# THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM OF NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MALAYSIA (UKM)

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study is to identify is to investigate the importance of conducting education using English medium in the National University of Malaysia. The main reason to this was because public universities such as UKM conducted the courses using the Bahasa Malaysia, the national language. This study also aims to investigate This study aims to investigate the importance of changes made in terms of language in a higher educational institution and its impact on the university as well as to find out the challenges faced due to the change in language in the education of university and to explore the ways to improve the acceptability rate of English as the second language. This study is considered essential because a big change can be seen in the trend of higher education system due to the needs of tradition and nationalism. The researcher also believes that this study is vital because the change in language in UKM was only successful in 2002 after the failure of the first attempt of the change back in 1993. A qualitative research involved two different methods of collecting the information. The first approach is the direct interaction with the individuals on a one-to-one basis. On the other hand, the second approach is the direct interaction with individuals placed in a group setting. In this research, the researcher seeks for obtaining both primary and secondary data. For the secondary data, sources like books and e-books, online and offline journal articles, publication were referred to. As far as the collection of primary data is concerned, the researcher conducted interviews with the respondents and inquire them about the issues which are being addressed in the research.*

## INTRODUCTION

The higher education of different countries is going through various phases and trends because of globalization. There are changes in the higher education system because of an open information environment. This environment comprises of crossing the national identities and borders and diversification. Institutions and organizations of higher education in each country are constantly changing to attain recognition and quality (Marginson, 2006). English has been swiftly growing in institution of higher education around the world. As mentioned by Rubdy and Tan (2008), English has gained emphasis in Asia as a political, cultural, commercial, and intellectual resource. Program and products inclusive of the English language are assumed to be more advantageous and authoritative in the international labour market. For instance, the use of English as a medium of teaching in its graduate program of Graduate School of Engineering, Hokkaido University has played an essential role in internationalization of the education itself (Werawan, 2007). Therefore, the growing role of English in the modern educational world is one of the most significant characteristics of internationalism. In this chapter, the researcher has discussed some of the essential elements upon which the entire study is based. These elements are inclusive of background of the university chosen for this study, statement of problem, objectives of the study and the statement of significance.

## Background of the National University of Malaysia

The National University of Malaysia or Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in Malay is a public higher education institute situated in Bangi. Bangi is a small town in the district of Selangor, and its location is 35km south of Kuala Lumpur. This university has a teaching hospital as well as one more branch in Kuala Lumpur. Overall, there are approximately 5,100 postgraduate students and 17,500 undergraduate students. There are 1,368 foreign students in UKM from 35 different countries (Post Grad Malaysia, 2015). UKM is a national university and is a result of the aspirations and ambitions of nationalists in Malaysia's early history. The main aim of this university is to encourage The Malay Language as the language that displays knowledge in the country. In 2006, UKM won the Prime Minister's Quality Award that indicates the efforts of the institute towards quality management and education. In 2014, the QS World University Rankings ranked UKM at number 259 in the world. In the last 50 years, UKM is considered as the 98th best university out of the 100 new universities established. This university is the only one from Malaysia which took place in QS Top 50 Universities ranking in 2012. Recently, UKM implemented a strategic plan named UKM Strategic Plan 2020 (PS2020). This plan intends to transform UKM as a leading research-based university by the end of 2018 (National University of Malaysia, 2015).

## Statement of Problem

The problem of this study is to investigate the importance of conducting education using English medium in the National University of Malaysia. The main reason to this was that public universities such as UKM conducted the courses using the Bahasa Malaysia, the national language of Malaysia. According to a study by Gill (2007), the students from private educational institutions were in higher demand as compared to the students of public universities. This is because private universities in Malaysia used English as the language to

conduct their courses. In the light of Puteh (2010), the Malaysian educational institutions including UKM realized the importance of English language in communication. Therefore, there were initiations regarding the integration of English as the MOI for technical studies in secondary courses.

## Research Objectives

Research objectives assist the researcher in not getting distracted from the prime focus (Cooper & Schindler (2006). Realizing this importance, the researcher has set some imperative objectives for the current research study as well. This study aims to

- investigate the importance of changes made in terms of language in a higher educational institution and its impact on the university.

- find out the challenges faced due to the change in language in the education of university.

- explore the ways to improve the acceptability rate of English as the second language.

All the objectives that have been stated above are formed by keeping in mind each and every mandatory aspect of the topic of this research. The major focus of the researcher is to understand the importance of conducting education in English and the challenges that arise due to this implementation.

## Statement of Significance

According to the researcher, this study is considered essential because a big change can be seen in the trend of higher education system due to the needs of tradition and nationalism. The researcher also believes that this study is vital because the change in language in UKM was only successful in 2002 after the failure of the first attempt of the change back in 1993. Therefore, the researcher finds that this change is important as it supports the theory mentioned by Marginson (2006) in the introduction.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the researcher takes into account and reviews the valuable work of past researchers. In other words, all the secondary information and data that has been accumulated in regards to the study done are being discussed.

## Initiation of Change

The increase in foreign companies in Malaysia indicated that the educational reform of the country needs improvement. The foreign companies which relied heavily on English as the basic communication language required a supply of skilled workers. The lack of available workers fluent in the English language signified that Malaysian universities had to produce

better students in the professional field (Malakolunthu & Rengasamy, 2012). The change of language which was a part of Wawasan 2020 or Vision 2020, an idea introduced by the Malaysian Prime Minister in 1991 Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, initiated this plan to unite the nation towards the achievement of a goal, i.e. Malaysia as an industrialized nation by 2020. Vision 2020 comprised of different aspects such as social well-being, economic prosperity, political stability and world-class education (Beng, 2006). Moreover, a study by Ahmed (2006) indicated that Malaysia's workforce is P-economy based, whereas, the international organization demands K-economy workforce. P-economy is the demand of workforce which is disciplined and brawn-intensive. On the other hand, K-economy requires the workforce that is creative, brain intensive and innovative. The rise in the K-economy business environment has encouraged the institutional organizations to plan the language change for the students. Moreover, it is observed that the shift from a poor K-economy workforce to a high-level K-economy workforce has to be dramatic and rapid. Therefore, the educational institutes planned the change of language from Malay to the English language.

**The Implementation of Change**

The purpose of implementing change of language in the educational institutions was to develop the economy of Malaysia. The change implementation was carried out on different levels in the educational institutes. The students were required to learn secondary subjects such as science and mathematics in the English language (Musa, Lie & Azman, 2012). In the opinion of Zubairi and Sarudin (2009), Malaysian institutes use MUET (Malaysian University English Test), a prerequisite for admission, to measure the proficiency of the students. Like IELTS and TOEFL for academic institutions around the world, MUET is used by Malaysian educational institutions. The purpose of using an admission test in the English language is to determine the efficiency of the student in a global language. As mentioned by Rethinasamy and Chuah (2011), MUET requires the students to perform to their ability in order to achieve their academic pursuits by having a good command of the English language. The idea of developing Malaysia in the world is more likely to take place if there is use of the English language in communication as well as teaching.

**Challenges of Implementation**

The implementation of English language as the medium to teach the students in public universities in Malaysia had to face certain challenges. There are three reasons why this policy and change was considered a failure among the students as well as professors. Firstly, the implementation of English language was termed as a gimmick by the politicians handling the Ministry of Education. The intention of the policy was unclear and vague as it failed to determine exactly how the language could improve the development of a country (Guan, 2007). Secondly, the critical mass in Malaysia failed to acknowledge the positive impacts of implementing the English language in universities. The policy failed to achieve support from the students and the teachers. Moreover, the parents of the students boycotted the policy as they believed their cultural and traditional values were being challenged (Brown, 2007). Lastly, the policy failed to have the intended effect. This failure is linked with the policy based on invalid evidence or information, or the policy based on an invalid theoretical model. The policy was also based on lack of sufficient information such as unclear idea about teachers and their payroll is one factor leading to minimum impact. On

the other hand, policy based on the invalid model is the educational expansion on manpower requirements (Puteh, 2010).

## Challenges in the Teaching and Learning Process

Besides that, there were emotional as well as physical reactions from the students. For instance, learners showed physical reactions such as discomfort and uneasiness in their English language classes. The students displayed a lack of confidence, nervousness and physical changes in that one specific class (Andrade & Williams, 2009). Another study by Noor Hashimah (2007) resulted in students who were less familiar with the English language showing more nervousness as compared to those who were familiar. Moreover, such students were passive and reserved in the English language classes. This study also showed that there were students who gained access to the use of English language in the classrooms only. In the light of Liu and Huang (2011), few of the students were more worried about their relation with the teachers as they feared being negatively evaluated. The individual pointing out of the mistakes by the instructor was another worrying factor for the students as it could increase their personal embarrassment.

## Potential Issues in a Trend

The trend of implementing a new language can pave the way for further potential issues jeopardizing the unity of the nation. In Malaysia, each ethnic group has a high regard for its race and considers another ethnic background as a competition. The experiences and history of each ethnic background have made it difficult for the government of Malaysia to create an image of common destiny. Since its independence in 1957, Malaysia has been home to Indian, Chinese and Malay people fighting with each other over their cultural values. The acceptance of English language as a secondary or official language can give birth to more problems and challenges (Canagarajah, 2015). In the light of Puteh (2010), a student who has a weak English language background is not given admission to the private universities. Despite being the official language, Bahasa Malaysia is still not practically implemented. The diversified culture and ethnic background has resulted in hindrance of building a national identity.

There are two conditions through which educational institutes can minimize the failure of implementing educational changes. First of all, the policy developed by the authorities should be feasible and concrete in terms of objectives. There should be a specific timetable and authentic and reliable financial sources. Secondly, the basis of language change should be a concrete research, and not based on intuition or goodwill. The opinions of stakeholders of the universities and other educational institutes should have been taken into consideration before the implementation (Puteh, 2010). In the light of Today (2013), the English language should be taught in the educational institutes as the second language. The students should be indicated that it is not essential for them to speak like and Englishman completely. However, they should know the basic knowledge of the language and can distinguish the meaning of different words.

**Factors of Sustainability**

There are different factors included in the education sector that leads to sustainable development in a country. The education for sustainable development (ESD) comprises of different processes that emphasize the need for developing a sustainable future. These processes use an integrated, holistic and interdisciplinary approach to developing skills and knowledge required for a sustainable future. Moreover, these processes are used by educational institutes to change the behaviour, values, and lifestyles of the individuals. The change in the language in educational institutes such as UKM was an attempt to improve the sustainability of the country. Such changes in the education systems, practices and policies help in empowering everyone included in the process. These people, whether young or old, have more capability of making decisions and acting in locally and culturally appropriate ways. For instance, a student who has proficiency in the English language is more likely to interact with international delegates as compared to professionals with low command over the language. Similarly, the changes in education system help the individuals in addressing the problems that threaten the future of the country (Kirchhoff, 2010). In the view of Venkataraman (2009), EDS helps the students in different education institutes to value and respect other languages in the world. Moreover, it also helps in learning how different languages can be used to exercise the rights on an international language. This study presents a new vision of education in the institutes as well as assisting in understanding the world in a better way. Students who have access to foreign languages are likely to address global issues such as poverty, environmental degradation, violation of human rights, etc.

**Considerations for a Change**

The advent of globalization and internationalization of businesses have resulted in various concerns regarding ethical issues with respect to languages. The ethical issues of revitalizing endangered languages persist in the society and countries where the language spoken is not well-known in international forums. Moreover, the students in different educational institutes have the responsibility towards individuals as well as the communities (O'Meara & Good, 2010). For instance, Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia do not consider English as an important language as it is against their cultural values. They believe including English in the curriculum will create differences in the nation leading to a disunited country. The notion of having a strong community with one language prevailing in the country is one ethical issue that stakeholders have to deal with extensively. Secondly, Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) highlight the ethical issue in the change initiative of language in Malaysia. The change in the languages can result in different perspectives among the students. For instance, the concept of equality is different in America, whereas, equality is perceived differently in Malaysia and other Asian countries. Similarly, the act of bribery is illegal in Western countries, whereas in Asia, giving gifts in business is considered an acceptable factor. Therefore, the initiative of language change faces the ethical issue of changing the perspective of the way a nation thinks.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research based on any topic and subject requires the researcher to collect measure and evaluate the information to reach an authentic conclusion. Data collection process helps a researcher in establishing a systematic procedure for answering the research questions. Moreover, it is essential for a researcher to collect information so that developed hypotheses are tested (Sapsford & Jupp, 2006). In the light of Dörnyei (2007), a qualitative research involves two different methods of collecting the information. The first approach is the direct interaction with the individuals on a one-to-one basis. On the other hand, the second approach is the direct interaction with individuals placed in a group setting. As observed by Gummesson (2006), the data collection method of qualitative research such as case study is time-consuming as well as expensive. Therefore, most researchers prefer collecting information from a smaller sample and authentic source. In contrast to this, Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2010) stated that qualitative approach is beneficial for attaining rich information and bringing extensive insights as results. In this section, the researcher states the methods and techniques on the basis of which the required data has been gathered. Apart from the collection methods, this section also includes the techniques via which the attained data is evaluated and assessed.

## Data Collection and Integrity of Data

Data collection methods differ from research to research depending upon the nature of the study. This means that the collection methods for quantitative and qualitative data are different (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). In this research, the researcher seeks to obtain both primary and secondary data. For the secondary data, sources like books and e-books, online and offline journal articles and publications were referred to. As far as the collection of primary data is concerned, the researcher conducted interviews with the respondents and inquired them about the issues which are being addressed in the research. The respondents were asked 8 questions related to this study. This interview method has helped the researcher in the observing of the attitude and behaviour and experiences of the educators in a better way. In order to analyse the responses obtained from the interview, the researcher has incorporated the technique of ethnographic content analysis. It is believed that this specific method will provide a platform to carry out the complete analysis effectively and efficiently.

## Research Design

Research design comprises of all the ground rules of methodology. This section emphasizes the sample size and sampling technique that has been used in approaching the respondents.

## Sampling Technique

Sampling techniques were formed by the researcher to make it suitable for the researchers to approach the respondents. The sampling techniques are broadly divided into two categories which are probability and non-probability sampling techniques. These techniques are however further divided into multiple sub-techniques such as convenience sampling, quota sampling, random sampling and snowball sampling (Saunders, Saunders, Lewis &

Thornhill, 2011). In the view of Handcock and Gile (2011), snowball sampling technique is convenient for the researcher in gaining access to the sample size. Unlike representative sampling that requires the sample to belong to a specific setting, snowball sampling is developed through personal contact. Therefore, the researcher of this study uses snowball sampling to reach the teachers and instructors of UKM. In a nutshell, the data of this qualitative study is collected through interviews with 20 teachers and professors in UKM on the basis of snowball sampling.

**Sample Size**

According to Post Grad Malaysia, (2015), UKM is home to more than 7,500 supporting staff and 2,200 academicians, which include the teachers. For the purpose of this study, the data is collected through interviews from the teachers who have more understanding of the national language of Malaysia. As this qualitative research is likely to consume much time, the sample size selected for this study is 20 teachers and professors who were affected during the implementation of language change in the university education system.

**ANALYSIS OF DATA**

This section of the study tends to analyse the findings that has been obtained from the interview session. The researcher has made the use of ethnographic content analysis for the assessment of the attained responses. Detailed assessment of the interview responses has been done below.

**The Importance of Language Factor**

The first question asked the teachers of UKM about their opinion regarding the importance of language as a factor in developing the economy. The majority of the teachers considered language as a critical aspect of the development of the country. One professor stated that "*In my opinion, language is important as it unites the nation that ultimately leads to economic and social development.*" On the other hand, few of the teachers believed that language is irrelevant to the development of the country. One teacher mentioned "*The thinking process of students can be changed irrespective of the country he/she lives in or language he/she speaks. An American can express his/her point of view as clearly as a Chinese can.*" However, a study by Lotbinière (2011) concluded that language can increase the earning power of an individual. Therefore, an individual needs to gain access to English to be stable in the globalized economy.

**Education in Reaching Vision 2020**

According to Lechner and Boli (2014), Malaysia's Vision 2020 indicates that the country has to overcome nine different challenges. The first challenge is to establish a united nation based on the Malaysian race. The second challenge is to create a secure, developed and liberated society in Malaysia. The third challenge puts emphasis on developing and fostering a mature democratic society. The next four challenges are about establishing an ethical, tolerant, progressive, and caring society. The eighth challenge is ensuring a fair and

equitable society, whereas the last challenge is to establish a prosperous society. This study asked the teachers and professors in UKM industry about the role of education in Malaysia's Vision 2020. 17 professors indicated that education is the least important factor in the vision. A teacher stated "*I believe education has a low emphasis in the Vision 2020 for the purpose of economic growth of the country.*" The rest of the sample size indicated that education is an inbuilt factor present in the vision.

**The Effectiveness of English in Career Development and Development of Country**

The samples of this study were asked the question whether they consider English as an effective language for the career development of the students. Most of the professors and teachers stated that students can improve their skills by learning English as a language. A professor commented, "*In my opinion, English is a global language that should be taught to the students. Considering the opportunities of international companies present in the business environment, the English language can help the students in achieving their career goals.*" In contrast to this, few of the professors were completely against the idea of integrating English in the course. For instance, a teacher stated "*The use of English language in teaching and communication can create a barrier for the Malaysians to act as one nation. Encouraging them to use English for career development is useless as they should promote their language.*"

According to Kieran, Krainer and Shaughnessy (2013), teachers are considered the stakeholders of an educational institute because of three reasons. Firstly, teachers are involved in reflective and inquiry-based activities, and secondly, teachers are significant in assisting the students during their research. Lastly, teachers are stakeholders as they have dynamic duality for increasing their experience and knowledge in a different area of expertise. The professors of UKM had different opinions regarding the English language being a vital tool for growth and development of the country. The answers of most of the professors were near this statement "*As a stakeholder, I believe the English language is essential for the success and development of the country. However, old traditions and customs have to be negated in the process leading to a complex issue.*" On the other hand, a few professors discouraged the idea and considered social value more important. For instance, a professor stated "*It is not essential for a nation to develop on the basis of language. There are other critical factors that can lead a country to development and success.*"

**Challenges Faced in Implementing English Medium**

The professors of UKM were asked whether they think that staff of the University was against the implementation of English as the medium of instruction. 15 professors of the university agreed that the teachers and staff of UKM were against the implementation of English language. One professor stated "*Most of the teachers and professors belong to a certain mind-set where accepting a new language can be difficult. Therefore, for them, accepting the English language as MOI was against the culture.*" In contrast to this, a few professors indicated that the staff was not against the implementation but did respond to it in a positive manner. For instance, a professor mentioned "*In my point of view, young professors and teachers were more welcoming to the idea of having the English language as MOI.*"

Adding to that, the professors and teachers also revealed that the implementation of English language gave way to internal conflicts in the organization. According to a professor "*The process of implementing the English Language as MOI resulted in various issues and conflicts between the professors. For instance, one professor was against the implementation, whereas, the other agreed to it. This issue created an environment of hostility among the professors.*" Only a few of the professors stated that implementation of English language was beneficial for the organization. A professor stated "*In my opinion, implementation of English language made it clear to the people belonging to diversified backgrounds that they need to stay united. Therefore, this implementation was advantageous rather than a source of the problem.*"

**The Outcome of the Implementation and Improvement for Future**

The professors and teachers of UKM were asked whether they believed that change in the language enabled the students to access more knowledge than before. The majority of the professors signified that change in the language did help the students in gaining more knowledge. According to one of the professors "*The change in the language from Malay to English has assisted the students in identifying terminologies in another language. The increase in the use of the internet has helped the students in learning more about the subjects because of its availability.*" However, there were a few professors who criticized this step and stated that this change is futile as the students are more likely to get confused. A professor opinionated "*I believe the inclusion of English language can increase the confusion of the students who have little or no command over the English language.*"

As observed by Kolb and Kolb (2005), educational institutes can use Vygotsky's Social Development Theory for constructing positive behaviours of the teachers and students. This theory states that social interactions among people lead to development. The teachers of UKM were asked to suggest ways through which the university can improve the acceptability rate of English as the second language. There were three basic recommendations provided by 16 professors, whereas the rest of the professors stated there is no need of promoting the English language. The first idea was "*In my opinion, the students of universities should be asked to learn the language since their childhood. For this purpose, parents have to play an essential role in signifying the importance of the language to their children.*" The following statement was the basis of the second idea, "*I believe the increase in the school time of students is one technique through which acceptability rate of the English language can be increased.*" The third and the last idea was that "*In my perspective, acceptability rate of the English language can be improved by making English a compulsory subject at the tertiary level.*"

**CONCLUSION**

This case study assessed the implications of a change in the educational institute. For the purpose of this assignment, the case of the National University of Malaysia (UKM) is being researched where the top management decided to include English as the medium of instruction in education. The main aim of taking this step was to put emphasis on the development of the country under the country's Vision 2020. The case study indicated the process through which data is collected from 20 professors of the selected educational institute. The study extensively explained the change initiative and the reason for planning

such a change in the organization. This case also highlighted the importance and challenges of implementing the change. Most of the professors, on the basis of their value of culture, believed that this change initiative was unacceptable. The case signified the challenges of the implementation process that gave way to further issues. Moreover, this research shed light on the perspective of the stakeholders, i.e. the teachers and professors of UKM and provided ways of improving the change.

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**Appendix: Interview Questions**
Question 1: *In your opinion, is the language in education essential for the overall development of a country?*
Question 2: *Do you think education is an important factor in Malaysia's Vision 2020?*
Question 3: *In your point of view, is teaching the students in English effective for their career development?*
Question 4: *Do you believe the change of language to English enabled the students to access more knowledge than before?*
Question 5: *Why do you think the staffs are against the implementation of English as MOI?*
Question 6: *What do you think were the most challenging issues that took place because of the change in language?*
Question 7: *As a stakeholder of the university, do you consider English as language vital for the growth and development of the country?*
Question 8: *What do you think can be done in order to improve the acceptability rate of English as the second language?*