

English Language and an Inclusive Malaysia

JAMES CAMPBELL

Senior Consultant: Asia Aware
jameskennedycampbell@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to discuss the pressures and forces which define the Malaysian English language debate and suggests that a new social compact involving a renewed commitment to democracy and social justice in Malaysia may be the necessary social context needed to address the increasingly unstable tension between nationalist language concerns and the pressures of globalization. In this article we shall argue that the way to avoid the English language debate from getting stuck oscillating between the Scylla and the Charybdis of nationalist and globalist discourses is to try to move the argument around language to one informed by progressive political economy and democratic theory. This also has the advantage of potentially undermining the politics of social division and cleavage which can derail progressive initiatives such as improvement of English in plural societies such as Malaysia.

Keywords: English language; democracy; plural society; globalization; nationalism

INTRODUCTION

The recent outcome of Malaysia's General Election has surprised many academic observers and has heralded much talk about Malaysian, democratic renewal (Hamid 2018, Ooi 2018, Weiss 2018). One interesting consequence of Malaysia's recent political transformation has been a renewal in the debate over the place of English in Malaysia (Hamilton 2018, Lau 2018). Malaysian newspapers report, for example, of a 'recent directive by Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad for senior civil servants to master the language' (Anon 2018b). Malaysian media have also noted that the push for civil servants to brush up on and improve their English language has not come without some opposition (Anon 2018b). This article seeks to discuss the pressures and forces which define the Malaysian English language debate and suggests that a renewed commitment to consensus building, democratic inclusivity and social justice in Malaysia may be the necessary instruments to gut the Gordian knot of the Malaysian English debate: the previously stable but increasingly unstable tension between nationalist language concerns and the pressures of globalization with its impact on economic development and social justice (Shamsul 1996, Shamsul 2009).

The core argument in this paper is that the newly minted Malaysian government which has resulted from the 14th General Election will need to frame its efforts to improve English competencies in Malaysia within a broader commitment to consensus building, social justice and democratic values as part of ensuring a sustainable and successful engagement with improving English language competencies. Despite these commitments it is possible that the reform push of the Malaysian government to improve English in Malaysian society will flounder due to push back from those who feel threatened by the discourse of English language improvement in Malaysia. Furthermore, if this issue is not handled sensitively or if it is pushed too quickly without consultation and without awareness of how language issues trigger concerns over identity it may even solidify divisions and political cleavages in Malaysia that can undermine the democratic direction of Malaysia (Case 2018, Lim 2018a, Lim 2018b).

It ought to be noted that these calls for improvements in English language capabilities are not new (Kaur 1995, Nair et al. 2012, Tan 2005, Wai 2015). This discourse is part of a

broader discourse around the place of English in Malaysia especially given the demands of globalization, needs of business as well as the challenges of economic development (Guan 2017, Hamilton 2018, Sua & Santhiram 2017, Tsui & Tollefson 2017a). What is new and potentially ground-breaking in its impact on the issue of English language competency is the recent democratic change in Malaysia. This democratic change also places the English language debate in a new political context which has re-energised the push for greater capability and use of English in Malaysia's institutions (Kok 2018, Nair 2018, Selvaratnam 2018). Long held to be a necessary component of Malaysia successfully engaging globalization and business competitiveness it now appears that Malaysia's democratic change towards what some are now calling a 'new Malaysia' is also now adding weight to the move to improve and promote English use and competency (Chalil et al. 2018).

A corollary intellectual discourse to the discourse over language and opportunity is the opening of a discussion by scholars such as K. S. Jomo in advancing a 'new social compact' in Malaysia (Zakaria 2018). A desire on the part of progressive thinkers to address the problems of inequality and ethnic divisiveness which can flow from it has renewed calls to re-engage with the values and address the limitations and problems that characterize Malaysia's experiment in social engineering under the New Economic Policy and consequent public policy elaborations and developments (Khalid 2014, Jomo 2016). The need to look back at the nineteen seventies Malaysian social reform model in economics, language and education and to understand its values, strengths and weaknesses, is critical in thinking about how to move forward language reform issues in contemporary Malaysian society. The new democratic opening in Malaysia may provide a way to open up discussion on economic issues, social justice, and national inclusivity as well as language issues in a progressive fashion based on a renewed and socially just 'developmental' approach to nation building (Gill 2006, 2007).

The key difference between the developmental approach to nation building which drove the effort to impose English in the teaching of maths and science in the past and the current approach in post GE 14 Malaysia may be a renewed emphasis of democratic engagement and consensus building as a way of advancing the relevant reform issues rather than just reliance on simple top down methods which have characterized the teaching of maths and science in English (Gill 2005). Democratic values rooted in an appreciation and respect for Malaysia's historical experience can both temper globalization discourse with a social justice orientation and refocus the discourse of nationalism on social and economic development in a more consultative and democratic fashion (Shamsul 2005). From a pragmatic political perspective this may be imperative given the need for democratic sustainability in the 'new' Malaysia which necessitates a commitment to the principle that 'nobody should be left behind' (Kaur 2018). Simply put, the gains of Malaysia's democratic development are not preordained and keeping the population with the government will arguably necessitate a more consultative, consensual and democratic approach to policy implementation and discourse.

The argument outlined in this paper may be further supported by the fact that important scholars and public policy officials such as Muhammed Abdul Khalid (Khalid 2014a) have voiced concerns and sympathies not unlike Jomo's in regard to re-visiting and engaging Malaysia's social compact. Khalid's focus on government policy truly addressing disadvantage can be viewed as an opportunity to also reframe or inform the English language debate not simply in what can appear as sterile reiterations of the supposed clash between nationalism and globalization but rather in terms of social justice, inclusivity and economic development for all Malaysians (Salleh 2000). This is especially so once the inter-relationship between language competency, employment opportunities and social disadvantage is fully grasped (Lee & Khalid 2016, Lee & Khalid 2009).

Three issues stand out regarding this renewed push for English to be learned in the Malaysian context. Firstly, there is the important argument over the status of language in the Malaysian polity. Language is not merely an instrumental or technical issue. It is also a deeply political issue and discussions over language in Malaysia go to the heart of arguments over national identity, national cohesiveness and social and political stability (A'Beckett & David 2017, Kaur, Awang-Hashim & Noman 2017, Yahya et al. 2017). Language connects to nationalism and the sense of what kind of nation Malaysia is to be and what kind of culture Malaysia respects (Omar 1998, Kaur & Shapii 2018, Omar 1979, Tsui & Tollefson 2017b). Yet as indicated above, disquiet also exists regarding the demand to improve English in both the public service and society in general (Anon 2018a, Ibrahim 2018). This disquiet usually manifests in a concern that the national language is being side-lined and that the unifying function of Bahasa Malaysia is being eroded by renewed emphasis on English (Azman 2004, 2009, 2011). This so-called nationalist concern is not something that can be easily dismissed or considered lightly.

Secondly there are arguments in relation to the pressures of globalization and specifically the importance of English to economic development, global integration and competitiveness (Barnard & Hasim 2018, Sua & Santhiram 2017). Pressures of globalization and success in the knowledge economy as well as concerns over who benefits and who is excluded in times of economic change are combining to advance the cause of English proficiency in Malaysia (Salleh, Sulaiman & Talib 2010). Finally, there is the advance of democracy as well as a historic commitment to addressing issues of social and economic justice and inclusion in Malaysia which is a necessary and critical aspect of sustaining the cultural and economic roots of democracy (Shukri 2017). All three factors influence debate about English in Malaysia and sustain the way in which arguments over English are fought out. All three factors also inter-relate with each other and while they are conceptually discrete, in practice they are often inter-weaved. The pushes and pulls of economic, political and cultural issues around language in Malaysia are not new. Malaysia has 'engage[d] in multiple forms of language planning, especially official status and corpus development, over the entire period of its national history' (Pirozzi & Bianco 2016, p. 16). However, in a plural society such as Malaysia concerns over national identity and the status of the national language are lightning rod issues. If issues of resentment over language combine with an ethno-religious backlash against the current multi-racial government in Malaysia this may upset Malaysia's path to democracy and hinder economic reform (Gill 2002, 2004, Martin 2005, Siddique & Suryadinata 1981, Sua & Santhiram 2017, Tsui & Tollefson 2017c).

NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY AND THE INHERENCE OF A PLURAL SOCIETY

Any discussion of language policy in Malaysia must be cognizant of Malaysia's colonial inheritance. The colonial inheritance that is particularly important in regard to the issues discussed in this paper lies in the colonial construction of what J.S. Furnivall refers to as a 'plural society' (Furnivall 2010, Puteh 2010, Saad 1980, Yeoh & Yeoh 2018). Furnivall whose work influences mainstream analysis of colonial Malaysia points out how plural societies function to tie ethnicity to labour market location (Furnivall 2010). In other words, Malaysia was bedevilled by, 'the identification of race with economic function' and this problem which is an inheritance from colonialism compounded the problem of poverty and economic marginalization (EPU 1971, p.1). The structure of Malaysian plural society has historically had a linguistic dimension. In Malaysia under the colonial period certain languages more were commonly used in different sections of the economy with English being 'the language of economic opportunity' (Gill 2005, p.246). The existence of a strong

connection between language ability and economic opportunity favoured urban and educated colonial subjects (Gill 2005). This linguistic dimension to plural society and its relationship with labour market segmentation can be experienced on many levels: between the elites and non-elite segments of a population; urban citizens and rural citizens; as well as between different ethnic groups which may have historically predominated in different trades, businesses and regions. Seong Chee Tham makes clear the relationship of linguistic pluralism to the colonial economy.

‘English was the language of government, business, and modern education. Chinese was the language of merchants, traders, artisans and others associated with the urban economy. Tamil was the language of estate workers and low level government employees. Finally, Malay was substantially the language of cultural life in the rural areas.’ (Tham 1990, p. 97)

Language can represent many things to people but one thing it represents most explicitly is a sense of belonging and dignity. Language competency can also offer people a sense of opportunity. During colonial times opportunity for those with English language competency led to, among other things, ‘professional mobility in the urban areas’ (Gill 2005, p.246). Those who worked with the colonial authorities or had their children educated in colonial English schools soon learnt English and this provided them with advantages in regard to jobs and status under colonial rule. This meant that there:

‘... was the strong link perceived between medium of instruction in schools and existing economic and social opportunities. In the former colonial system, English schools were located in urban areas and were mainly attended by non-Malays and a few Malays who came from the elite. In contrast, Malays in the rural areas attended Malay medium schools (at least for the primary levels). English had already become the language of economic opportunity and social mobility and this situation resulted in “an identification of a racial group with a particular type of vocation or industry and hence its identification with wealth or poverty”’. (Gill 2005, p. 246)

Better jobs, higher status. Yet this opportunity for some simply reinforced the inequalities and exclusions of plural society under colonialism. What then of this issue in contemporary times? Here we face a growing conundrum. Increasing opportunity in a globalized knowledge economy entails improving English competency. This seems clear. We also know that language reinforces a sense of identity and belonging to a particular kind of national community. This also seems clear. Language identity is in Shamsul Amri Baharuddin’s words a characteristic of the ‘nation of intent’ Malaysians seek to build (Shamsul 1996). Historically the core issue regarding national language policy is that it was advanced with a sense that Bahasa Melayu would act as a unifying language that would help build national unity. According to Sua and Santhiram, ‘the main thrust of the Malaysian educational language policy was to ensure that the Malay language serve as a common denominator to unify the three main ethnic groups in the country’ (Sua & Santhiram 2017, p. 40). The key point here is that language policy and practice is a defining issue in how we understand a national sense of identity and sovereignty. This is why the issue of language in Malaysia has been of such historical, political, cultural and constitutional import. Asmah Haji Omar reminds us of the defining constitutional aspect to the issue when she points out that:

‘The drafters of the Malayan Constitution took the greatest consideration of the situation in drawing up the various policies which all aimed at evolving Malaya, now Malaysia, into an integrated nation. One of these is the National Language Policy which is provided in Article 152 of the Constitution.’ (Omar, 1985, p.41)

It is important to note that this understanding of the link between national unity and national language policy in Malaysia has not gone unchallenged. Critics argue that the use of Malay as a binding national language merely masked political power and ethnic chauvinism (Le Ha, Kho & Chng 2013). Much of this criticism itself represents an alternative view on Malaysian identity: a different perspective on Malaysia's 'nation of intent' (Shamsul 1996). However, as an important legal political and cultural reality in Malaysia the importance of the national language cannot be dismissed or side-lined. Puteh points out 'A national language is more than just the language of the government or education. It is the symbol of people's identity as citizens of that nation.' (Puteh 2010, p. 193) The key to understanding the importance of the national language policy to Malaysian policy makers given the political, economic and cultural inheritance from the colonial past lies in understanding a commitment to national unity, a desire to redress 'the racial imbalance' (Omar 1985, p.43) of Malaysian society especially in the economy and the desire to build a sense of national cohesiveness and identity.

GLOBALIZATION

If nation building and issues of sovereignty have influenced and guided language policy in Malaysia especially since the NEP, the pressures of globalization as mentioned above have also had their effect and impact. One of the first things to note about the debate over globalization is that often appears as if globalization was itself something new, something recent. This however fails to address the fact that globalization as a process is far from new. In many respects the processes of colonization, and integration of Malaya into the trading system of the British Empire were also forms of globalization (Thomas & Thompson 2014). Pointing this out adds weight to the argument that the spread of English in Malaysia and its power rests on a continuance of the heritage of colonialism (Mandal 2000, Mohd-Asraf 2005, Ozóg 1990, Pennycook 2002, Pope et al. 2002). To a large extent this is true. Without British colonialism and the impact of the British Empire the English language simply would not have the status it enjoys today. Even despite this history strong supporters of the national language such as Asmah Haji Omar have noted that, 'There is no denying that among the legacies of the British colonial government in Malaysia the most valuable is the English language.' (Omar 1982, p. 53) The fact that the authority and extant of English is an artefact of colonialism is not of itself an argument against the use of English although recognizing the difficult tension between the pressures of globalization and nationalist sentiment is an important part of engaging with those who are disquieted by the spread and authority of English language in the context of efforts to build national unity and independence.

What is critical to understand in the current context of globalization, and the place of English in an increasingly global economy is the way in which the pressures of globalization and economic development now place pressure on the nexus between the policy of language nationalism and economic opportunity. In principle the national education policy, language policy and economic/social policy of the New Economic Plan which aimed to 'reduce and eventually eradicate poverty, by raising income levels and increasing employment opportunities for all Malaysians irrespective of race' are reinforcing and working together in tandem. As Saran Kaur Gill points out: 'the government implemented the National Education Policy which stipulated Malay as the main medium of instruction in schools ... The aim of this policy was to remove the identification of a particular ethnic group with school achievement and reduce the inequality of opportunity among ethnic groups' (Gill 2013, p. 82). Asmah Haji Omar captures the immediate historical policy context with its economic, political and social dimensions:

‘The objective of the National Language Policy was to rectify the imbalance which has for so long characterised the Malaysian society, through the National Education Policy. This policy cannot achieve its goal if left on its own. The New Economic Policy whose main objective is to redress the economic imbalances of the racial groups and thus restructure the Malaysian society, too cannot succeed if it is not complemented by the National Education Policy. Hence, the racial imbalance of the Malaysian society can be redressed only when the education and the economic policies are implemented together.’ (Omar, 1985, p.43)

However, national language policies which were intended to build the basis for social cohesion and national unity are in an increasingly neo-liberal environment having a possibly unintended consequence of (in some cases) reinforcing marginalization of the very communities it is meant to support and empower. According to Lowe and Khattab: ‘Globalisation was to pose a dilemma for policy planners. The success in having a national language resulted in the Malays – the race it was designed to help – being disadvantaged.’ (Lowe & Khattab 2003, p. 219, Gill 2006, p. 88) An example of how this manifests is in problems in employment opportunities for graduates of public universities where, ‘[t]he weakening competencies in the language have also led to serious problems of unemployment for graduates from public universities in the private sector’ (Gill 2006, p. 88). The pressures of globalization and its effects on employment issues have placed renewed emphasis on the need for Malaysians to have a facility in the English language, but above all these pressures have also forced policy makers to rethink and assess the unintended consequences of the diminution of English capability among poorer and marginalized Malaysians (Annie & Hamali 2006, Ridge 2004, Hanapiah 2004, Rashid, Rahman & Yunus 2017).

DEMOCRACY

The relationship between democracy and the language debate in Malaysia is complex and can be contradictory. If people feel that a discourse about language is both disrespectful to their culture and national identity and reinforces social, educational and economic marginalization then this discourse will create and enflame conflict, not advance the social, economic and political aims of the society. Engaging with nationalist critics of English language policy is of critical political, social and economic importance and addressing issues of economic and social marginalization as part of this discussion is imperative (David & Govindasamy 2005). However ultimately the debate over English must be handled with due respect to democratic and consensual values: it is a democratic imperative. It is important however that the debate over language does not over reach or indirectly suggest benefits to language ability that are far from provable. One criticism of the direction of Malaysian public policy and the diminution of English in Malaysia points out that while the speaking of English does not necessarily lead to or create a more tolerant and democratic society there has been a noticeable slide towards intolerance which has correlated with the downgrading of English competency. Tunku Zain Al-Abidin puts the argument this way:

‘The link between language and culture has societal implications too: an older generation points out that when we communicated properly (in Malay as well as English), we were also more tolerant, open-minded and optimistic. A political metaphor is provided by comparing the standard of English spoken – and the speaker’s own politics – at the United Nations from Tun Dr Ismail 60 years ago and one of his successors more recently. Our political and social regression is not, of course, caused by speaking worse English: but one of the root causes for both are similar, stemming from the personal agendas of politicians distorting the policymaking process.’ (Tunku 2017)

While it would be unwise to argue any causal relationship between English language competency and democratic values in Malaysia as pointed out by Tunku Zain Al-Abidin there is no doubt that a general unease at the slide towards intolerance, extremism and ethnic and religious conflict concerns both Malaysian public policy makers and the wider public (Aun 2017). Lack of tolerance and empathy are difficult issues to address in any polity. They are critical issues in achieving democratic buy in to language policy reform. Empathy for each other and for those who feel marginalized and diminished by a discourse especially when framed in terms of globalization is crucial for building the necessary consensus and buy in for support for English policy change. Drawing on democratic and consensual values as a method of engagement can help avoid a reversing direction in this important public policy area as has happened previously (Gill 2005). Empathy when translated into economic and social policy provides a critical social justice referent to underpin how we view the whole English language debate. Without empathy and respect based on principles of mutual regard, language policy can be seen as imposition. Muhammed Abdul Khalid in discussing his important book ‘The Color of Inequality’ (Khalid 2014a), points out that:

‘What is urgently needed from us all – regardless of ethnicity, creed, gender, religion, social status, and political affiliation – is empathy, which is the ability to put oneself in the shoes of another person. Only then, perhaps, this issue of sharing the nation’s wealth, as well as other sensitive national issues, will not be prejudiced by racial biases.’ (Khalid 2014b)

Discussions over the respective value, importance and place of language in Malaysia is not simply a technical or instrumental issue. Language has historically been a lightning rod issue for division especially when combined with other divisions based on ethnicity religion, class and region (Singh 2001). Furthermore, there is a very real need for those who advocate improvements in English and a raising of the level of facility in English to do so in a way that does not suggest a diminution of the national language. This is critical since discussions about English seem to invariably be bound up with fears of the diminution of Bahasa Melayu. This is unfortunate since it does not follow that improvements in English entail a lowering of status for the national language, but the perception that it might is enough to force a wedge between advocates of improvement in English and many people who might benefit through improving their English language. It is at this point that not only is empathy for how people perceive the public policy debate critical, but so is respect for the place and role of the national language central to any successful outcome in this difficult public policy issue.

When we investigate the issue of English language in Malaysia we find that it is very crucially connected to social and economic empowerment which is central to a healthy and substantive democratic culture. Careful note ought to be taken of some of the unintended consequences of the English language push should it be framed within a simple neo-liberal framework absent of commitments to a more inclusive economy and of addressing the continued salience of ethnic segmentation in employment. It is important to note that, ‘research finds both correlation and causation relationships between language grievances and threats to social cohesion’ (Bianco 2016, p.2) and this ought to give people pause when assessing the cultural political and economic context of language reform. Language issues can provide fuel for ethnic tension and division. Ethnic and linguistic divisions which beset plural societies do have a potentially negative impact on both economic development and political stability let alone social cohesion. When these divisions compound and solidify into cleavages the effect can help solidify in society ‘a *form of closure of social relationships*’ (Deegan-Krause 2007, p. 2). This can be a contributing factor in reversal of democratic gains

in a society and flash point for conflict. Malaysia has seen what happens in extreme cases of social division conflict and cleavage. Khalid points out:

‘Ultimately, what we want is that the nation be unified, and the gains from economic growth are savoured by all. It bears repetition that the failure to correct economic inequality could shake and jeopardise the stability of a country, the consequences of which could be severe indeed. History is the best teacher: the costly and painful experience of the May 13 riots of 1969, which exploded due unequal distribution of economic growth, should not happen again. It would be far better if these old lessons could be remembered, rather than re-learned.’ (Khalid 2014b)

If the most negative outcome for plural societies is solidification of cleavages across linguistic, cultural and economic lines then the desired outcomes of advancing positive public policy initiatives such as improving the level of English competency in society is fraught and ought to be engaged with an eye on social justice, economic inclusion and addressing the unintended consequences that sometimes flow from policy. Democratic engagement, dialogue and understanding of those whom disagree or fear English language reform may help to dissipate what otherwise may form as a “compounded divide” in society (Bornschieer 2009, p. 3). Compounded divides result when ethnic, economic and institutional forces combine to form persistent and consistent political division in society. If democracy is to be a relevant mediator between the pulls of globalization and the pushes of nationalism in the English language debate, then a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the importance of democracy democratic culture to the debate over language in Malaysia needs to be advanced. This is especially so since the whole issue of English language in Malaysia goes to the heart of issues of social justice, national identity, cultural recognition and social inclusion.

The significance of the English language debate, education and the broader debate over language in Malaysia is critical since, ‘governments, especially but not only through education, can influence whether language issues contribute to social cohesion or continue as causes of social conflict.’ (Lo Bianco & UNICEF 2015, p.9) In other words the approach of governments to the language issue in Malaysia and the way in which this issue can be used to help solidify ethnic divides points to the need for a nuanced approach to the discourse of English language and Malaysian society (Gill 2007, Haque 2003). Language issues are not simply issues of instrumental communication that can be understood context free. As a possible contribution to social and political cleavage, the issue of language can be a unifier in Malaysia and a divider. Given the newness of the ‘new’ Malaysia, addressing language issues with an eye on how they can be politicised to compound what are already existing divides is critical for protecting democratic progress. In the Malaysian context the need to ground language debates around a renewed commitment to social justice and democratic values as well as an understanding of ‘local cultures of learning’ (Azman 2011, p. 115) is central to a successful resolution of the tensions around English language.

Bianco (2017) captures a necessary concern regarding language and social cohesion which is relevant in the Malaysian case. He argues: ‘It is no exaggeration to say that among the most pressing social concerns of the world today are questions of intercultural understanding and civil coexistence. Every effort possible should be invested in mutual understanding, conflict resolution and consensus building. Much more research and practical support to better understand and utilize the critical role of language in conflict mitigation and social cohesion is urgently needed.’ (Bianco 2017) It is especially important that discussions over the English language do not inadvertently reinforce racist stereotypes or enflame racial resentment especially since there are those who would ‘stir... nationalist grievances’ and enflame ‘anxieties’ to fuel ‘backlash’ against the democratic direction of Malaysia (Case 2018). Noor points out what is at stake if we want to avoid sliding into divisive politics or set

of racial fears among those who feel threatened by shifts in policy and culture. In her discussion of Malaysia's current state of affairs, she writes:

'When racism tips over into the slippery slope of castigation, ostracisation, then demonisation of 'the other', then that significantly raises the risk of radicalisation. We are not yet at that tipping point, but the barometer of communalism has risen and fallen enough in the past to warrant sufficient concern. Racism and radicalisation are a process. Their consequences do not manifest overnight. So, the process needs to be checked before the consequences materialise. At the most fundamental level, we need to go back to basics – to respecting, accepting (not just tolerating) and even celebrating differences. Our diversity is not just a tagline. It is both our vulnerability and strength.' (Noor 2018)

It is here that we return to interesting proposals for a renewed social compact in Malaysia, one that draws on the lessons from the past and addresses the excesses of neo-liberalism which are driving division and enflaming inequality. Jomo's argument is relevant to the underlying social, political and economic context that needs to underpin progressive language reform: 'We need a new social compact. We need to have an open discussion on that, not a manipulated discussion. A truly open discussion where you talk to all kinds of people, including people who may have different views' (Zakaria 2018). Framing the language debate in Malaysia within a search for this 'new social compact' and with a real commitment to empathy, mutual understanding and respect is a plausible way forward in the debate over English language in Malaysia. It is a way that can help avoid forcing discussion into one dimensional binaries such as between globalists and nationalists and help contextualize debates over language within a socially just and democratic context which understands the diversity of discourses, interests and fears that make up Malaysia's nation building project. Furthermore, advancing language policy in the context of an empathic commitment to social justice and inclusivity as well as a respect for the national language may also help to ameliorate divisions and their politicization which can have severe effects on Malaysia in its attempt to reform and advance its democratic life. The fact that much of this approach to the English language issue draws upon Malaysian cultural norms and the lessons learnt from its history of social reform may provide policy makers with some further support for change rooted in consensus and 'solidarity-making' building rather than conflict division and cleavage making (Shamsul 2005, p. 7).

CONCLUSION

In this article we have argued that the way to avoid the English language debate from being getting stuck oscillating between the Scylla and Charybdis of nationalist and globalist discourses is to try to move the argument around language to one informed by progressive political economy and democratic theory. The debate over English language can be seen as part of a deeper and broader debate over a 'new social compact' (Zakaria 2018) one that takes seriously the substantive values that Malaysia's earlier nation builders tried to advance and addresses the problems of ethnic polarization and economic inequality that have marred Malaysia's more recent past. These values can be found in the desire on the part of government policy makers who introduced the New Economic Policy to, 'reduce and eventually eradicate poverty, by raising income levels and increasing employment opportunities for all Malaysians a irrespective of race' as well as to accelerate 'the process of restructuring Malaysian society to correct economic imbalance, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic function.' (EPU 1971, p. 1)

Recasting an eye back to the values of Malaysia's nation builders allows us to contextualize the debate over language in renewed principles of social equity and social

justice (Jomo 1989, Jomo 2016). Jomo's argument for a new Malaysian 'social compact similar to the New Economic Policy (NEP) of the 1970s to chart future growth' (Zakaria 2018) at least provides us with the beginnings of a way to frame the argument over English language in Malaysian social and economic development that is free from the excesses of populist nationalist discourse rooted in identity politics and not beholden to the excesses of neoliberal globalization. We should remember for example that a key concern of the national language policy which was viewed as part of a broader reform agenda in Malaysia which included the NEP was not simply communication *per se* but also an attempt to help facilitate Malaysians to 'understand one another's values through a common language.' (Omar 1985, p. 44) Empathy, respect, commitment to social balance and social justice are not simply just for personal and economic advancement but they are also the critical values that can inform the debate over English in Malaysia. These values can form the back bone of a 'new social compact' within which advancing English capability can be advanced.

Interestingly it very well may be that some element of engaging language and social issues has a 'back to the future' feel (Jomo, 2016). Advocates for improvement in English in Malaysia can learn much from the sentiment that informed the earlier nation builders advocacy of Malaysia's national language policy and the new economic policy as well as from its limitations and mistakes. This is so even given the setbacks and unintended consequences that have marred these policies in the public's eye. Finding ways to frame the English language debate in a discourse that does not unintentionally reinforce perceptions of disrespect or ignore the continued problems of economic and social marginalization is of the utmost importance especially given the way the politics of social division and cleavage can derail progressive public policy initiatives in plural societies (Zuckerman 1975, Zuckerman 1982). The key to successful language policy change is to understand each other's values and fears and through this reinforce a new democracy based on inclusivity and respect and justice. Commitment to these values can be found in Malaysia's nation building past, a past that is still present and from which the 'new' Malaysia can still learn.

REFERENCES

- A'Beckett, L. & David, M. K. (2017). *National Language and Social Cohesion: Focus on Ukraine and Malaysia*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of The Fifteenth International Conference on Law and Language of the International Academy of Linguistic Law (IALL2017): Law, Language and Justice, pp. 195-198.
- Annie, M. N. W. & Hamali, J. (2006). Higher education and employment in Malaysia. *International Journal of Business and Society*. Vol. 7(1), 66-76.
- Anon. (2018a). Ministry: Unlawful to use English as medium of instruction in schools. *Malaysia Kini*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/441575>
- Anon. (2018b). 'Strengthening our English doesn't mean forsaking BM'. *Star Newspaper*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from The Star Online website: <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/08/15/strengthening-our-english-doesnt-mean-forsaking-bm/#KMtCG2TSARZhTgJe.99>
- Aun, L. H. (2017). Fault Lines—and Common Ground—in Malaysia's Ethnic Relations and Policies. *ISEAS Perspective*. Vol. 63, 1-9.
- Azman, H. (2004). Global English and English Literacy Education in Malaysia In P. Lee & A. H. Azman (Eds.), *Global English and Primary Schools: Challenges for Elementary Education* (pp.17-29). Melbourne: CAE Press.
- Azman, H. (2009). English in Malaysia: A paradox in rural pluri-literacy practices. *Akademika*. Vol. 76(1), 27-41.
- Azman, H. (2011). English language in rural Malaysia: Situating global literacies in local practices. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature*. Vol. 11, 99-119.
- Barnard, R. & Hasim, Z. (2018). Case study: EMI in a public university in Malaysia. In *English Medium Instruction Programmes* (pp. 29-40) London: Routledge.

- Bianco, J. L. (2016). Conflict, Language Rights, and Education: Building Peace by Solving Language Problems in Southeast Asia, *Language Policy Research Network Brief* (LPREN), April, pp. 1-8.
- Bianco, J. L. (2017). Resolving Ethnolinguistic Conflict in Multi-Ethnic Societies. *Nature Human Behavior*. Vol. 1, 1-3
- Boeke, J. H. (1953). *Economics and Economic Policy of Dual Societies: As Exemplified by Indonesia*. New York: Institute of Pacific Relations.
- Bornschieer, S. (2009). Cleavage Politics in old and new democracies: A review of the literature and avenues for future research, *EUI Working Papers*, MWP2009/07, Florence, European University Institute, pp.1-20.
- Case, William. (2018). Umno's Ethnoreligious Order Is Not Gone — Just Waiting. *East Asia Forum*, Retrieved September 6, 2018 from <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/08/16/umno-ethnoreligious-order-is-not-gone-just-waiting/>.
- Chalil, M., Mohan, C., Mering, R., Zi, T. M. & Cheah, C. (2018). Merdeka in 'New Malaysia': Optimism, sense of achievement in the air. *Malay Mail Online*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from <https://www.malaymail.com/s/1667857/merdeka-in-new-malaysia-optimism-sense-of-achievement-in-the-air>
- David, M. K. & Govindasamy, S. (2005). Negotiating a language policy for Malaysia: Local demand for affirmative action versus challenges from globalization. *Reclaiming the local in language policy and practice*, In S. Canagarajah (ed.). *Reclaiming the Local in Language Policy and Practice* (pp. 123-146). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence, Erlbaum Associates.
- Deegan-Krause, K. (2007). New dimensions of political cleavage. In R. Dalton and H.-D. Klingemann (Eds.). *Oxford handbook of political behaviour* (pp. 538-556). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- EPU. (1971). *The Second Malaysia Plan*. Kuala Lumpur: EPU (Economic Planning Unit): Prime Ministers Department, Malaysian Government.
- Furnivall, J. S. (2010). *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gill, S. K. (2002). Language policy and english language standards in Malaysia nationalism versus pragmatism. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*. Vol. 12(1), 95-115.
- Gill, S. K. (2004). Medium of instruction policy in higher education in Malaysia: Nationalism versus internationalization. In Tollefson, J. W. & Tsui, A. B. (Eds.). *Medium of instruction policies: Which agenda? Whose agenda?* (pp.135-152) London, Routledge.
- Gill, S. K. (2005). Language policy in Malaysia: Reversing direction. *Language Policy*. Vol. 4(3), 241-260.
- Gill, S. K. (2006). Change in Language Policy in Malaysia: The Reality of Implementation in Public Universities. *Current Issues in Language Planning*. Vol. 7(1), 82-94.
- Gill, S. K. (2007). Shift in language policy in Malaysia: Unravelling reasons for change, conflict and compromise in mother-tongue education, *ALIA Review*. Vol. 20, 106-122.
- Gill, S. K. (2013). *Language policy challenges in multi-ethnic Malaysia* (Vol. 8): Springer Science & Business Media.
- Guan, L. H. (2017). *Education and Globalization in Southeast Asia: Issues and Challenges*: Singapore, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Hamid, S. (2018). What Democracies Can Learn From Malaysia. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from The Atlantic website: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/05/malaysia-democracy-najib/560534/>
- Hamilton, A. (2018). Solving Malaysia's problem with English. *Free Malaysia Today*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from FMT News website: <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/06/18/solving-malaysias-problem-with-english/>
- Hanapiah, M. F. (2004). English Language and the language of development: A Malaysia Perspective. *Jurnal kemanusiaan*. Vol. 2(1), 106-120.
- Haque, M. S. (2003). The role of the state in managing ethnic tensions in Malaysia: A critical discourse. *American Behavioral Scientist*. Vol. 47(3), 240-266.
- Ibrahim, A. (2018). Education revamp needs new ideas. *New Straits Times*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from New Straits Times website: <https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters/2018/09/408799/education-revamp-needs-new-ideas>
- Jomo K. S. (1989) Malaysia's new economic policy and national unity. *Third World Quarterly*. Vol. 11(4), 36-53
- Jomo, K. S. (2016). *Back to the Future? Malaysian Lessons from the 1970s*. Paper presented at the Tun Hussein Onn Chair Public Lecture, Kuala Lumpur, Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia.
- Kaur, A., Awang-Hashim, R. & Noman, M. (2017). Defining intercultural education for social cohesion in Malaysian context. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*. Vol. 19(2), 44-60.
- Kaur, K. (1995). Why they need English in Malaysia: A survey. *World Englishes*. Vol. 14(2), 223-230.

- Kaur, M. (2018). Perak Sultan: Growing pains part of Malaysia's path to mature democracy. *The Star Online*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from The Star Online website: <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/07/17/perak-sultan-growing-pains-part-of-malaysia-s-path-to-mature-democracy/>
- Kaur, P. & Shapii, A. (2018). Language and Nationalism in Malaysia: A Language policy Perspective. *International Journal*. Vol. 3(7), 1-10.
- Khalid, M. A. (2014a). *The Colour of Inequality: Ethnicity, Class, Income, and Wealth in Malaysia*. MPH Group Publishing Sdn. Bhd..
- Khalid, M. A. (2014b). The Colour of Inequality: Ethnicity, Class, Income and Wealth in Malaysia. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from <http://sanusijunid.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-colour-of-inequality.html>
- Kok, T. (2018). Need to master English to become global players. *The Star Online*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from Star Online website: <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/letters/2018/08/27/need-to-master-english-to-become-global-players/#RzvUqHaoSWyVsSqB.99>
- Lau, L. (2018). Chat in Malay but also master English, says Dr M. *Malay Mail Online*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from Malay Mail website: <https://www.malaymail.com/s/1664028/chat-in-malay-but-also-master-english-says-dr-m>
- Le Ha, P. Kho, J. & Ch'ng, B. (2013). Nation building, English as an international language, medium of instruction, and language debate: Malaysia and possible ways forward. *Journal of International and Comparative Education (JICE)*, 58-71.
- Lee, H.-A. & Khalid, M. A. (2016). Discrimination of high degrees: race and graduate hiring in Malaysia. *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*. Vol. 21(1), 53-76.
- Lee, H. & Khalid, M. A. (2009). Degrees of Discrimination: Race and Graduate Hiring in Malaysia. Retrieved from http://umexpert.um.edu.my/file/publication/00006071_99752.pdf
- Lim, Ida. (2018a). Pakatan needs Goldilocks approach to reforms, says academic. *Malay Mail Online*, Retrieved September 6, 2018 from <https://www.malaymail.com/s/1637743/pakatan-needs-goldilocks-approach-to-reforms-says-academic>.
- Lim, Ida. (2018b). Forum Sees Risk of Umno Doubling Down on Communalism, Embracing Pas. *Malay Mail Online*, Retrieved September 6, 2018 from <https://www.malaymail.com/s/1637750/forum-sees-risk-of-umno-doubling-down-on-communalism-embracing-pas>.
- Lo Bianco, J. & UNICEF. (2015). Synthesis report: Language, education and social cohesion (LESC) initiative in Malaysia Myanmar and Thailand. Bangkok: UNICEF EAPRO.
- Lowe, V. & Khattab, U. (2003) Malaysian language planning and cultural rights in the face of a global world. In A. Goonasekera, C. Hamelink & V. Iyer (Eds.) *Cultural Rights in a Global World* (pp. 217–22). Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.
- Mandal, S. K. (2000). Reconsidering cultural globalization: The English language in Malaysia. *Third World Quarterly*. Vol. 21(6), 1001-1012.
- Martin, P. (2005). Safe language practices in two rural schools in Malaysia: Tensions between policy and practice. In Angel Lin and Peter Martin (eds.) *Decolonisation, Globalisation: Language-in-Education Policy and Practice* (75-99.) Clevedon, U.K.: Multilingual Matters.
- Mohd-Asraf, R. (2005). English and Islam: A clash of civilizations? *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*. Vol. 4(2), 103-118.
- Nair, Gopala Krishnan Sekharan, Rozlan Abdul Rahim, Roszainora Setia, Norhayati Husin, Elangkeeran Sabapathy, Nur Amalia Abd Jalil, Razifa Mohd Razlan, Razita Mohamad, Shahidatul Maslina Mat So'od, and Nurul Izatee Md Yusoff (2012). Malaysian Graduates English Adequacy in the Job Sector. *Asian Social Science*. Vol. 8(4), 143-147.
- Nair, M. (2018). Yes, Malay is important but don't neglect English and Mandarin. *FMT News*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from FMT news website: <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2018/08/07/yes-malay-is-important-but-dont-neglect-english-and-mandarin/?fnt=1>
- Noor, E. (2018). Building a New Malaysia - Part 2: Nation building. *The Peak*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from The Peak website: <http://thepeak.com.my/people/building-a-new-malaysia-part-2-nation-building/>
- Omar, A. H. (1979). *Language planning for unity and efficiency: A study of the language status and corpus planning of Malaysia*: Kuala Lumpur, Penerbit Universiti Malaya.
- Omar, A. H. (1982). *Language and society in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Omar, A. H. (1985). The Language Policy of Malaysia: A Formula for Balanced Pluralism. In D. Bradley (Ed.), *Papers in South East Asian Linguistics* (pp. 39-49). Canberra: ANU Printing Service.
- Omar, A. H. (1998). "Language Planning and Image Building: The Case of Malay in Malaysia". *International Journal of The Sociology of Language: Linguistic Issues of Southeast Asia*. 130. pp. 49-65.
- Ooi, H. (2018). In Malaysia, a Win for Democracy. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from The Diplomat website: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/in-malaysia-a-win-for-democracy/>

- Ozóg, C. K. (1990). The English language in Malaysia and its relationship with the national language. In R. B. Jr. Baldauf, & A. Luke (Eds.), *Planning language and education in Australasia and the South Pacific* (pp. 305-318) Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Pennycook, A. (2002). *English and the discourses of colonialism*: London Routledge.
- Pirozzi, G. & Bianco, J. L. (2016). *Synthesis Report: Language Education and Social Cohesion (LESC) Initiative in Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand*. Bangkok: EAPRO/UNICEF.
- Pope, M., Musa, M., Singaravelu, H., Bringaze, T. & Russell, M. (2002). From colonialism to ultranationalism: History and development of career counseling in Malaysia. *The Career Development Quarterly*. Vol. 50(3), 264-276.
- Puteh, A. (2010). The language medium policy in Malaysia: A plural society model? *Review of European Studies*. Vol. 2(2), 192-200.
- Rashid, Radzuwan AB, Shireena Basree Abdul Rahman, and Kamariah Yunus. (2017). Reforms in the Policy of English Language Teaching in Malaysia. *Policy Futures in Education*. Vol. 15, 100-112.
- Ridge, B. (2004). Bangsa Malaysia and recent Malaysian English language policies. *Current issues in language planning*. Vol. 5(4), pp. 407-423.
- Saad, I. (1980). *Competing identities in a plural society: The case of Peninsular Malaysia*: Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Salleh, H. (2000). Globalization and the challenges to Malay nationalism as the essence of Malaysian nationalism. *Nationalism and globalization: East and West*. 132-174.
- Salleh, K. M., Sulaiman, N. L. & Talib, K. N. (2010). *Globalisation's impact on soft skills demand in the Malaysian workforce and organisations: What makes graduates employable*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 1 st UPI International Conference on Technical and Vocational Education and Training. (pp. 10–11). Bandung, Indonesia.
- Selvaratnam, V. (2018). Our glaring English deficiency is too big to ignore. *Malaysia Kini*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/440643>
- Shamsul, A. B. (1996). Nations-of-Intent in Malaysia. In S. Tonnesson and H. Antlov (Eds.), *Asian Forms of the Nation* (pp. 323-347). Richmond: Curzon.
- Shamsul, A. B. (2005). The construction and management of pluralism: Sharing the Malaysian experience. *ICIP Journal*, 2(1), 1-14.
- Shamsul, A. B. (2009). Managing a Stable Tension: Ethnic Relations in Malaysia Reexamined. In Nungsari Ahmad Radhi and Suryani Senja Alias (Eds.), *Readings on Development: Malaysia 2057: Uncommon Voices, Common Aspirations* (pp.1-25) Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Nasional.
- Shukri, S. F. M. (2017). The Role of Ethnic Politics in Promoting Democratic Governance: A Case Study of Malaysia. *Intellectual Discourse*. Vol. 25(2), 321-329.
- Siddique, S. & Suryadinata, L. (1981). Bumiputra and pribumi: Economic nationalism (indiginism) in Malaysia and Indonesia. *Pacific Affairs*. Vol. 54(4), 662-687.
- Singh, H. (2001). Ethnic conflict in Malaysia revisited. *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*. Vol. 39(1), 42-65.
- Sua, T. Y. & Santhiram, R. (2017). Globalization, Educational Language Policy and Nation-Building in Malaysia. In Lee Hock Guan (Ed). *Education and Globalization in Southeast Asia: Issues and Challenges*. Vol. 36, 36-58. Singapore, ISEAS.
- Tan, P. K. (2005). The medium-of-instruction debate in Malaysia: English as a Malaysian language? *Language Problems and Language Planning*. Vol. 29(1), 47-66.
- Tham, S. C. (1990). *A study of the evolution of the Malay language: Social change and cognitive development*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Thomas, M. & Thompson, A. (2014). Empire and Globalisation: from 'High Imperialism' to Decolonisation. *The International History Review*. Vol. 36(1), 142-170. doi:10.1080/07075332.2013.828643
- Tsui, A. B. & Tollefson, J. W. (2017a). The Construction of National Identity and Globalization in Multilingual Malaysia. In *Language Policy, Culture, and Identity in Asian Contexts* (pp. 65-82): London, Routledge.
- Tsui, A. B. & Tollefson, J. W. (2017b). Language policy and the construction of national cultural identity. In *Language policy, culture, and identity in Asian contexts* (pp. 11-32): London, Routledge.
- Tsui, A. B. & Tollefson, J. W. (2017c). *Language policy, culture, and identity in Asian contexts*: London, Routledge.
- Tunku Zain Al'Abidin. (2017). On Malaysian English. *IDEAS*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from <http://www.ideas.org.my/on-malaysian-english/>
- Wai, W. C. (2015). The sad state of English in Malaysia. *The Jakarta Post*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from The Jakarta Post website: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/06/22/the-sad-state-english-malaysia.html>
- Weiss, M. (2018). Malaysia after GE14: transition to what? *New Mandala*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from New Mandala website: <http://www.newmandala.org/malaysia-ge14-transition/>

- Yahya, Z., Ibrahim, N., Ramli, R., Yusof, N. M. & Othman, Z. (2017). Your Language My Culture My Language (YLMC): Developing a Local-Culture ELT Matrix for Schools in Terengannu, Malaysia. *Kajian Malaysia*. Vol. 35(2), 39-66.
- Yeoh, J. & Yeoh, P. (2018). Competitiveness between Ethnic Malays and Ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. *GSTF Journal of Psychology (JPsych)* . Vol. 2(1), 16-21.
- Zakaria, W. I. M. (2018). Malaysia needs new social compact similar to NEP of 1970s: Economist. *The Sun Daily*. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2018/01/21/malaysia-needs-new-social-compact-similar-nep-1970seconomist>
- Zuckerman, A. (1975). Political cleavage: A conceptual and theoretical analysis. *British Journal of Political Science*. Vol. 5(2), 231-248.
- Zuckerman, A. (1982). New approaches to political cleavage: A theoretical introduction. *Comparative Political Studies*. Vol. 15(2), 131-144.