
The Competitive Edge of Bilingualism on the Job Market

Ain Nadzimah Abdullah
Rosli Talif

Department of English Language
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Introduction

The social environment in Malaysia is not made up of one basic language and culture. As a result, bilingualism as a phenomenon is widespread and stands out as a feature which characterizes the lives of most Malaysians. In fact, no less than seventy languages belonging to different families of Austro-Asiatic and Austronesian stock are spoken in Malaysia. (Wong and Thambyrajah, 1981).

Malaysia is a country where linguistic communities live side by side and for decades has striven to foster unity through allowing the use of minority and indigenous languages. These linguistic differences have not affected national

harmony but have increased Malaysia's cultural and communal divisions to one of "varied" unity. Although none of these languages is regarded as official or national, their use is welcome. This presents linguistic, cultural and intellectual enrichment resources for the nation.

Language is seen as a political force which can unify or threaten to split a country. Language diversity should not lead to language conflict, ethnic hostility and political separatism. Thus, the Malaysian constitution is not silent on language status and role. Bahasa Malaysia (BM) has been legislated as the national and official language as the government believes that a key to unity for a polyglot group of people is to establish a language of mutual understanding. Policy planners have put in place an educational infrastructure to ensure that each and every Malaysian will be able to speak this common tongue (BM) and thus become integrated into Malaysian society. Bahasa Malaysia would then have performed a unifying function.

Meanwhile, English is the second most important language for Malaysia as it is the undisputed lingua franca of the world and its use is indispensable. English provides a shared foundation for people from every corner of the world to come together. Technological advances, changing global roles, and the realization that English is the language for wider communication have also created a need for the government to actively promote BM and English-knowing bilingualism. English-knowing bilingualism is a term first used by Kachru (1982) to illustrate a country's preference for using English as a "working language."

There is a necessity in Malaysia to master both BM and English. We should not view this issue as being a competition where the development of one language jeopardizes the other. Positive consequences for one does not imply negative consequences for the other as no country will downplay its own language (Asiaweek, June 16, 1995). Promoting BM and English-knowing bilingualism does not advocate development and maintenance of English at the expense of BM. Therefore, perceptions towards bilingualism should be positive as the bilingual is able to achieve and contribute more towards the development of the nation.

What is Bilingualism?

The term bilingualism is from Latin, *bi* meaning two, *lingua* for tongue and *alism* as in nationalism. In contrast to monolingualism, bilingualism involves the ability to make alternate (and sometimes, mixed) use of two languages. Being bilingual allows one to have access to a range of resources. There are actually many definitions of bilingualism, some of which are incorrect and based on myth. A person does not, for example, have to speak both languages with equal fluency and possess native-like competence in two languages to be considered a bilingual. Hamers and Blanc (1989) define bilinguality as the psychological state of an individual who has access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication.

It is very common for bilinguals, even those who have been bilinguals since birth, to be somewhat dominant in one language. There are no clearly defined levels of bilinguality. Instead, they lie on a continuum, ranging from the passive, dominant to balanced bilingual.

A passive bilingual is a person who is a native speaker in one language and is capable of understanding but not speaking another language. A dominant bilingual is a person who is more proficient (in most cases native-like) in one of the two languages. A balanced bilingual is someone who is more or less equally proficient in both languages, but will not necessarily pass for a native speaker in both languages. However, an equilingual bilingual is one who possesses native-like ability in both languages, i.e. he or she is indistinguishable from a native speaker.

The form of bilingualism being promoted by the government in Malaysia is likened to dominant bilingualism, involving BM and English. BM is the dominant language as it is the medium of instruction at all levels of education in the country. English is stated in the education policy as the second most important language in the country. This is for pragmatic purposes.

The Problem

The use of two languages (BM and English) in Malaysia should be complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Being bilingual in both BM and En-

English should be seen to increase earning power, provide individuals with flexibility to take advantage of job opportunities while allowing one to acquire more marketable skills to facilitate access to today's competitive job market. The bilingual situation should be one of co-existence, regarded as an asset and not a liability.

Employers in Malaysia see BM-English bilingualism as an important tool for commercial development since it can open doors to new markets. This linguistic infrastructure enhances bilingual communications and is a big selling point as it allows for tremendous opportunity in the marketing of goods and services. Malaysia's bilinguality provides the country with visibility on the international scene, thus allowing us to communicate and conduct business with people from virtually anywhere in the world. Employers recognize the profitability of bilingualism because the existence of a bilingual workforce represents tremendous economic potential.

Bilingualism seems to provide economic profitability. There is also a broad consensus that assumes that being bilingual is similar to the possession of a capital good or a form of human capital. Being bilingual is assumed to be like a capital good because the benefits it yields flow over extended periods of time. In fact, the value of the asset appreciates with use.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate perceptions towards BM-English knowing bilingualism and its profitability for executive-level employees in the job market. Knowing both BM and English in Malaysia promote the ability to communicate and interact with a wide range of people and allows one to gain access to knowledge sources thus bringing social, cognitive, and economic advantages to a person.

Procedure

Instrument

A telephone interview survey involving 15 national and multinational organizations in the Klang Valley, Malaysia was conducted. The organizations are involved in manufacturing, oil and gas, banking, telecommunications, media, legal, and the service industry. The survey consists of five parts. (1) designation of the respondent in the organization, (2) use of English in the organization, (3) hiring of staff, (4) perceptions towards bilingualism, and (5) further comments.

Sample Population

There were 15 respondents in the study who included senior human resource personnel involved in the recruitment of executives for their own organization. They are also responsible for policy making, training, compensation and benefits.

Discussion of Findings

Use of English

All the respondents in this study stated that English is used in their organization both in the oral and written form. They also noted that English is used in the following situations: at meetings, for both internal and external correspondences, communication among employees, and with clients. However, they also indicated that BM would be used when dealing with the government as it is the official and national language. Although not all jobs within each organisation require fluency in both BM and English, possessing the ability is a definite advantage and often becomes the decisive factor for employment.

It is universally acknowledged that incidences of monolingualism among language users are definitely smaller compared to those of bilingualism. This numerical imbalance of bilinguals to monolinguals is expected to get even larger due to increasing international trade and travel, and the growing use of

international communication and technological networks. It has also been said that in some parts of the world, the borders between countries are effectively disappearing. For organizations with international concerns, having a bilingual workforce therefore seems necessary.

Knowledge of a Third Language

When asked whether knowledge of a third language other than BM and English is important in their organization, only four respondents said that it is not necessary. The remaining eleven respondents mentioned that a third language is important for the purposes of marketing their products, communicating with prospective clients and expatriate staff hired by the organization. The most popular third language stated by the respondents is Mandarin, followed by Tamil, Japanese and French. There seems to be an awareness that knowing more than two languages may confer the benefit of broadening one's scope beyond the limits of one's own culture and country.

Importance of English

Being proficient in English is important in the respondents' work place for the purposes of communication and business transactions. Among the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) the respondents replied that speaking is the most important skill to have, followed by writing, reading, and listening. This is especially true for the multinational companies that employ expatriates.

When asked about the percentage of staff who speak English fluently in their organization, three organizations indicated 100%, while the lowest percentage indicated is 60%. Understandably, multinational organisations noted higher percentages of staff who are fluent in English. Most respondents indicated that all their departments use English in their daily routine especially those that have international dealings such as media, international and corporate banking, business and planning, information technology, customer relations, and communications.

Hiring of Staff

Eleven respondents stated that they would not employ someone who is not fluent in spoken English while only four said they would. All 15 respondents said that it is important for employees to be proficient in both BM and English. It is interesting to note that when it comes to employing prospective candidates who have the same qualifications but differ in their language proficiency, all respondents stated that candidates who are more proficient in English have a better chance of being employed. Nine respondents mentioned that they would not consider prospective candidates who are more proficient in BM than in English. Only three respondents stated that they would consider such candidates for employment with their organization while two respondents said that it depends on the job requirement.

From the economic point of view, the advantages of bilingualism are evident at the individual level. It seems that bilingual persons seeking employment have an advantage in the job market. A 1995 study conducted by Ohio University economists Vedder and Galloway (<http://www.englishfirst.org/html>) found that a lack of English skills has trapped almost 1.5 million immigrants into poverty in the United States.

Even though some job positions do not state specific language requirements, being bilingual may give the prospective employee an advantage. However, in certain cases, job specifications and requirements play a role and are considered. For instance, journalists are required to be proficient in both BM and English. The legal profession, however, is undergoing a transition period whereby BM is being given due emphasis. Prior to this, English has always been the dominant language used. In fact, article 152 (2) of the Constitution states that for 10 years after independence, the English language may be used in both Houses of Parliament, in the Legislative Assembly of every state, and for all other official purposes.

Being bilingual shows that one has learned two languages. This demonstrates discipline, spirit of initiative and a predisposition to learn new things. Thus, being proficient in more than one language makes the employee more flexible, more valuable to the organisation. Having the capacity to adapt to two languages is therefore profitable to an individual.

Ten respondents indicated that it is not difficult to hire prospective employees who are proficient in English, while five others said that it is difficult to find such candidates. The five respondents were involved in broadcasting, manufacturing, and the service industry. These organizations had higher expectations and required candidates who are highly proficient in English.

At the executive level, it was found that interviews for employment are mostly conducted in English. Eleven respondents stated that they place advertisements which require candidates to be proficient in English. Only four respondents said otherwise because the nature of the job does not require the candidate to be proficient in English. It is also understood that candidates for executive level positions should be proficient in English. Six respondents stated that they indicate in their advertisements that the prospective candidates need to be proficient in both BM and English while those who did not advertise as such said that it is expected of the prospective employee to be proficient in both languages.

Perceptions Towards BM-English Bilingualism

All respondents said that it is important to be bilingual in both BM and English if one wants to succeed in his career. Both BM and English language proficiency are implicitly taken into consideration during employment and promotion exercises. In some organizations, non-executives who are considered for promotion to executives are required to take an English proficiency test.

Being proficient in more than one language is necessary and advantageous in the job market. This is especially so for managers and persons in the service and knowledge intensive sectors. Although bilingualism is not often stated as a requirement for employment, it still provides comparable benefits. As there are positive cognitive and social advantages in being bilingual, there should be no occurrence of personality disturbances or social alienation. Instead, bilingualism should be judged as necessary and profitable.

Language Training

Thirteen respondents stated that English language training such as business writing and oral presentation skills are provided for employees. The respondents mentioned that since English is used in all departments, training is provided to those who are not proficient. Language training for BM, however, is not provided. Generally, employers believe that job seekers at the executive level should be proficient in both BM and English.

Conclusion

Language conflicts generally incorporate symbolic struggles over religious, ethnic, cultural, or national identity. A problem threatening BM-English bilingualism in Malaysia is the lack of agreement with regards to its purpose and aims. Even after considering the advantages associated with BM-English knowing bilingualism and the contexts in which it is promoted, sustained and developed, many are concerned about the effects it could have on the national language. Viewpoints on these issues are linked to general political philosophy and ideals of what it means to be a Malaysian.

The debate seems to be about whether promoting English as a tool of development would confine BM to the backwoods (Far Eastern Economic Review, October 10, 1992). There is also the belief that promoting English may result in the loss of the Malay identity. As stated by Professor Ismail Hussein, "Language is the soul of the race. We should master English but let it not master us." (Malaysian Business, 1992).

The Prime Minister of Malaysia has argued that BM has a role to play and the government is not de-emphasizing its role. No language should be seen as having the ability to debase another. He said, "we should not be fanatical about it (BM) because that would make it difficult for us to benefit our race in a competitive world. Whether we like it or not English is an international language" (Malaysian Business, 1992). English is after all the common world language and it is English that allows us to overcome the influence of linguistic separatism. Thus, Malaysia seems to be promoting linguistic duality through BM and English-knowing bilingualism primarily for economic reasons.

Bilingualism has become a common human condition which influences cognition and has numerous social advantages. The bilingual mind therefore is not simply the sum of cognitive processes associated with each of the two monolingual modes but that of one that allows the two languages to interact with one another.

In conclusion, the simple truth is that those who cannot function in the country's predominant languages are less able to find jobs. Ultimately, it seems that material interests often determine the politics of language. It is hard to ignore the many benefits of being bilingual. In order to appreciate the profitability of bilingualism, one must realize that it is an added gift as it allows one to possess a better means of communication suggesting an increase in individual potential. It also enables one to have many perspectives on life, foster open-mindedness and open more job opportunities while eliminating cultural ignorance.

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