

Language Vitality of Malaysian Languages and Its Relation to Identity

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ABSTRACT

Bahasa Malaysia is the national language in Malaysia, which acts as a national symbol that raise a sense of national unity, and maintains a sense of cultural value and identity. As the country is multicultural and multilingual, the use of Bahasa Malaysia, English, Mandarin, and Tamil invite questions of comparative vitality, which is a strength evaluation of language relative to other languages that coexist in the linguistic sphere. The present study, via the indicators such as language use, dominance and preference, language attitude and motivation, and language proficiency, aims to examine the vitality of these languages and to obtain comparative information about their connections to national and ethnic identity. Vitality Questionnaire was distributed to Malaysian primary five students from vernacular Tamil and Chinese schools. Findings indicate that Bahasa Malaysia and English do not have high vitality. Yet, vernacular languages are rated as having high vitality. It is suggested that ethnic languages dominantly shape ethnic identity and that they play an important role in the students' lives at early age as compared to Bahasa Malaysia which has not gained a stronghold. Thus, the sense of national identity appears to have taken a back seat. National aspiration in this aspect of nation building is still far from being realized if it is to be nurtured and expected to be developed at this stage of growth. Within a multilingual milieu, establishing national identity appears a complex issue and language choice and use may have long term effects on the moulding of a Malaysian national identity.

Keywords: language vitality; vitality indicators; ethnic identity; Malaysian languages; primary education

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian education system promotes bilingualism and multilingualism through the establishment of primary schools with three mediums of instruction. Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, is used as the medium of instruction (MI) in both primary and secondary national schools, while Mandarin and Tamil act as the medium in national-type (vernacular) primary Chinese and Tamil schools. At the same time, English is learnt as another language subject that has economic significance. While Bahasa Malaysia does not serve as the MI in national-type primary school, the language is taught as a compulsory language subject alongside with the English language in these schools. This system for primary schools is an

established feature in the Malaysian national education system since the achievement of independence from the British in 1957. The system implemented is considered appropriate for the nation, taking into account the multi-ethnic and multicultural milieu characteristics of the nation. While preserving the ethnic languages, Bahasa Malaysia and English are learnt as common languages to communicate with other speech communities. Through the system, it is believed that a shared sense of identity will be inculcated that brings together multiethnic citizen into a united nation. However, the arrangement has given rise to criticisms as it does not seem to promote national unity or a unified education system that could be better managed to attain national goals. Despite some proposals to integrate the systems, vernacular schools have survived and thrived with apparent increasing enrolment in the current times.

As recent as 2013, the Minister of Education, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, affirmed that vernacular schools will continue to exist as part of the national education system and will not be abolished, though the issue is still a topic of debate (Zahiid, 2013). The sentiment is related to the perception of vernacular schools as a hindrance to nation building which includes national identity construction. The concern is due to the use of vernacular languages (Mandarin and Tamil language) as MI that may be an impediment in the building of national identity which is aligned to the promotion of Bahasa Malaysia as the language of unity. The links between language learning and national identity are inextricably intertwined. A language is said to reflect an identity (Fishman, 1977; Byram, 2006). In particular, the national language functions as a unifying symbol, linguistically incorporating members from other speech communities into a community and enables bonding among the citizens. As Byram (2006, p.6) said, “an important language/identity link is the one between national language and national identity. This link may be created, strengthened or weakened by formal teaching in schools...”, thus the larger issue is to review the establishment of national identity through a national language, which is Bahasa Malaysia in this research. Being a national language, Bahasa Malaysia represents a national symbol that acts not only “to raise a sense of national unity, but it also reinforces and maintains a sense of cultural value and identity” (Ha, Kho, & Chng, 2013, p. 62). This claim stimulates discussion on the construction of national identity via the learning of Bahasa Malaysia among vernacular primary school students who are subject to school learning in ethnic language that serves as MI and are also obliged to learn a third language, English for pragmatic development simultaneously with vernacular language and national language. The learning of these language has led to the central issue of language vitality in providing concrete data on the strength of a particular language relative to other languages that coexist in the same linguistic sphere where there is ongoing interaction which uses first, second and third language as means of communication. In turn, this could give an indication of the identity building.

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND ETHNIC IDENTITY IN MALAYSIA

To understand the development of the Malaysian languages, in particular the national language, some background issues need to be explained. The term, *Bangsa Malaysia* coined by Tun Dr. Mahathir, the former prime minister for 22 years, was used to emphasize a united Malaysian nation which does not distinguish its citizens according to ethnicity. It is regarded as “people being able to identify themselves with the country, speaking Bahasa Malaysia and accepting the Constitution” (Tun Dr. Mahathir, quoted in Asiaweek 2000). Embedded within the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* is the presence of national consciousness (being a Malaysian) and the use the national language. Liu, Lawrence, and Ward (2002) in comparing the identities of Singaporeans and Malaysians, found that Malaysians have a higher ethnic identity than Singaporeans. They reported that Singaporeans tend to identify themselves in terms of nationality, whereas Malaysians will identify themselves according to ethnicity. This

distinctiveness among Malaysians is a worry as it is interpreted as a cause of disunity and needs concerted orientation. Ali, Hamid, and Moni (2011) in discussing the implementation of PPSMI (Teaching Science and Mathematics in English) expressed that the position of Bahasa Malaysia may be overlooked as the policy gravitates towards a greater use of the English language and could indirectly lead to racial disharmony in the nation. Moreover, the study by Abdullah and Chan (2012), also stressed the importance of the national language as the main unifying force in establishing national identity. Thus, it could be said that the English language is seen as a competing force which appears to have its own vitality and may contribute to the shaping of identity as well. The major ethnic languages (Mandarin and Tamil) are given recognition as a result of the historical significance connected to the contribution of the migrants from China and India who settled in Malaysia. The gaining of independence also saw the official status given to these languages in the dual MI system practiced in the Malaysian education system.

VITALITY, LANGUAGE USE AND IDENTITY

In the context of the socio cultural changes that had taken place in the country, the language choice and use and its relationship to identity is an issue that needs to be addressed. Thus, the study has embarked on the investigation of language vitalities of the different languages to give data on the sociolinguistic reality of the interplay and impact of the language practices. To begin the discussion, the concept of vitality first needs to be defined distinctively for the study. Vitality is closely associated with the development of ethnolinguistic vitality or group vitality that “makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations” (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977, p. 308). Via three indicators, which are status, demography, and institutional support, the vitality strength of a group is assessed objectively and subjectively. Subjective ethnolinguistic vitality is the first-hand assessment of group members’ perception towards their own ethnolinguistic vitality while objective ethnolinguistic vitality is a secondary measure that assesses the overall group circumstances in certain settings or places.

The concept of language vitality focuses on the language component rather than other group variables as its chief characteristic. It is defined as the degree to which language will live and survive. There are several models attempting to assess the vitality of a language such as Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scales (GIDS) of Fishman (1991), expanded GIDS (Lewis & Simons, 2009) and UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (UNESCO, 2003). In contrast to the previous concept of vitality, the studies of Van Der Avoird, Broeder, and Extra (2001), Pluddemann et al. (2004), and Extra, Yagmur, and Van Der Avoird (2004) had added more indicators, such as language proficiency, language choice, language dominance, and language preference to gauge language vitality. Notwithstanding that each model of vitality has various indicators to gauge the vitality of a language, it should be noted that in applying the concepts of both ethnolinguistic vitality and language vitality, early focus is on the immigrant minority, indigenous, and endangered language. This is seen in studies on vitality assessment between Italian and English language in Canada (Bourhis & Sachdev, 1984), the vitality of Turkish and English language among Turkish immigrants in Australia (Yagmur, Bot & Korzilius, 1999), the vitality of English, Bengali, and Sylheti language among Bangladeshi immigrant in United Kingdom (Lawson & Sachdev, 2004), the vitality of Sihan language in Sarawak, Malaysia (Mohamed & Hashim, 2012) and many more.

In line with current developments, the meaning of language vitality is extended beyond the concern of minority groups. Language vitality is now gauged for any large groups of language users. From the early days of exploration into ethnolinguistic vitality, language

use has been further hypothesized as a strong determinant in the perceiving of identity. Gao, Schmidt, and Gudykunst (1994), and McEntee-Atalianis (2011) found that ethnic identity has influenced ethnolinguistic vitality. In other words, those who have a strong ethnic identity have high ethnolinguistic vitality. Members with high ethnolinguistic vitality would strongly identify with their group (i.e. ethnic group) and has strong group membership. Negative identity may cause otherwise. In a related study, Sayahi (2005), also reported that speakers of Spanish in northern Morocco showed high vitality towards the Spanish-speaking group leading to the maintenance of competence and proficiency in Spanish language. Having high ethnolinguistic vitality as members of the Spanish-speaking group, they did not associate themselves as Moroccan.

For this study, language vitality is examined in the context of Bahasa Malaysia, English, as well as Mandarin and the Tamil language which are the two vernacular languages used in the national-type Chinese and Tamil primary schools. In assessing the vitality of the languages, the indicators that are used pertain to language use, language preference and domination, language attitude and motivation, and language proficiency. Language vitality will reflect the dominance of languages in use and make the important link between language vitality and the emergence of linguistic ethnic and national identities. It would help to act as a gauge of the strength of these languages that will illuminate the emergence of Malaysian linguistic ethnic and national identities.

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLE

In total, 63 Chinese school students participated in the study. 59 Indian-ethnic participants were sourced from the Tamil schools. All 122 students were primary five students who have been exposed to the learning of Bahasa Malaysia, English and at least one vernacular language. At this age, which is eleven, they are believed to have the ability to discern their daily linguistic experience and linguistic abilities and have reached a certain maturity level that enabled them to answer language-related questions. The details about the respondents are summarized in the table below.

TABLE 1. Respondents' overall profile

School	Ethnicity	Total
National-type Chinese School	Chinese	63
National-type Tamil School	Indian	59
Total		122

INSTRUMENT

In the present study, a questionnaire is used as the only instrument to examine the language vitality of primary school students. Adapted from the studies of Van et al. (2001), Pluddemann et al. (2004), and Extra, Yagmur and Van Der Avoird (2004), the indicators included in the study are language use, language dominance, language preference, and language proficiency. Language attitude and motivation was included as one of the important indicators which make up a total of five indicators. The initial questionnaire was administered to a sample of 50 respondents and Cronbach's Alpha reliability test was conducted using SPSS version 21 software. It is found that the Cronbach's Alpha is 0.767, which indicates a good internal consistency. While limited to using only a questionnaire in the study, the vitality indicators obtained are seen as having the potential to reveal the vitality of these languages in the defined context of use. Nevertheless, it should be noted that using

questionnaire as the sole instrument in the study, to some extent, may provide one-dimensional results and findings instead of well-rounded, fully dimensional analysis. As in this context, the questionnaire survey instrument could only provide self-report data among Chinese and Indian Malaysian primary school students.

TABLE 2. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.767	85

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data collection involves getting an official consent from the state education department. Thereupon full cooperation from the selected national-type primary schools was accorded. After getting the approval from the school principal, the researchers liaised with the vice-principals and the teachers who gave their class schedules for the administration of the questionnaire. In order to ensure that there is no disruption to the normal flow of school activity, forty five minutes to one-hour class for a non-core subject was used to distribute and answer the questionnaire. During the class, a researcher was present to assist students in answering the question and to clear any doubts that students may have. After administering the questionnaire on a small sample of students, the data were analyzed to obtain a reliability index and also to adjust the questions for final administration. Data collection was then resumed. Subsequently, the data were entered manually into SPSS software (version 21) and were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results are displayed in the form of percentages (%).

RESULTS

The results are discussed and presented in bar graphs according to the indicators that compose language vitality. The discussion also links the indicators to identity.

LANGUAGE USE

As Miller (2004) said,

How we speak and are heard within sites is critical to social identity work... these sites provide places in which identities is enacted, where social interactions, cultures, languages, and identities are made manifest, where the 'insidering' and 'outsidering' is done, where spoken discourse is heard or not heard, is validated or remains unacknowledged, and where membership is made available or denied" (p. 295).

These sites may be at home, in school, outside home and school, or any contexts of use considered crucial in building identity, be it ethnic or national identity. They represent social space where there is a portrayal of identity in association with language use. What can be seen from the result is that the students frequently used Mandarin and Tamil in many contexts demonstrating that at this early age, students have most contact with their own speech community. They used the ethnic language (their mother tongue) more often than the national language and English language, thus showing greater ethnic group engagement. The use of vernacular languages as MI can be regarded as a successful initiative to maintain ethnic identity. At this stage of learning, national identity markers manifested in the vitality of a national language is not apparent.

HOME LANGUAGE

In the present study, it is found that 81.60% of Chinese school and 74.58% of Tamil school students used Mandarin and Tamil at home. As expected, they are the languages used the most at home. Since home is always regarded as the nurturing platform whereby languages of the parents play an important role in determining the language use, it would be a norm that Mandarin and the Tamil dominate home use, especially when Mandarin is the mother tongue for the Chinese ethnic and Tamil is the mother tongue for the Indian ethnic. As a matter of fact, the data could be interpreted in the context of a speech community exerting its influence on cultural values and identity aligned to ethnic grouping. As for Bahasa Malaysia, Figure 1 shows that it was used not more than 10% by Tamil school students and none at all among Chinese school students in the various domains of home language use. The extremely low usage of the national language is expected since at such an early age Bahasa Malaysia mostly does not have practical usage at the home domain. In Figure 2 which shows a further comparison between languages that included English, Bahasa Malaysia was ranked after English in use. It can be seen that 21% of Tamil school students and 9.84% of Chinese school students use English as a home language. This could mean that the English-speaking environment at home does not show any incongruence to notions of ethnic identity. In fact, as stated in the study by Wong, Lee, Lee, and Yaacob (2012), “There is both a strong awareness of maintaining one’s own cultural and communal identity even while embracing English as L1 or L2, at the same time, a merging of one’s cultural identity with the Malaysian identity” (p. 152-153), English language which was once a colonial language, has been accepted as part of the Malaysian linguistic fabric and is actively used in the daily life of many Malaysian.

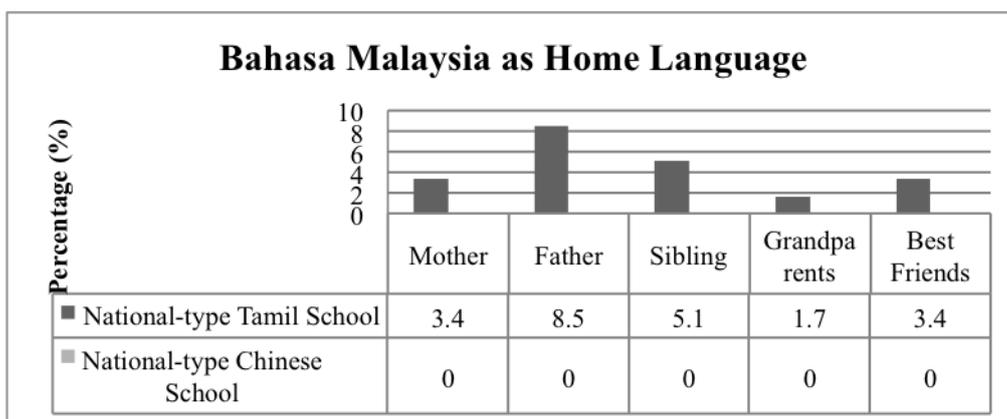


FIGURE 1. The use of Bahasa Malaysia as home language

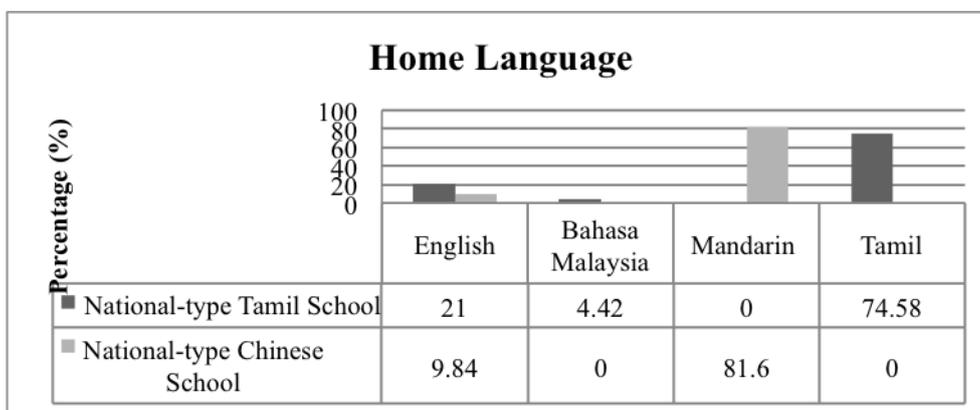


FIGURE 2: Home language use among Chinese and Indian ethnic students

LANGUAGE OF MEDIA

Overall, as demonstrated in Figure 3, less than 14% of Tamil school students and not more than 2% of Chinese school students used Bahasa Malaysia as the language in media exposure. Among Tamil school students, the language was used mostly for SMS, reading newspapers, storybooks, comic books, and magazines. For both ethnic groups, Bahasa Malaysia usage in the media context is considered to be very low. It would appear that the Indians are more exposed to the use of Bahasa Malaysia compared to the Chinese, while the Chinese are more strongly influenced by their own culture in such language practices.

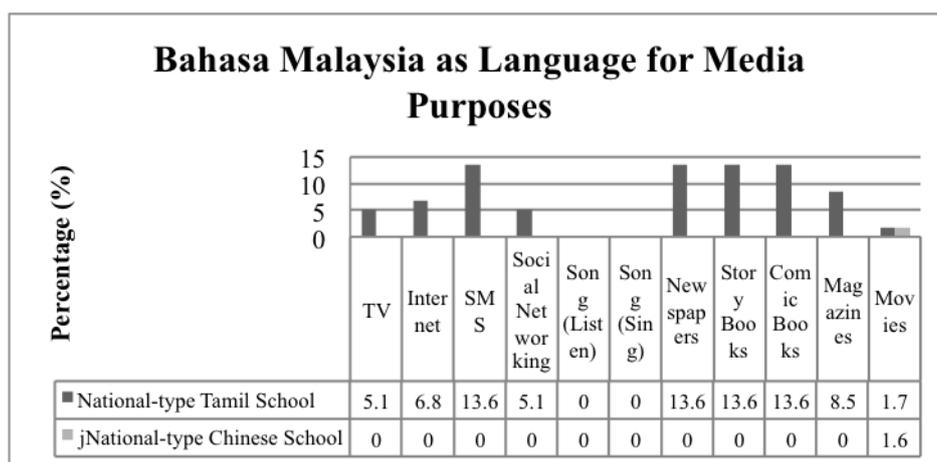


FIGURE 3. The use of Bahasa Malaysia as language for media purposes

When English is included for comparison (Figure 4), it was found that the English has gained a stronger foothold than Bahasa Malaysia, accounting for 32.31% of language use among the Chinese and 46.68% of the Indians. In fact the Indians used English slightly more than Tamil language. It could be said that the Indians are more exposed to English whereby cultural values attachment in relation to language use is not as dominant compared to the Chinese. On the other hand, the visible use of the English language for media purposes among Tamil school and Chinese school students also marked its role in the area of technology pointing to the fact that there may be a high availability of resources and materials in the language.

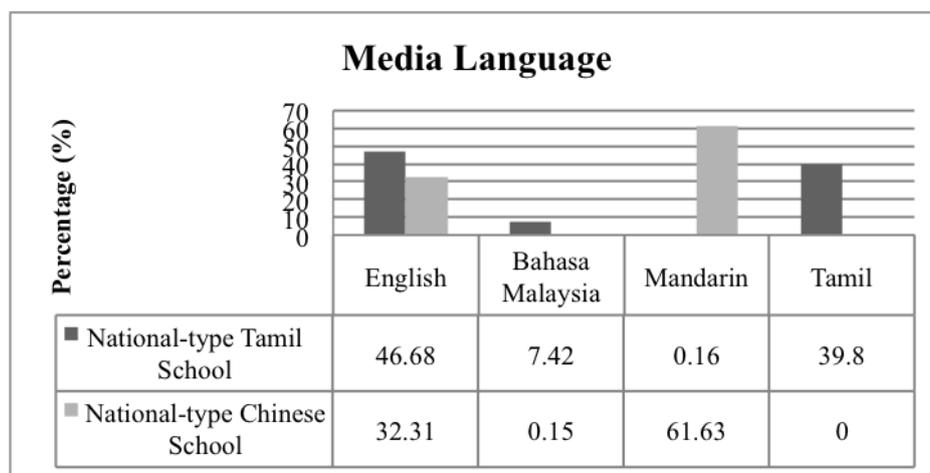


FIGURE 4. Media language

SCHOOL LANGUAGE

The vernacular languages which are used as the medium of instruction in the primary school mark one of the uniqueness in the Malaysian national education system. School represents a main social space in which students are able to mingle and interact with people using languages they are familiar with. Taking into account that the main language used in these schools is the vernacular language, it is not surprising that Mandarin and Tamil are highly used in these schools (Figure 6). Within the school setting where Bahasa Malaysia is taught as a school subject to students for whom the language is not their first language, the language use is rather low, except for interaction with school office staff, which registered 49.2% by Chinese school students and 44.1% of Tamil school students (Figure 5). These figures affirmed the use of Bahasa Malaysia as a language used for formal purposes such as for contact with government offices or for official matters. It could also be a case of having to use Bahasa Malaysia for inter-ethnic communication as the office staff may be of different ethnic origin and thus Bahasa Malaysia is the language that serves this functional purpose. Interestingly, communicating with the headmaster appears to be done more with the vernacular language, even though he is part of the office administration aligned for the use of the national language as an official language. On the whole, the result implies that despite Bahasa Malaysia having the status of a national language, students still have limited exposure to the language in the primary school environment. They seemed to have inadequate opportunities to apply Bahasa Malaysia in real life via interaction with other people. The same applies to the English language in the school where students were exposed insufficiently to the language (Figure 6). It is ironical that under the obligation to learn English in school where every learning begins at school, the supposedly exposure to the language returns with minimal usage at the primary stage. It is supported by the study of Musa, Koo, and Azman (2012) that our education system is lacking of supportive environment to learn the language as well as opportunity to have sufficient language experience.

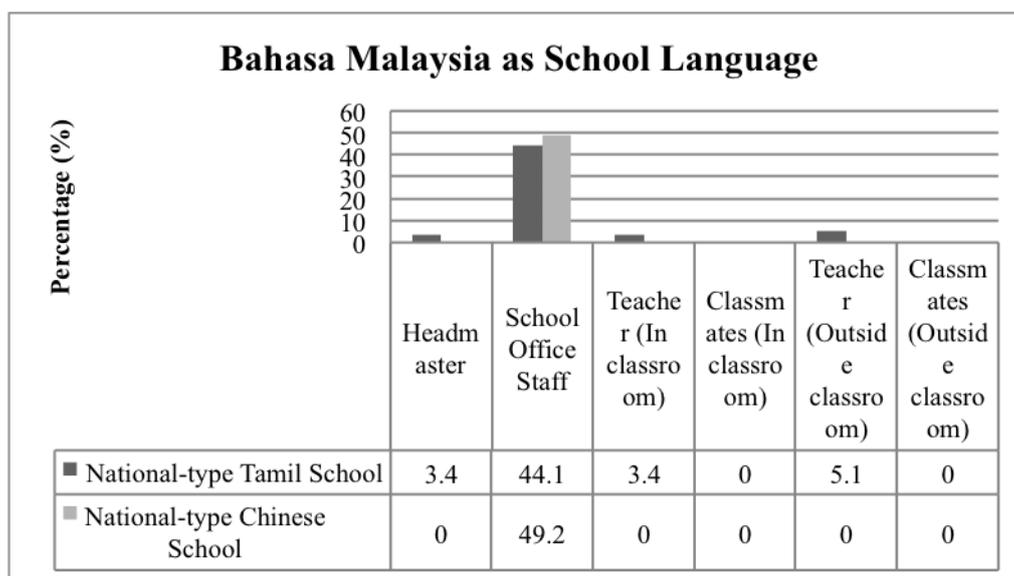


FIGURE 5: The use of Bahasa Malaysia as school language

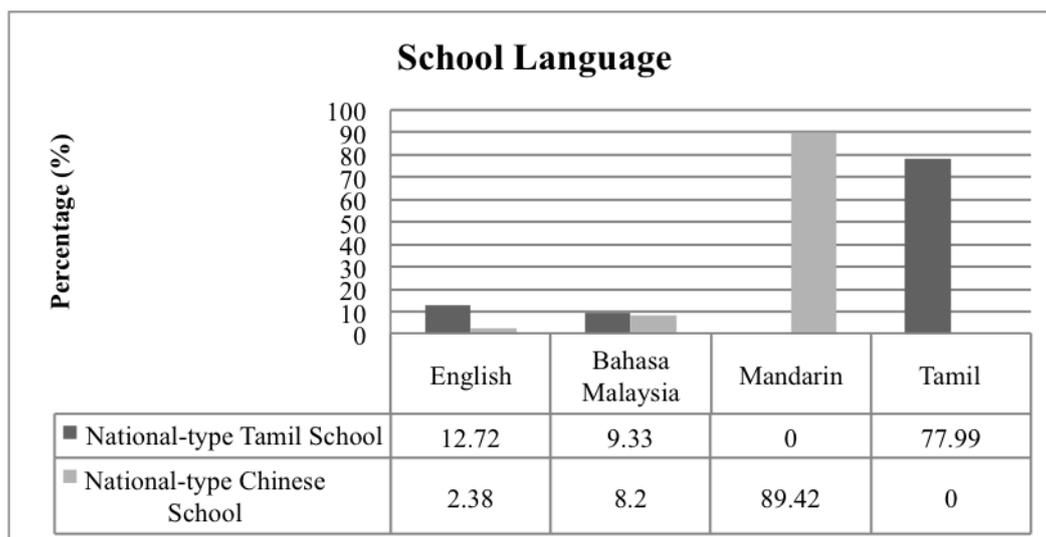


FIGURE 6. School language

COMMUNITY LANGUAGE

As shown in Figure 7, shopping, interacting with neighbours and talking with strangers are among the three highest language use registered for Bahasa Malaysia. For Chinese school students, 4.8% used Bahasa Malaysia while shopping and 3.2% used the language with neighbours and strangers and in religious activities. However, for Tamil school students, 39% used the language with neighbours, with 23.7% and 20.3% using the language for shopping and talking to strangers respectively (Figure 8). The use of Bahasa Malaysia in these domains evidenced the value as a common language to communicate with people who belong to different speech communities in the nation. It is clearly not a language often used by the Chinese ethnic. For the majority of Indians, the incidence of Bahasa Malaysia use is much higher, though it is still lower compared to English as used by the two ethnic groups. Figure 8 reveals that 80.28% of Chinese school students and 54.6% Tamil school students used Mandarin and Tamil for communal activities respectively affirming that the vernacular languages are the dominant community languages used.

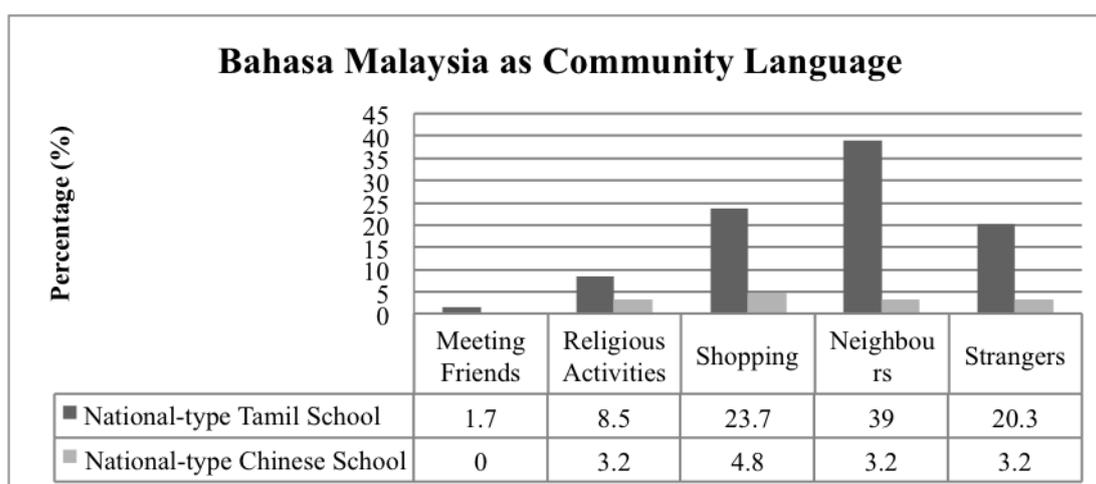


FIGURE 7. The use of Bahasa Malaysia as community language

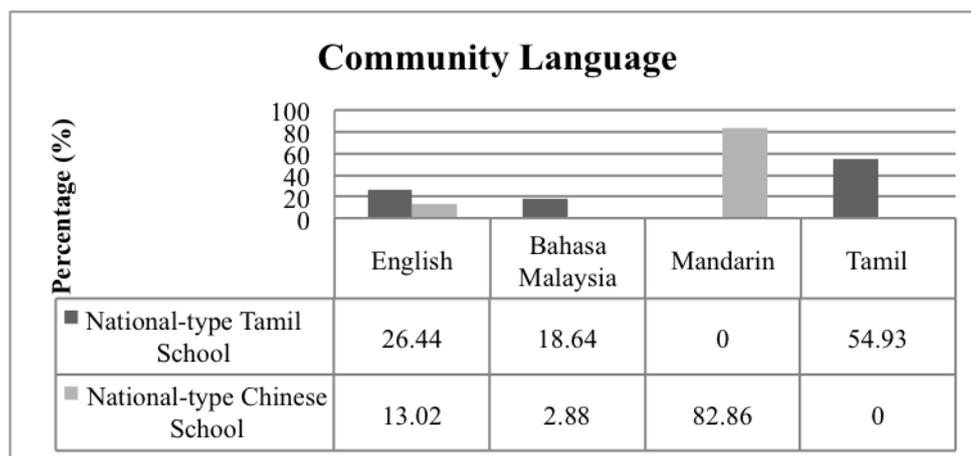


FIGURE 8. Community language

LANGUAGE DOMINANCE

Figure 10 shows that the majority of the students (84.6% of Chinese school and 72.9% of Tamil school) selected Mandarin and Tamil language as the language they speak best in (Figure 10). It is not surprising as their linguistic experiences are dominated by their first language (mother tongue for the majority) which they have acquired and is strengthened through mother tongue education. However, for Bahasa Malaysia as captured in Figure 9, only a few students reported that they have dominant control in the use of it. In comparison with Mandarin and Tamil language, the result demonstrates that the students attach greater allegiance to ethnic language rather than the national language. On the other hand, in the case of the English language, more students claimed that they are dominant in English compared to Bahasa Malaysia. Given that English is the second important language in the nation and an extremely important language in the international platform, it is believed that English will have higher vitality as students progress to higher level of education. On account of the fact that Malaysia is a multilingual nation, it should be noted that being acceptant towards multilingualism is the way to establish a more liberal interpretation of national identity. In other words, being the citizens of multilingual nation, we should be receptive to the stance that Bahasa Malaysia and the dominance of the language should not be the only emblem of the national identity. National identity should take other language into consideration as well.

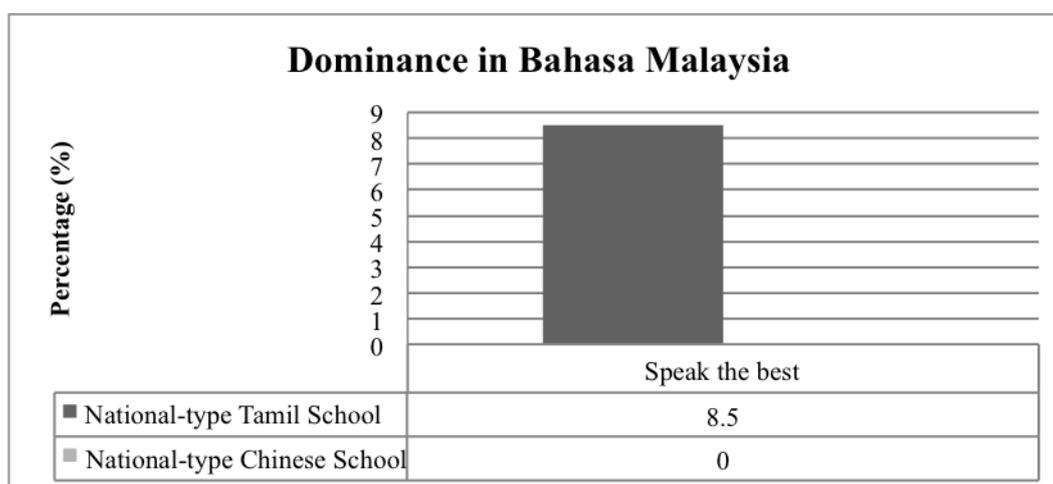


FIGURE 9. Dominance in Bahasa Malaysia

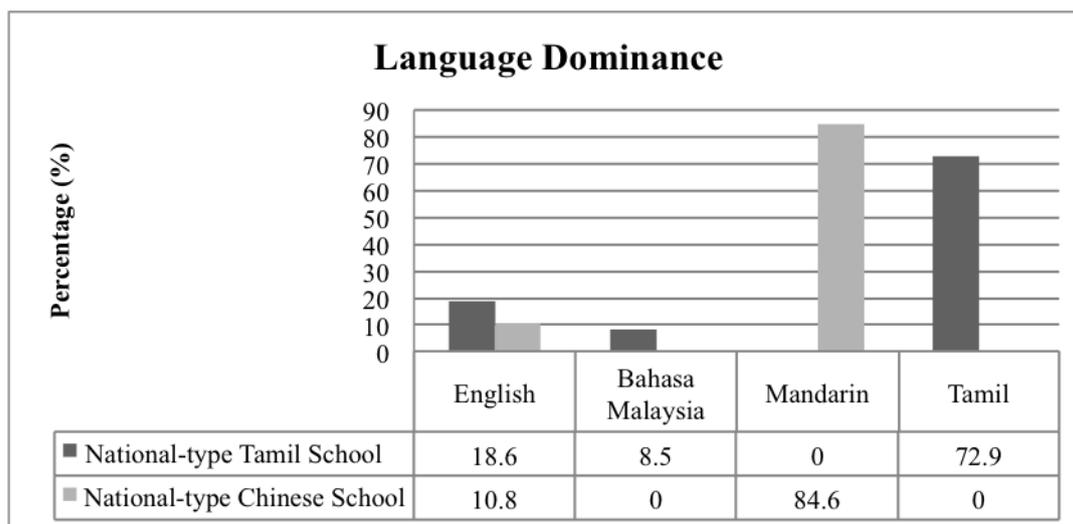


FIGURE 10. Language dominance

LANGUAGE PREFERENCE

As another vitality indicator, students were asked about their language preference. Bahasa Malaysia, again, is chosen as the less preferred by students. When asked about a language they do not like, 55.6% of Chinese school students and 35.6% of Tamil school students stated that they dislike Bahasa Malaysia (Figure 13). Among the Chinese school students, none of the people chose Bahasa Malaysia as the language they like to speak in, compared to 5.1% Tamil school students in the responses (Figure 11). The low percentages seemed to signal a reluctance to use Bahasa Malaysia although it is the national language. Any unfavourable feeling towards a language may trigger rejection or refusal to learn and use the language. Therefore, this has repercussions for the national language agenda which promotes Bahasa Malaysia as a symbol for unity or the building of a national identity. However, the low vitality does not necessarily translate into the lack of pride to be a Malaysian, although it has to be recognised that language forms the inner component of identity (Gill, 2009; Rajantheran, Muniapan, & Govindaraju, 2012). In building a national collective Malaysian identity, through the use of national language as the means of communication, it would seem that it is a tall order to achieve the aspiration of using a common language that can help in building a national identity. Figure 11 shows that none from Chinese schools and 3.4% of Tamil school students chose the national language as the language preferred to be exposed to in school. Such preference could result in poor motivation to learn the language. In addition, the fact that only 18.6% of Tamil school students and none of Chinese school students opted for Bahasa Malaysia as the language they prefer to be exposed to outside of school also testifies to the lack of interest in the language. In comparison with other languages (Figure 12), the students had selected their ethnic languages as the language they preferred the most to use in the school and outside the school. The function of home as the bastion in using the mother tongue/vernacular language in deference to ethnic identity might be the underlying reason for not selecting the national language. Also, for English language, 10.2% and 11.1% of Tamil and Chinese school students (Figure 13) claim their dislike towards the English language. Meanwhile, 28.8% and 13.1% of Tamil and Chinese school students asserted their preference for the English language.

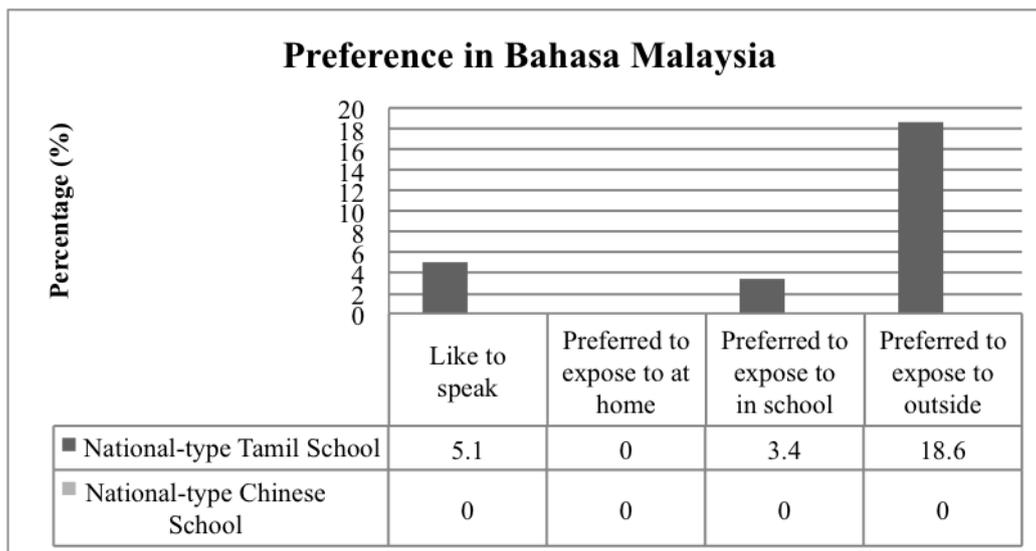


FIGURE 11. Preference in Bahasa Malaysia

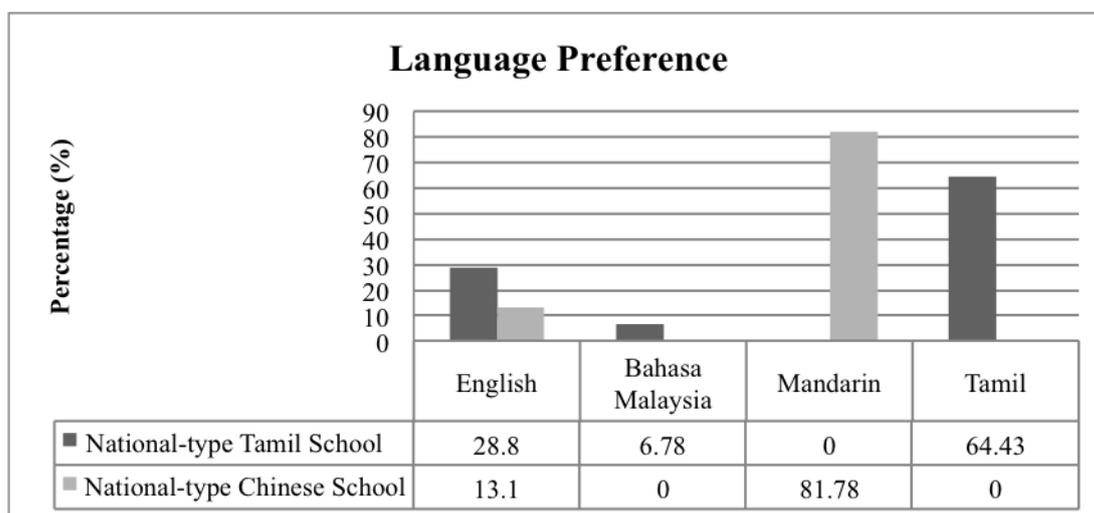


FIGURE 12. Language preference

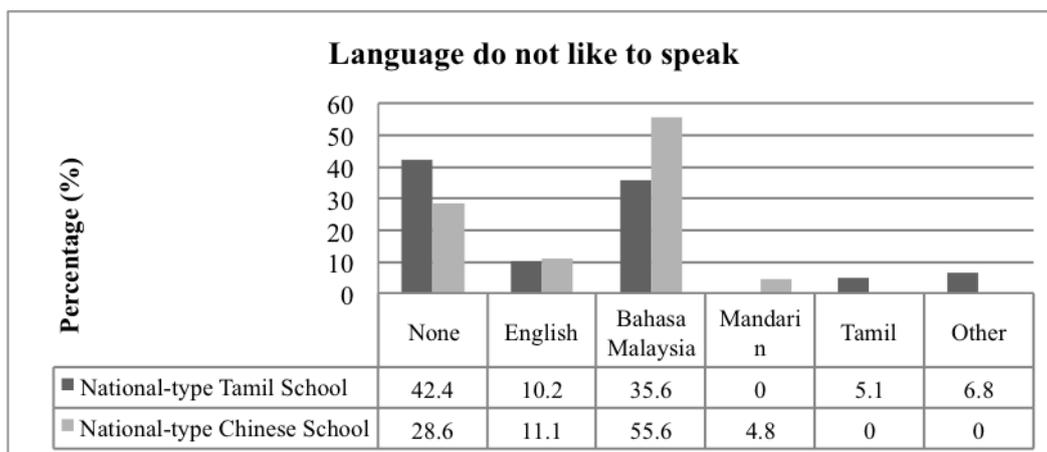
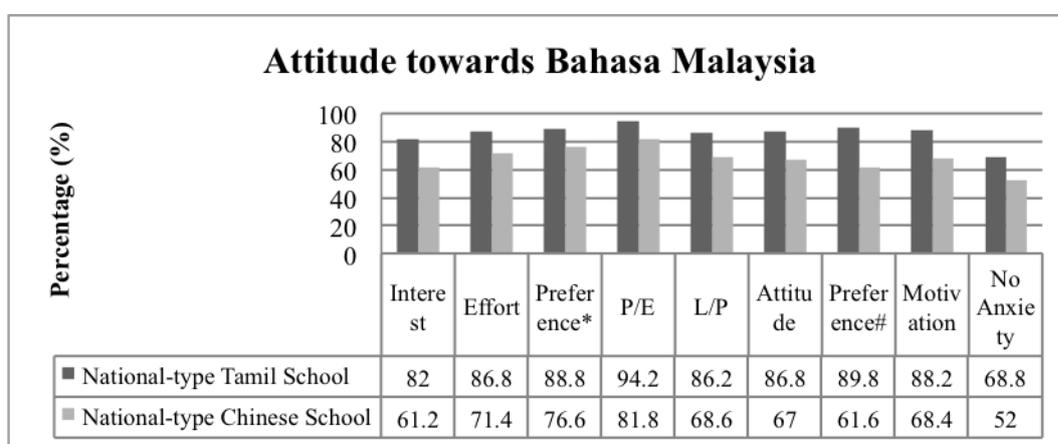


FIGURE 13. Language do not like to speak

LANGUAGE, ATTITUDE AND MOTIVATION

In figure 14, students were shown to have a positive attitude and motivation to use Bahasa Malaysia (Figure 14). However, there appears to be present a certain amount of anxiety in the use of the language with 52% of Chinese school students and 68.8% of Tamil school students. Having anxiety when using the language shows that students exhibit some negative feelings such as being afraid or feeling embarrassed to use the language. These negative feelings are commonly found in Malaysian students, especially when they use English which they are not familiar with (Talif, Chan, & Abdullah 2010; Yahaya, Yahaya, Ooi, Bon, & Ismail, 2011; Che Mat & Yunus, 2014). In parallel with the anxiety in English language, feeling anxious in their attempt to use Bahasa Malaysia is an eventual indication of non-familiarity with Bahasa Malaysia. The attitude towards English is more or less similar to that towards Bahasa Malaysia among the Mandarin, and Tamil language users (Figure 15). Mandarin and Tamil language are also presented with a positive attitude and motivation by the students.



Note: *Preference = Preference towards teacher
P/E = Parental Encouragement
L/E = Language Programme
Preference# = Preference towards speakers

FIGURE 14. Attitude towards Bahasa Malaysia

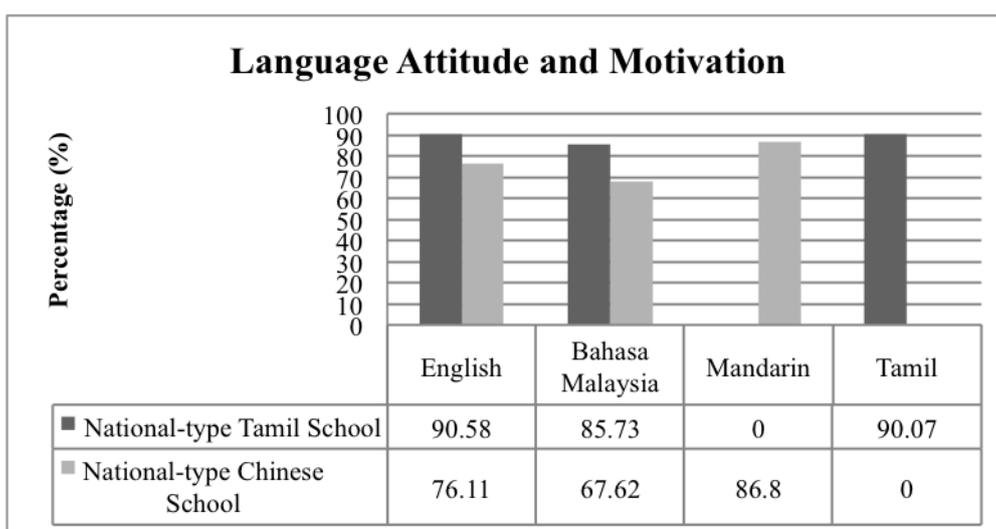


FIGURE 15. Language attitude and motivation

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

For proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia and English language, the analysis showed positiveness as both groups claim to have a relatively good command of the language. Tamil school students seemed to possess a higher proficiency level in the language. That being the case, it still did not translate in a high use of the language or a high liking for it. In other words, it could be said that in the present study, proficiency in the language is not a strong determinant of vitality.

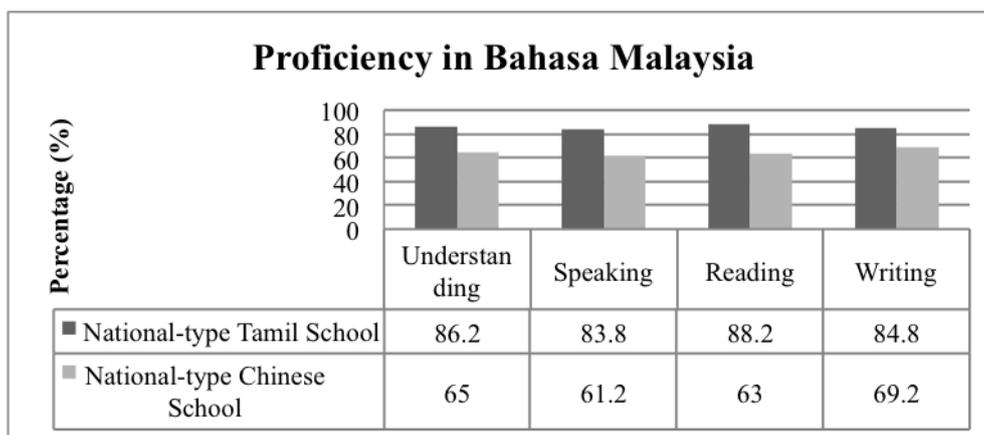


FIGURE 16. Proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia

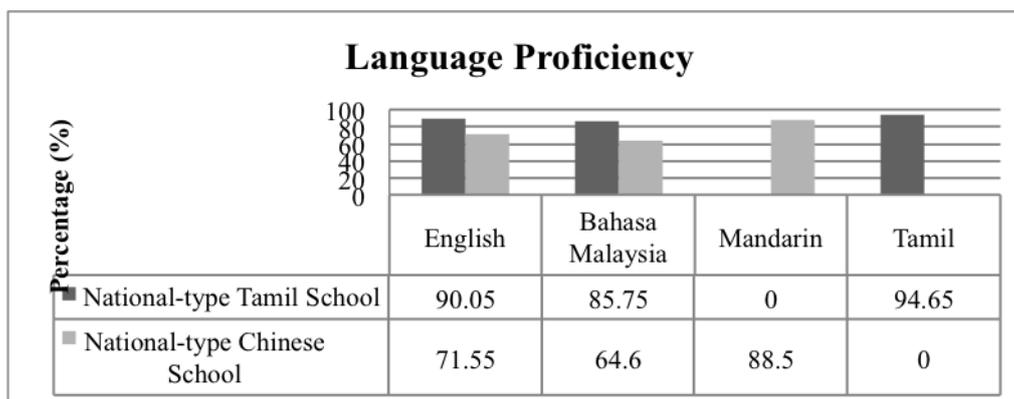


FIGURE 17. Language proficiency

DISCUSSION

The analyses of the result have highlighted that there is a clear pattern about perceptions of language vitality among primary vernacular school students. Bahasa Malaysia is used infrequently in a wide range of contexts. It is not a dominant language among the students and is not a preferred language for students; yet, the students stated that they have a good attitude and motivation in learning the language and have a reasonable command of the language. More pertinent is the perception that the language is not seen to fulfil their daily communicative purposes and therefore appears not to be a language of significance. In comparison, vernacular languages, Mandarin and the Tamil language, are used dominantly in various contexts. Moreover, students possess positive attitude and motivation to use the languages. It could be surmised that at the early stage of learning in the vernacular schools, high vitality goes to the Mandarin and the Tamil language. Ethnic identity is significantly

portrayed through a high vitality of their mother tongue, thus, issues a conjecture that at the early age, students have more attachment towards being a Chinese or Indian. It should be noted as well that English does not have a high vitality, and Bahasa Malaysia, the national language has the lowest vitality. As a matter of presupposition, Bahasa Malaysia was thought to be placed second and English to be posited last since the latter is neither Malaysian ethnic language nor a national language, but an acknowledged international language that is of significance in international standing. It was first deduced that the language that have ethnic and national impact would be given an emphasis beforehand. Yet still, English is ranked second (before the mother tongue and after Bahasa Malaysia) in terms of the vitality that is considered, a manifestation of acceptance towards the language and their willingness to form hybrid identities, which we, preferably call ‘a Malaysian identity’ – that is neither so ethnically or nationally that espouse the concept of multilingualism.

Bucholtz and Hall (2010, p.19), said that “identity is a discursive construct that emerges in interaction”. Any communication or contact via a language in a multi-ethnic environment reveals a sense of who the speakers are and how they relate to their social surroundings. The use of ethnic language helps to connect themselves with their ethnicity and shape their identity, and in the process the national language could be sidelined. This leads to the lack of prominence in cultivating a national Malaysian identity through national language use. Much needs to be done for the national language if it is to be promoted for the building of a national identity. In order to shape a better national linguistic identity, any unfavourable feeling towards the national language should be eliminated. Mills (2004, p. 177) stated that language can be presented “as a powerful means of exclusion and inclusion”. In this context, the low vitality of Bahasa Malaysia could possibly hamper the construction of a national identity and this could be an unconscious effort of exclusion that has long term effects. This action could be due to the students having a feeling that there is a lack of a social purpose in Bahasa Malaysia use in the community. The low vitality may have long term detrimental effects as the student progress further to secondary school where the medium of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia. The language may continue to be learnt with less enthusiasm.

However, national identity is seen as “no longer a static entity and pure substance, but a blend of compound cultural mixtures, overlaps and interactions” (Khader, 2012, p. 275). As Abdullah and Chan (2012) stated that there is a need to reconcile from the diversity into “creating oneness within multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multicultural Malaysia” (p. 51), it unconsciously implies that Malaysian national identity should be comprised of the property of “multi-”. In addition, Ting (2013, p.100) emphasizes that “the national education system is regarded not only as a tool for nation building, but the multilingual character of the schools is also perceived to be constitutive of the Malaysian national identity”. Thus the notion of national identity needs a redefinition especially in the context of a multilingual nation like Malaysia. A national identity cannot be formed based only on the use of the national language, but should involve the embodiment of linguistic diversity to give the concept a more accurate and holistic meaning.

CONCLUSION

The present study has concretized that the vitality of Bahasa Malaysia among primary school students could be elevated to some extent. However, any measure implemented, could not cause any pernicious drawbacks on the vernacular languages and the survival of vernacular schools as a cultural embodiment of long established communities. Gill (2009, p.2) believes that “it is language that enables a person to be culturally ethnically rooted and yet to reach out communicatively at a national level”, he or she would need to achieve a balance between ethnic and national aspirations. If a balance is achieved, ethnic languages would not be seen

as a contender in language dominance or a threat to national identity. Preservation of own culture, identity, and voice is not a negative thing. One should not be denied a voice in this era of choice and individual expression. While “bilingualism and multilingualism must be promoted for national identity, for instrumental use, for ethnic and personal identity, and the importance of culture and values” (Hashim, 2009, p. 45), preference in language use in school and outside school should not be a contentious issue. Rather multilingualism should be regarded as an asset that shows our rich heritage and diversity.

However, it should be taken into account that there are some limitations in terms of methodology in the present study. Due to the small number of respondents involved in the study, the results could not be generalized to the total cohort of vernacular primary school students in the nation. Moreover, the questions asked are limited to just five main indicators and the instrument used is limited to a questionnaire. There could be the use of multiple methodologies which are likely to yield more insights into the issue. The questions asked could be expanded to include other factors such as socioeconomic status and parental income and profession. As McEntee-Atalianis (2011) said, hinging solely on questionnaire to obtain answers on an issue as complex as national identity could be restrictive. Therefore, further research on the topic in the future should take these elements into consideration. Would vitality of Bahasa Malaysia and English continue to be low as the student progresses to secondary school? Would the vitality of ethnic languages suffer a setback as the students age? Seeking answers to these questions would require research extensions. For the moment, lucid snapshots have been captured about language use and vitality that occur in a particular site of linguistic bustle located in a unique multilingual environment.

NOTE

In this study, Bahasa Malaysia (Malaysian language) is used instead of Bahasa Melayu (Malay language). Although both terms refer to the same language, the use of the term ‘Bahasa Malaysia’ is appropriate in this context as the term (Bahasa Malaysia) represents a language not only for Malays, but for Malaysian of all races as well. The term ‘Bahasa Malaysia’ is used as a reference to national language.

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