

The English Language And Its Impact On Identities Of Multilingual Malaysian Undergraduates

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Abstract

Despite the increasing prominence of English as a world lingua franca, there is little research on how the use of English affects the identities of Malaysian speakers. Asmah Haji Omar observed that interest in language and identity seemed to be confined to studies on national identity. A doctoral study by Lee Su Kim of the identity of Malaysian speakers of English found that there was resentment in certain localized contexts amongst the Malay respondents in the study towards the use of English. Expressions of resentment and ambivalence towards the use of the English language were also prevalent amongst the non-Malay respondents within certain contexts. This paper presents the findings of a qualitative research study which sets out to investigate the impact of English on the identities of young Malaysian undergraduates in selected private and public universities in Malaysia. Using qualitative methods, this research study essentially takes off from Lee Su Kim's doctoral research study, and aims to explore on a larger scale the role of English in the identity construction of a younger Malaysian cohort from both public and private universities. The findings presented here are from a few selected case studies that provide the qualitative data. The discussion will focus on how different multilingual Malaysian undergraduates regard English *vis a vis* the other languages in their repertoire and how it has affected their identity constructions and everyday negotiations. Three dominant themes arising from the findings will be discussed, 1) Multilingualism with English emerging as the dominant language, 2) English viewed as a pragmatic language and a language of empowerment, and 3) Varying degrees of 'othering'.

Keywords: language and identity, multilingualism, Malaysia, tertiary education

Introduction

Today, the English language is a global language and an international lingua franca. However, despite the fact that there are more people who speak English as a second or foreign language than those who speak it as a first language, its impact on culture and identity remains an under-researched area (Graddol, 2006). In Malaysia, English has a rather complex and ironic status. It is an “inherited” language, a “legacy” of the British colonialists, an inevitable consequence of its role in our national history. Among Malaysians, English is viewed rather equivocally. On the one hand, it is regarded as an important second language for instrumental purposes, a neutral language for social integration and a pragmatic one for professional growth and career advancement. On the other hand, it is perceived in certain quarters as a language that threatens the status of the national language and erodes local cultures (Lee Su Kim, 2003; Lee Su Kim, 2008).

Review of Literature of Studies on Language and Identity in Malaysia

Yet, there has not been much work done on the impact of English acquisition on the identities of its learners in Malaysia. Among the earliest studies in Malaysia on identity-related issues are Asmah Haji Omar’s (1991) study on a group of bilingual non-Malay academics and also her study (1998) on the correlation between language and ethnicity. In her 1991 study which comprised mostly Chinese and Indians at a local Malaysian university, she found that though they used mainly English, there was a gradual trend towards reversing the language shift when it came to their children. Several Chinese and Tamil subjects said they were ensuring that their children learn their mother tongues through private tuition, indicating a revival of pride and interest in their ethnic and cultural identity. This indicates that they perceived the communal language as an important marker of their cultural identity.

Asmah Haji Omar’s (1998) study of Malaysians from the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia (Malays, Chinese and Indians) investigated whether there was a correlation between linguistic identity, an individual’s ethnic heritage, and the place of linguistic identity in the individual as a member of a group or groups. The findings showed that linguistic identity in the individual is not inborn and not fixed, but “changes with the individual’s development, environment and situations of language use” (1998, p.21). An individual has multiple linguistic identities which are projected with various degrees of strength.

Maya Khemlani David’s (1996) doctoral study on three generations of Sindhi Malaysians, found that there had been a great deal of shifting in linguistic usage amongst the Sindhis, namely from the mother tongue, Sindhi, to English. The third generation of Sindhis who had undergone the national system of schooling where Malay is the medium of instruction, had no proficiency in the Sindhi language. However, the respondents of the study felt that the Sindhi language was no longer a marker of cultural identity for the Sindhi Malaysians. Instead they reported using other markers such as shared values and sociopersonality traits, food, clothing, and religious and cultural celebrations.

Lee Su Kim's doctoral study on the impact of English on the identities of a group of selected Malaysian postgraduate students who were very fluent speakers of English (2001; 2003; 2005; 2006) found that there was resentment in certain localized contexts amongst the Malays towards English. Using English was perceived as an attempt to "show off", being "boastful", a relic of colonialism, as being elitist, and a betrayal of the Malay cultural identity and the Malay language. This resentment was also prevalent amongst the non-Malay students. (Lee Su Kim, 2006; Lee Su Kim et al., 2007). The Chinese participants reported that they were regarded as "too Westernized" because they could only speak in English and were not fluent in Mandarin.

However, the English language also had significant positive outcomes on identity. Mastering English was an empowering experience. It was claimed to possess a quality of directness and neutrality, enabling access to alternative views, and reducing ethnocentrism. It was also seen to facilitate a more reflective and critical attitude towards one's own culture. Multiple identities seemed to be fostered through ownership of multiple languages, allowing participants to switch and "mask" (Lee Su Kim, 2005; Lee Su Kim, 2008) their identities dependent on the changing contexts. There is an urgent need for more research that looks at issues of language and identity in the complex and diverse linguistic landscape of Malaysia. In Malaysia, English is officially a second language but great importance is attached to it as English competence is acclaimed to be an important tool to help the nation grow a knowledge society towards achieving its goal of becoming a developed nation. Yet there is much ambivalence towards the use of English in education, as is evidenced by the unabated arguments by educationists and leaders in different ethnic communities over the Ministry of Education's six-year-old project of teaching Science and Math in English. English is clearly a language that divides; it is an important marker of identity in the multilingual, multiethnic Malaysian society.

Objective of the Study

The study that we are currently conducting investigates the impact of English on the construction of the social and cultural identities of a group of Malaysian undergraduates. These young Malaysian adults have either acquired English from a young age, as a first language or later in a more formal context, in school. This paper presents only the findings from a few selected case studies that provide the qualitative data. We will report on how different multilingual Malaysian undergraduates regard English *vis-a-vis* the other languages in their repertoire and how it has affected their identity constructions and everyday negotiations. It will be seen that the subjects of this study report substantially different experiences from the participants in Lee Su Kim's (2001) doctoral research study of selected postgraduate Masters students who reported identity dissonances and conflicts in the use of English.

Research Questions

The research questions that this study seeks to address are:

1. In what ways does English affect the identities of young adults in Malaysia as bilingual/multilingual speakers?
2. How does English empower young Malaysians in this globalized world?
3. Is English viewed as a threat to their cultural identity? In what ways does English affect or marginalize local languages and local identities?

Identity as a Concept

Identity is a theoretical concept that is derived from social sciences disciplines such as psychology and anthropology, and also from interdisciplinary studies such as cultural studies. Identities are seen as the means by which people care about and care for what is going on around them. They are considered as important bases from which people construct new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being (Holland et al., 1998).

Identity construction is not a conscious process but rather it is influenced by unconscious psychological processes. It is an on-going, evolving and dynamic process which is pluralistic in nature. Mead (1934) viewed the self as a social emergent, arising through processes of social experience and interaction. Identity is perceived to “develop in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process.” As language is seen as ‘significant symbols’ for communication between people, identity is described as developed in the interactions between people in an organic social-symbolic world of internal relations (Cronk, 1973). Norton (1997, p.410) defined identity as people understanding their “relationship to the outside world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future”.

The concept of identity construction takes on a wider dimension especially when people of different cultures come together, as in the context of Malaysian society. In such settings, Lin (2008) states that the notion of identity may become a double-edged weapon with risks and probable dangers. Identity in such contexts involves the formation of bicultural identities, where the self defined by local meanings and more traditional practices is maintained alongside a self defined by global culture (Arnett, 2002). Hermans and Kempen (1998) however, proposed the notion of a hybrid identity, where these two cultures are integrated in a multiple, dynamic and conflicted relationship. Anchimbe (2007) noted that linguistic identity in postcolonial spaces is multifaceted – either used for survival, which is to benefit from the advantages of association with the linguistic group, or for asserting pride in one’s roots. Lim and Ansaldo (2007) introduced the notion of identity alignment among displaced populations in multicultural nations, involving three aspects – this population does not dispute its ‘imposed identity’, still preserves its presumed ethnic identity and aligns itself with an ‘assumed global identity’. In the identity negotiations of these diasporic populations, it is stated that “just as they may ‘choose’ from their repertoire a linguistic resource appropriate for a given

circumstance, so do they align themselves with a particular facet of their identity” (Lim & Ansaldo, 2007, p.234).

Hence, language learners are seen as selves and as persons that have to exist in various contexts, and they need to constantly negotiate and transform their selves; to construct, co-construct and re-construct their identities to cope and deal with their own world and the realities of the world around them.

“Othering” as a Concept

Included in identity constructions may be an element of “othering” based on sociolinguistic differences between groups. The concept of “othering” refers to the practice of comparing ourselves to others and at the same time distancing ourselves from them (Palfreyman, 2005). The markers of differentiation that shape the meaning of “us” and “them” may be based on factors related to race, geography, ethnicity, economic group or ideology. Although this is a common psychological experience, the process of othering may have specific implications when it is used as the basis of self-affirmation at the expense of denigrating the other group. Lin (2008) claims that symbolic struggles in identity negotiations usually revolve around linguistic, discursive, institutional and cultural processes of essentialising identities. Identity constructions can be perceived to include not only the positioning of self, but the positioning of others in relation to the self in society.

Research Methodology

The sample for the qualitative research consists of 20 Malaysian undergraduates, ranging from 20 to 24 years of age. Out of the 20 undergraduates, seven were Malays, eight were Chinese, four were Indians and one was Singhalese. There were four males and sixteen females. Twelve undergraduates were from public universities and eight were from the private universities. In selecting the subjects, the main consideration was that the subjects would be regular users of English in addition to other languages in their repertoire and are conversant enough to be able to provide their views in the interviews. This familiarity with English was a necessary prerequisite for us to explore how English use has impacted the identity of the subjects. An additional consideration was a preference towards the selection of more mature undergraduates from the second or final year to obtain more mature reflections on the issue. Some of the subjects were students known by the researchers and identified to fit into the profile, the rest were referred by these known students and volunteered to participate.

The subjects are all either bilingual or multilingual with English as part of their linguistic repertoire. All were undergraduates studying at public and private universities around the Selangor area and while the majority of them grew up in Selangor, the hometowns of the others included Perak in the north of Peninsular Malaysia, Johor and Negeri Sembilan in the south, and Sarawak in East Malaysia. Only two of the subjects reported having spent a significant amount of time abroad – one of the subjects lived her early years, from one to eight years old, in England, another subject went through three years of secondary

school in Beijing and has travelled in places in Europe. The subjects are considered to range between average and above average socioeconomically, with the private university students generally being wealthier than the students from the public universities.

Data was obtained from interviews conducted with these undergraduates between July and September of 2008. The interviews were semi-structured and Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnography interviewing techniques were applied. Questions for semi-structured interviews were formulated to allow for some degree of flexibility and manoeuvring. Six main topic domains were selected. The domains are: language repertoire, experience of learning English, social interaction, experience of culture, literary exposure and identity. For each topic domain, one lead-off question was formulated and a few follow-up questions were prepared. Each respondent was interviewed individually by one of the four researchers involved in the study and the session was audio-taped. On the average, each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. All the taped interview sessions were transcribed verbatim. The profile and case study of each respondent was written by the interviewer based on the six topic domains mentioned earlier. Themes were identified from each case study. The case-studies of all the respondents were then scrutinised and common themes drawn out from the interviews. Coding was then carried out on the interview transcripts based on the common themes identified.

Some limitations of the study will be noted here. The sample size consisted of 20 participants only from public and private universities in Selangor. Furthermore, only one interview session was conducted with each participant in the study due to time constraints. A larger sample size involving undergraduates from universities in other parts of Malaysia, as well as repeated interviews with the subjects, would have provided more extensive data and more insights on the issue.

The Findings

Some dominant themes that emerged from the analysis of the case studies are:

Multilingualism with English emerging as the dominant language

All the respondents in this study could communicate (speak and write) in at least two languages, with a large number of the non-Malay respondents being able to speak at least 3 languages. This is hardly surprising as it is reflective of the linguistic norms among Malaysians of different ethnicities. What is interesting is that about half of the respondents report that they are far more comfortable using English than any of the other languages in their repertoire. (All the names of the respondents in this article are pseudonyms.)

Their preference for English may be due to any one (or a combination) of these factors:

- a) English is one of the languages spoken at home. Jessy, a female Chinese undergraduate studying in a public university reveals that, "... *in my family most of us speak English, but not like entirely, yeah. Some sort of, err,*

*bahasa rojak*¹ kind of family, but most of all it will be English, or Hokkien, a mix up of that". Kasey, a Chinese public university undergraduate declared, "at home I only converse in Cantonese with my mom not mandarin and with my father some English and Cantonese..." What both respondents revealed about their home linguistic environment is common among this group of respondents. English is used to some degree at their homes.

- b) At least one of their parents is English-educated and he/she used English with the respondent from an early age. The parent may have tutored the child in the language when s/he was young. A case in point is Jim Min, a Chinese undergraduate studying in a public university. He speaks mainly Cantonese and Mandarin at home. When he was young, he attended a Chinese Primary School. His mother, believing that Chinese school students were generally not proficient in English, took it upon herself to teach him English when he was five years old. As Jim Min explains, "...she know that um, many, for many Chinese, their English is not that good ... (so) ... my mother give me tuition herself". Because of his mother's tutoring, he said that "... throughout my whole primary school, my English level was like, according to my friend, my teachers, higher than many other people..." Similarly, Delina discloses that she did not receive English education from school alone. She says, "... my mom also did teach me outside... And she used to read to us and then let us learn the words and then read and look at the pictures and all that. And also let us do exercises from the text books and all that..." A few other respondents whose parents are proficient in English also recall being taught to read by their parents and being encouraged to use English when they were young. It appears that these respondents were introduced to English for purely utilitarian reasons.
- c) The school that the respondents attended would have been originally English medium schools and they have retained some of the English heritage. Such schools are no longer English schools but have become national schools whose medium of instruction is Malay, with English as just one subject in the curriculum. Nevertheless, many English-speaking parents seemed to prefer to send their children to such schools. Hence, there were more children who could speak English there. Children who were sent to such schools could acquire English not only formally but informally by mixing with other children from English-speaking homes. This is the case with Kasey and Raj who attended such "mission" schools. Kasey went to a convent school and Raj went to a LaSalle mission school.

According to Kasey, her mother sent her and her younger sister to a convent school because she wanted them to learn English so they could converse in English with their two older sisters who attended Chinese school. Commenting on her mother's action, she says, "...To help us ... because

¹ Bahasa rojak – multiple code-mixing

she wants ... my elder sisters to teach us Chinese and the other hours we can converse in English and we can help our elder sisters in terms of (their English)..."

However, Kasey believes that her proficiency in English was not acquired from the classroom alone but more from mixing with friends who could speak English. She said, "... *my English class was not really (helpful) ... it's only like maybe one or two hours and our syllabus was in Bahasa Malaysia² so ... can be said that unless you converse with your friends, your English are very good... it depends on what kind of friends or groups that you join...*"

According to Raj, an Indian undergraduate studying in a private university, there were still a few old La Salle brothers in the school when he started school there, retaining some English use in the school traditions. Besides, his school friends also influenced him. He says, "... *most of my friends are Chinese friends and they are so used to talk-.. they are more towards English as well, so eventually when they speak English, I tend to reply them in English also*".

- d) The English-speaking social environment is another factor. These respondents found more than ample opportunities to use English outside of the immediate family circle, such as in the friendship and school domains. Most of the respondents tend to socialize among friends who are English-speaking. In addition, some of them are taking courses that are conducted in English. It is therefore easier for them to discuss their studies in English. For example Jim Han says that he uses mainly English to communicate with his course mates who are from different races as they have been taught Science in English since they were in upper secondary. In university, their programme, Genetics, is conducted mainly in English so it is natural for them to use English among themselves regardless of race.

Jessy, who is majoring in Spanish Studies, said her friends are mainly TESL students and they speak more in English. Raj and Delina who are taking English Language Studies say that they speak mainly in English among their course mates.

The factors discussed above account for the status of English as a dominant language among this group of respondents. They use English naturally as their language of choice in virtually all domains: family, academic and social. English is no longer merely a language for communication but a first language - used spontaneously for expression of emotions and even in their dreams!

² Bahasa Malaysia = Malay

English is viewed as a pragmatic language and a language of empowerment

Most of the respondents who use English predominantly do not attach any prestige to being fluent in English. This could be because they have grown up using the language, and they see everyone around them speaking the language. Generally, they do not see using English as being elitist although they recognise that English is important and that there are clear advantages to being fluent in English - for example, it is an international language, it is usually used at job interviews, it is useful for overseas travel, for understanding lectures, as well as for accessing knowledge as references are in English.

A few respondents, however, recognize their fluency in English gives them an edge over their peers who do not speak the language. For example, Raj says, “... *I feel I’m one step ahead of them as ... they really can’t speak that fluently so I feel that’s an advantage that I know little more than them...*”

Another undergraduate, Lyn, a Singhalese, believes that when she speaks in English “*people started like, looking up to you and they – they value your opinion especially the guys. They stopped fighting with me... they stopped arguing with me because they were afraid they going to lose...*” In this instance, being proficient in English is viewed as being intellectually superior or more knowledgeable.

Some Malay undergraduates, like Ati, who have a fairly good command of English, feel that speaking in English has elevated her status in the eyes of some people. She feels empowered. Ati, recalling an incident that took place in a shopping mall in the city, says, “... *I just came back ... from PJ³ class that evening and I was being ignored by the salesgirls and when I speak in English with my friends... they ...keep asking me “yes miss”, “what do you want?”, “can I help you with everything” because I think it’s kind of double standard...*” Somehow, by speaking in English, Ati became a customer worthy of the sales person’s attention. Does speaking English signal a higher social economic status, and by extension, better purchasing power?

In fact, this ego-boosting effect of speaking English could be sometimes attributed to the speaker’s own perceptions of those who speak English. Ela, a Malay undergraduate from a public university, reveals, “*when we speak in English ... we tend to feel very confident and then we feel like ...good ... with yourself.*” She also thinks that those who speak English “*look more stylish, more ... modern... I think more superior...*”

Besides being valued as a pragmatic language and a language for knowledge acquisition, English seems to empower its users. To the first group, English is a tool that opens up the window to another world and enables them to share differing world views. To them English has a modernizing influence. In this sense, English has empowered its users. Some respondents are of the opinion that some people react more favourably to them when they speak English. Because of that, they develop a sense of confidence in themselves.

³ PJ =physical education

Varying degrees of ‘Othering’

There appears to be varying degrees of othering among the respondents depending on their proficiency in the other languages. Respondents who are multilingual and are able to switch comfortably between different tongues did not generally report any apparent sense of being "othered".

However, there is a sense of “us”, those who speak mainly English, and “them”, those who speak mainly local languages like Malay, Tamil or Mandarin. The Chinese respondents who are not fluent in Mandarin recognise the need to also be a part of “them” and most of the Chinese respondents report making efforts to learn, to improve and to speak Mandarin. Carina, one of the Chinese respondents, describes mainly Mandarin speaking Chinese groups as “*more closed up with themselves*” and notices “*a sort of boundary*” that she feels arises when these groups realize she does not speak Mandarin. Carina admits that the main reason she is trying to learn to communicate in Mandarin is “*...to pretend like there’s no barrier there... so that they won’t notice that I’m different, so that I can make friends with them...*”

The respondents also see a difference in the ways of seeing the world, in the thinking, attitude and behaviors between the more Chinese-centric, Malay-centric and Indian-centric students and the more English or cosmopolitan ones. As Jessy observes, “*...most of us can see, the Chinese and English educated, they think differently. They act differently.*” Explaining this difference between the two, Jim Han observes that the English speaking “*dare to speak out*” and are “*more optimistic*”. The Mandarin speaking are more cautious, preferring to “*think of the problems first*” while the English ones are more gung-ho. He feels that very often the English speakers are just “talkers” and cannot solve the problem.

Our data suggests that there might be instances of othering experienced by the respondents albeit in rather mild ways. Kat, an Indian respondent claims that she has been labeled “*mat salleh celup*⁴” by her relatives for speaking English better than Tamil, and “*there’s like a stigma attached to it, if you’re Indian and you don’t speak Tamil, it’s kind of prejudice actually, they start thinking you’re perasan*⁵ ...”

Another respondent, Lya, also an Indian undergraduate, reports that she has been scorned with the retort “*Oh, you think you’re white, is it?*” by Tamil speakers when she speaks English among them. Jessy, a Chinese, alleges, “*... when you speak English, and stuff, people will condemn you, saying that uh, you are like, show off.*” Ping Nah, also a Chinese undergraduate, feels that people have the perception that those who speak English are “*very sombong*⁶...”

⁴ Mat Salleh celup = pseudo White person

⁵Perasan = trying to show off / an exaggerated sense of self importance or egocentrism

⁶Sombong = proud

Other respondents, particularly the Malay subjects, reported being referred to as “*bukan Melayu*”⁷ or being described as trying to show off. Some of the other subjects reported that they were seen as “arrogant” or “proud” when they used English in their social interaction. For instance, Khai, a Malay undergraduate says, “... *people ... call me ... he so arrogant... speak in English*”.

At this stage of our analysis, it appears that that spoken fluency in English (often coupled with an obviously less than acceptable competence in the ethnic group’s language) is the basis for the respondents’ being othered by members of their community. In other words, the multilingual speakers are actually the ones othered by those who probably do not command the same level of spoken proficiency in English. Nevertheless, respondents appeared not to have experienced any sense of resentment or conflict because of negative remarks.

Discussion

The findings reveal several not uncommon themes that occur among Malaysian undergraduates, for whom knowledge of English evidently has a part to play in their identity negotiations. Despite being raised in multilingual backgrounds, sixteen out of twenty of the respondents admitted English as a dominant language for them. While adept at switching to other languages, usually Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese or Tamil, in suitable contexts, these respondents attest to feeling the most comfortable using English in a wide range of domains; English thus becomes not just a language for communication but functions as a first language. In the multicultural context of Malaysian society where English is associated with “Westernization”, as found in Lee Su Kim’s study, this dominance of English probably impacts how these respondents perceive themselves and are perceived in society.

Indeed, all the respondents acknowledged that being competent in English positively positions them socially. While most of them do not attach any prestige to English, they are aware that the ability to use English is pragmatic as English is clearly valued academically and socially. Almost all the respondents observed that English is socially empowering as the people around them have noticeably higher opinions of them when realizing they speak English well. The high perception of people towards them - whether it is salespersons who treat them with greater respect, classmates who seek their assistance with English related material, or people who give them more attention when they speak in English - naturally grants these undergraduates more confidence in perceiving themselves.

The awareness of the pragmatism of learning English certainly contributes towards the subjects’ perception of the value in being conversant in English. The responses of the subjects indicate a distinct consciousness of their vested interest in learning English, reflecting Norton’s (1997) notion of ‘investment’ that acquiring the language allows access to social capital for advantageous positioning in society. Furthermore, six of the

⁷ Bukan Melayu = not Malay

respondents believed that knowledge of English has played a part in making them more 'open-minded', taking on more neutral views towards values that are perceived to be markers of cultural identity. Some of the respondents also believed English to be a tool which allows them to communicate more directly. These findings echo the results of Lee Su Kim's (2003) study, in which case studies with multilingual postgraduate students also found that respondents adapted identities as they switched languages in different localized contexts, particularly switching to English when wanting to be direct. Similarly, the same studies also found that knowing English contributed towards a more reflective and critical outlook towards the culture of the respondents.

However, despite this acknowledgement that English is an empowering pragmatic language, there appeared to be some degree of othering among some of the respondents. Almost all the respondents had an acute sense of a division between those who speak English as a main language and those who are more proficient in the ethnic group's language. The respondents who are multilingual with English as a first language and correspondingly lesser competency in the language of their ethnic group experienced more pronounced othering; as they perceived those who are less competent in English as more 'closed up' and ethnocentric, and those who are more proficient in the ethnic language thought them to be "arrogant", "showing off", and "*mat salleh celup*". These findings again resonate with Lee Su Kim's (2001; 2003; 2005; 2006) studies which likewise found that both Malay and non-Malay respondents who are more proficient in English faced resentment as their peers who are more proficient in the ethnic tongue considered them to be "boastful" and "Westernized".

Despite some similarities with Lee Su Kim's (2003) study from which this study takes off, there seems to be a slight shift in the attitude towards English. In the current study, the theme that features more prominently is the subjects' awareness of the pragmatism and social advantage in being well-versed in English, along with the indication that a significant number of subjects amongst the 20 interviewed were found to be multilingual with English featuring as a dominant language. While traces of "othering" between dominantly English speaking and native speaking undergraduates are still evident, it doesn't seem to factor as prominently as the resentments that were reported by the subjects in Lee Su Kim's (2003) study. This may bear significant implication that a shift in the attitude towards English is in progress amongst Malaysian undergraduates – as the English language has established itself as the pertinent International Language of the world, Malaysian undergraduates may be progressing towards increasing acceptance of the role of English in their own lives in Malaysia and their making of meaning in the world. It is also a shift of attitude that implies that Malaysian undergraduates are embracing the English language as their own, a relevant tool in their own lives rather than a second or foreign language.

Conclusion

The findings presented seem to suggest that for a significant number of the respondents, English can quite easily be considered the dominant language in all domains. In most cases, English has empowered its users as it has opened up their world and in some cases

has improved their self-esteem, improved their social status, and made them appear more knowledgeable. However, there appears to be some degree of “othering” experienced by the users. The data suggest that this is dependent on the community that the respondent is from and degree of proficiency of the respondent in his/her native language. However, these themes and the variables connected to them need to be further investigated. A similar study on the impact of English on identity could be beneficially carried out in other areas of Malaysia, particularly East Malaysia for its rich and highly unique sociocultural composition. A study on the impact and roles of the English language in other traditionally ‘non-native speaker’ or ‘outer circle’ countries would also prove beneficial in contributing to the body of knowledge towards understanding the implications of the spread of English as the language of the world today.

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