, the plural form of *accident* is *accidents*, and *baby* is *babies*.

We now move on to superlative. Superlative in the Malay system comes in the form of an intensifier. In English, superlative is indicated within the adjective itself by the addition of –est suffix. For example *slow* will become *slowest*. The second form of superlative involved the adding of ‘most’ to uninflected adjectives, for example *expensive, more expensive and most expensive*. The third form involves the irregular comparative and superlative forms e.g. *good, better, best*. In Malay, the concept of superlative is indicated through intensifiers such as ‘amat, sangat dan paling’ (translation: very). There is no inflection to the base word. The same can be said of adverbs. The addition of –ly to an adjective will normally convert the word into an adverb. For example *slow* becomes *slowly, careful* becomes *carefully*. The following sentences demonstrate the use of these adverbs:

i. She walks *slowly* on the slippery floor.
ii. We must drive *carefully* when it rains *heavily*.

Prefix, more specifically derivational bound morphemes such as im- and dis-, also pose problems among learners. The difference in forms and functions of prefixes between Malay and English is significant. English prefixes can derive a new word with opposite meaning such as *embark* into *disembark* and *patient* into *impatient*. For example:

i. We can *embark* from this airport to Jakarta.
ii. Please do not switch on your cellular phone until you have disembarked from this plane.
iii. She is so *patient* in facing all the problems lately.
iv. She has become *impatient* with her naughty son.

The above prefixes do not exist in the Malay system. This disparity is what is causing students from successfully understanding and using English language. If this is not given due attention, students will continually fail to master the target language.

We now move on to the area of syntax. Syntax concerns sentence structure. The areas tested include ‘subject-verb agreement’, ‘be copula’, ‘article’, ‘determiner’ and ‘possesive pronoun’. The questions that received the highest incorrect answers are questions which test ‘subject verb agreement’ and ‘relative pronouns’. Both structures are not present in BM. Therefore, it can be assumed that the errors committed are largely due to structural differences and absence from the first language. Again, the questions tested the students on basic areas of syntax. The following is a question taken from Cloze Test 1.

C1 5. Different species _____________ (5) different habits and eat different kinds of food.
A. adopt
B. adopted
C. adopts
D. is adopting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cloze, Qs No</th>
<th>Correct (C)/Incorrect (I)</th>
<th>Senai %</th>
<th>STARP %</th>
<th>SSA %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1,5 (SVA)</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>79.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above question tested the students on the area of subject-verb agreement and the percentages for incorrect answers exceeded 70%.
Table 4: Incorrect Answers - Syntax

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammatical Categories</th>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
<th>SENAI</th>
<th>STARP</th>
<th>SSA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copula</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVA</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>79.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Clause</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 present the percentages of incorrect answers in the areas of syntax. The overall picture of committed errors is very distinct. Again the problem lies in structural differences between Malay and English.

From the above chart, relative clause, subject verb agreement and copula ‘be’ are 3 problematic areas with high numbers of incorrect answers. Relative clause recorded the highest number or errors i.e. 80%. Sample of questions testing the areas of copula, SVA, article and relative clause have revealed an apparent weakness among the respondents in mastering the target language. They have failed to recognize the four forms of copula be i.e is, are, was and were. Those who answered correctly were assisted by a clue in the sentence that points to the past. Subject-verb-agreement is always mistaken as plural inflection. SVA emphasizes on the relation between the subject and the verb that follows. Singular subject will be followed by a singular verb marked by the suffix –s. Although the form is similar to that of the plural inflection, the function and meaning are entirely different. Linguistic explanation by the teacher may help to resolve this confusion. For example:

i. She eats with her hand.
ii. There are three books on the table.

In the above examples, sentence (i) focuses on SVA. She is a singular subject that dictates the singular present suffix –s. In the second sentence (ii), three indicates plural, the head noun therefore must take the plural inflection –s. The similarity in form is the cause of confusion among learners.

Although article posed the least problem in the cloze test, nearly half of total subjects failed to answer accurately. Articles such as a, an, and the are not explicitly present in Malay. In the test, the omission of article shows that respondents have failed to understand the importance and function of article within a noun phrase. Articles are compulsory in most noun phrases and mistakes in its usage
are common among learners. The severity increased when it comes to complex items such as relative clause. Pronouns such as who, whose, whom and which, which are not present in the system of Malay, can be an indicator of problem and high percentages of error committed among respondents.

The above discussion has clearly demonstrated how structural differences between the first language ie Malay and the target language ie English can be the cause of misunderstanding and failure to master the language. This problem is further aggravated by negative perception and less than favourable social surroundings. The question is, in light of the facts and findings tabulated from the data, can our government achieve its vision of creating first class human capital who are highly proficient in English?

7. Language Policy, English Competency & Quality Human Capital

7.1. Aspiration and Reality

The information gathered from the above analysis needs to be managed wisely. Starting with our education policy, to social surrounding, proficiency level of students and finally human capital, the solution can be achieved but realistically it is not without its setbacks. It firstly helps to briefly examine the Razak and post Razak Policies. The aim was to establish a common policy that goes across the boundaries of ethnicity, status and location. Malaysians are bound to the same education system. National schools were created and all these were perfected by a committee that represented all ethnic groups including the colonizers. It has to be reminded that the Razak Report was a result of the 13th May tragedy; a tragedy that was the consequent of economic instability and disparity between the Malays and the non-Malays.

After the implementation, there had not been any racial conflict until 2003. In fact, non-Malays are able to be high achievers at the levels of PMR, SPM, STPM and tertiary using the national language. At this point in time, everybody has equal job opportunities (YM Tengku Razaleigh: 2007). And this has given rise to many Bumiputera engineers, doctors, accountants and architects rivalling those of the non-Bumis.

We now move on the the aspect of English acquisition. The findings show that many we are still a long way away from the ideal scenario. The solution at the moment is to review and improve on pedagogical weaknesses. Pedagogy is highly focused on the teaching of English grammar which, as we have seen, is structurally different than Bahasa Melayu.

Social surroundings ought to create a conducive and exciting platform for the learning and teaching of English. English teachers need to have linguistic knowledge in order for them to be able to effectively explain to students about the rights and wrongs of their answers. However, the possibility of this happening remains slim as we are lack well-trained linguistic teachers, especially in rural schools. This is the reason why language problems persist. The introduction of the new education policy in 2003 saw the implementation of English as the medium of instruction for certain subjects in schools and tertiary institutions. This has definitely intensified the problem faced by those who are already weak in the target language (English).

The backlash effect of teaching of Science and Mathematics in English will be felt in the long run. Table 8 shows that out of a total 100%, only 29% of subjects are still taught in Malay. This is because the science stream is dominated by subjects such as physics, chemistry, biology, modern maths and additional maths. This effect will continue when they enrol in higher education such as secondary 6 and matriculation.

The percentage for subjects taught in Malay will continue to decrease to 20%. At this stage, subjects are specialized to suit the programs. Malay which is considered as a language of unity, is assuming a lesser role in our education system. The question to be asked is would students who are weak in English be able to successfully follow and understand the content of the subjects. The chart below displays the percentage of language which will be used at secondary six and matriculation level. As the list of science subjects increases, the role of Malay declines.
As we can observe, the usage of Malay as the medium of instruction in higher education decreases to 9%. This scenario has diverted far from the original aim of the Razak Report in which Malay is meant to be the main medium of instruction in public universities including schools and matriculation centres. Is this a wise step to be taken when the level of proficiency is still low despite early exposure to English via Science and Mathematics.

Table 8: Subjects taught in BM and English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects Taught In Malay and English</th>
<th>BM</th>
<th>Engl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SPM</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Uni</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kamal Shukri: 2002

After examining the education policy and the proficiency level of students in English, we shall now look at our government aspiration for creating a new generation of citizens who are well-versed in the areas of science and mathematics and highly proficient in English. This is only possible if students are from economically secure and stable families, blessed with a conducive learning environment and tuition facilities. But realistically, for 70% of rural Malaysians where the majority is Malays, those ideal conditions are beyond their reach. Prof. Diraja Ungku Abdul Aziz (Mingguan Malaysia Interview 2006) mentioned that rural folks are marginalized and disadvantaged in many aspects. Language is one of the contributing factors. Failure to master English could also mean failure in the subjects of Science and Mathematics. Logically, the aim of creating a competent first class human capital may not be achievable.

8. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the short and long term effects of the implementation of English in schools and tertiary education will not only create problems for the students, but also educators. Consequently, the result will be far from what is expected.

We have to review some of the policy changes. Adjustments considerations from people from all walks of life have to be made. Although it is aiming towards the establishment of SMART and cluster schools, unfortunately the changes will only benefit a small number of schools in Malaysia. It is therefore suggested that there be a re-examination of the teaching of English in schools. If memorisation and rote learning are ineffective, then an innovative way of integrating structure and communication must be developed and implemented. It is certainly disappointing when there is a mismatch between what is taught and what is achieved by the students. Due to the exam-oriented nature of our education system, schools and teachers are pressured into focusing on the grammatical aspects of the target language, leaving very little time for interaction in English. Ironically, this is the language students are expected to use upon entering the workforce.
Secondly, teachers need to be equipped with linguistic knowledge for teaching in order to be more effective and explanations are articulated clearly. A combination of linguistic knowledge and effective pedagogy may be able to make learning English more exciting. If efforts are taken to expose students to a fun learning environment, then maybe English will be a good medium of instruction for the learning of science and mathematics. The combination of three factors i.e. a fair and non-discriminatory education policy, linguistically adept teachers and conducive learning environment will definitely ensure a generation of competent first class human capital.

References