

## Parents' Perceptions of Selecting Language of Instruction for their Children's Primary Education in Malaysia

Diana Phooi-Yan Lee & Su-Hie Ting  
Centre for Language Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

### ABSTRACT

The study examines the influence of parents' educational background on the selection of language of instruction for their children's primary education and their beliefs on the impact of language of instruction on children's academic capabilities, career prospect and personal characteristics. A survey was conducted on 400 Chinese parents with a child in primary one in Kuching, Sarawak. The results showed that the parents' educational background influenced their choice of language of instruction for their children's primary education. The Chinese-educated parents in Kuching are more likely to enrol their children in Chinese-medium schools while English- and Malay-educated parents prefer Malay-medium schools. The Chinese-educated parents choose Chinese-medium school as they believed that their children would have better career prospects, more useful qualifications, academic competencies, particularly in Mandarin, mathematics and science, and greater appreciation of Chinese culture. The Chinese-educated parents also believed that their children would be proficient in English and Bahasa Malaysia, hardworking, open-minded and racially tolerant but the English- and Malay-medium educated parents disagreed on these perceived impacts of Chinese education and believed that their children studying in Malay-medium schools are just as likely to have these characteristics. The findings suggest that parental choice of school language of instruction may be a proxy for choosing the school culture associated with Chinese- and Malay-medium schools.

*Keywords:* Educational background, language of instruction, medium of education, parental choice, primary education

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Parental Choice of School

In other countries, parents' choice of school takes into account location of the school (Bridge & Blackman, 1978; Rossell, 1985 as cited in Goldring & Hausman, 1999), convenience or proximity of school (Bussell, 1998; Denessen *et al.*, 2006; Goh, 2007; Kleitz *et al.*, 2000; William, Hancher, & Hutner, 1983), exam results and school reputation (Jackson & Bisset, 2005), child's happiness at school (Coldron & Boulton, 1991), social class context (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1995) and academic reasons (Armor & Peiser, 1998; Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Denessen *et al.*, 2005; Elacqua *et al.*, 2005; Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Moe, 1995; Weiher & Tedin, 2002; William, Hancher, & Hutner, 1983 as cited in Goldring & Hausman, 1999). As the review shows, there are various determinants of school choice but medium of education is not among the factors studied because schools in these settings use only one language of instruction. For example, Goh (2007) did not study language choice because all schools in Australia use English as the medium of instruction.

---

\*Correspondence to: Su-Hie Ting (email: shting@cls.unimas.my)

In multiethnic and multilingual settings, language cannot be separated from social life, and choice of medium of education is an important decision. Parental choice of school language of instruction warrants research because the early medium of education in primary school may have far-reaching educational and social consequences on the children. Studies have shown that the use of the first language of the child in education promotes proficiency in their respective language and eventually in their second language (Simanu-Klutz, 1999, p. 4). Simanu-Klutz explains that knowing one's first language well brings about an easier transition to learning a second language. On the other hand, the use of languages other than the first language in education may lead to consequences which may not be beneficial for students (Huebner, 1986) such as native language decline (Topping, 1981) and deterioration (Crocombe, 1994) as well as compromised literacy (Simanu-Klutz, 1999). Educational background has long-term effects on the children, and it is important to uncover the possible reasons for parental choice of either Malay- or Chinese-medium schools. This research area has been relatively unexplored because the focus has been on English as a medium of instruction policy and the effects of its implementation in countries like Malaysia (Ali, 2011, 2013), Japan (Hashimoto, 2013), Vietnam (Dang, Nguyen, & Le, 2014), driven by internationalisation of education and globalisation (see also Hamid, Nguyen, & Baldauf, 2014).

## 1.2 Background on Education in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country with a population of 28.3 million comprising 63.1% Malay, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indian, 4.3% Indigenous and 0.7% others (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2014). For unity and communication purposes, the Malaysian government instituted the national language, Bahasa Malaysia (Malay henceforth), as the official language and the language of instruction in public schools. English which was the official language during the British rule is now a language that is second in importance to Malay but it is a compulsory subject in the school curriculum (Omar, 1985). Article 152 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia does not prohibit or prevent the teaching or learning of any other language other than for official purposes, meaning "any purpose of the Government, whether Federal or State, and includes any purpose of a public authority" (Federal Constitution, 1957, p. 122).

The medium of education differs in national and national type schools in Malaysia. Government schools using Malay as the language of instruction are referred to as national school (*Sekolah Kebangsaan*) whilst the English, Chinese and Tamil schools are referred to as national type schools (*Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan*) (Omar, 1985; Yusof, 1998). National type schools have the right to teach using their own language as the medium of instruction but Malay and English are compulsory school subjects (Omar, 1985, p. 42). In national schools the languages of the minority ethnic groups, Mandarin and Tamil, are taught as optional subjects if "at least 15 students formally apply to learn the language concerned" (Loh, 2002, p. 30). The existence of national type schools in Malaysia provides parents with a choice of medium of instruction for their children's education. In the rest of this paper, *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina)* and *Sekolah Kebangsaan* are referred to as Chinese-medium and Malay-medium schools respectively. Parents may choose Malay or Chinese medium education to give their children more exposure to their preferred language. In Chinese-medium school, Mandarin is used to teach all subjects, except Malay and English. The time allocated for the Mandarin subject in both national and national type primary schools is 450 minutes per week for Years 1 to 3 and 300 minutes per week for Years 4 to 6.

The financial investment is greater if parents choose Chinese-medium school because the school is only partially supported by the government through the Capital Aid Fund and Special Building, Upgrade and Maintenance Fund which are used for repair of amenities, purchase of text books, payment of utility bills and salary of non-academic support staff, maintenance of school cleanliness, construction of new blocks and building maintenance ("RM15.5m for Chinese primary schools, The Borneo Post, April 10, 2013). Since the Malaysian government provides free primary and secondary education up to Form Five (the equivalent of "O" level), parents who chose Malay-medium schools pay less for their children's education.

If parents choose Malay-medium schools, there are more schools to choose from there are more government schools than Chinese-medium schools. For example, in Kuching there are 151 primary schools, of which 116 are Malay-medium schools and 35 are Chinese-medium schools. Since Malaysia practises a system of assigning schools based on proximity to residence, registration in Chinese-medium primary school has to be done up to two years in advance in order to secure a place for their children in the preferred school.

### 1.3 Purpose of Study

The study examined the influence of parents' educational background on the selection of language of instruction for their children's primary education. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. determine whether the parents' educational background influences their choice of language of instruction for their children's primary education; and
2. determine the English-, Malay- and Chinese-educated parents' beliefs on the impact of language of instruction on children's academic capabilities, career prospect and personal characteristics.

## 2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF STUDY

The theoretical framework for this study hinges on the relationship between ethnic identity and language but the background on self and group identity is provided before proceeding to ethnic identity and its bearings on language choice.

A person's identity can be categorised as social identity and self-identity (Immerfall, Boehnke, & Baier, 2010; Lee, 2009 as cited in Immerfall & Therborn, 2010). Self-identity refers to how one perceives and defines oneself as a human being (Immerfall, Boehnke, & Baier, 2010, p. 325). Social identity refers to the expectation of others on a particular person or how others perceive that particular person (Lee, 2009, p. 28), the feelings of attachments to or part of a particular group, and perceptions of other groups as being different from one's own (Halverson, 2008, p. 44; Immerfall, Boehnke, & Baier, 2010 as cited in Immerfall & Therborn, 2010, p. 325). Social identities comprise a range of dimensions, for instance, family, community, nationality, race, ethnic, age, religion, educational level, language and accent, and gender. Ethnic identity is only one kind of identity that both individuals and aggregates may display and be aware or conscious of (Fishman & Garcia, 2010).

Edwards (1977) defines ethnic identity as "a sense of group identity" derived from "real or perceived common bonds such as language, race and religion" (cited in Breakwell, 1992, p. 130) and Coser *et al.* (1991) defines ethnic identity as the "distinctive characteristics of an ethnic group" (p. 260). In general, ethnic identity refers to an individual's sense of self from the aspect of membership in a particular ethnic group (Liebkind, 1992; Phinney, 1990 as cited in Phinney *et al.*, 2001).

The relationship between ethnic identity and language has been much debated. Researchers such as Edwards (1977) believe that language is not essential to ethnic identity. This is supported by research findings. For example, Campbell, Chuah, and Ting (2012) reported that out of the 81 Bidayuh teenagers living in Kuching in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, 37.50% believed that a Bidayuh who cannot speak Bidayuh is still a Bidayuh and only 21.25% believed that inability to speak the ethnic language disqualifies them from membership in the Bidayuh community. The remaining 41.25% were of the view that if they cannot speak Bidayuh, they are not fully Bidayuh, but they are by default already Bidayuh because of their parents who are Bidayuh. This means that only 21.25% of the Bidayuh teenagers are of the view that language is essential to ethnic identity. There is no doubt that language is a salient ethnic marker for the Bidayuh (Ting & Campbell, 2013), along with their ethnic festival (*Gawai*) and Bidayuh ancestry, but this does not mean that the ethnic language is essential to ethnic identification. Further support for this can be obtained from Ting and Rose's (2014) findings from their study of 568 indigenous teenagers in Sarawak, and the Bidayuh is one of the groups. Their findings showed that "there is no clear relationship between the extent of ethnic language use and strength of ethnic identity, suggesting that attempts at language maintenance may not be the main means to instill ethnic identity in the younger generation of the Sarawak indigenous groups" (p. 107).

However, researchers generally agree that "language and ethnic identity are related reciprocally, that is, language usage influences the formation of ethnic identity, but ethnic identity also influences language attitude and language usage" (Gudykunst & Schmidt, 1987, p. 157). Myhill's (2003) "language-and-identity ideology" suggests that one's needs to speak the language that is associated with their identity in order to be better, authentic, loyal and committed to their group membership (Fishman, 1972) (cited in Jaspal & Coyle, 2010, p. 202). Because of this, the identity of the speaker can be predicted based on their choice of language (Gal, 1979). In a speech community which may consist of different groups, language plays an important role in shaping and maintaining such feelings as group identity and solidarity (Fishman & Garcia, 2010; Phinney *et al.*, 2001; Roberts *et al.*, 1999). Language is said to be an important contributor to one's ethnic identity (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1990; Hurtado & Gurin, 1995; Miller & Hoogstra, 1992). Most people believe that the best medium for preserving and expressing their tradition is nothing

but language (Spolsky, 1998). In Campbell *et al.*'s (2012) study, 26.93% of the Bidayuh teenagers felt that it is necessary for them to know their ethnic language for them to understand their culture but a similar number (21.79%) disagreed. The majority (51.28%) felt that if they could not speak Bidayuh, they would not fully understand their Bidayuh culture, indicating that language provides access to cultural knowledge. Since the language-ethnic identity relationship exists, this could influence language choices, including parental choice of school language of instruction.

As the participants in this study are Chinese living in Sarawak, a specific review of the relationship between language and ethnicity for the Chinese diaspora is included. Chinese education propagates the language and the Chinese identity. Tan (1997) asserted that:

Language is one of the basic components of culture. It is a vital element of ethnic identity. ... language and education are two indispensable instruments for sustaining one's culture. Therefore when the Chinese educationalists fought for the preservation of Chinese education, they were actually fighting for the status of their language, and vice versa. (p. 298)

Chinese schools are instrumental for ethnic Chinese to maintain their Chinese characteristics. Ku (2003) wrote that "Chinese education plays important roles in transmitting Chinese traditional values to new generation and simultaneously instills the spirit of nationalism and political awareness to them" (cited in Lee, 2009, p. 24). Similarly, Lee (1997) viewed Chinese schools as a place of transmission of Chinese culture. In this sense, those who have a Chinese educational background are likely to have a stronger Chinese identity and stronger affiliation with the Chinese language. For Malaysian university students of Chinese descent in their early twenties, the ability to speak Chinese marks them as Chinese more than their Chinese ancestry (Ting & Ooi, 2014). Lee (1997, p. 99) stated that the Chinese education has apparently remained an essential part of the school system with 27 per cent of the total enrolment of Chinese primary school being state-supported. Lee asserted that the value of Chinese language would increase parallel with the economic growth of countries of Chinese origin (i.e., China, Taiwan and even Singapore) and emerge as a regional business language. Whether this translates to more parents choosing Chinese-medium schools for their children's education in future needs to be investigated through longitudinal studies.

### **3.0 METHOD OF THE STUDY**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The participants of the study comprised 400 Chinese parents with children in primary one (200 parents who chose Chinese-medium primary schools and 200 parents who chose Malay-medium national primary schools). The Chinese parents were identified as Chinese based on the school record of their children using Chinese names and self-identification of race.

The participants' age ranged from 22 to 62. More mothers than fathers participated in the study (i.e., 64% female; 36% male, Table 1). The parents held a range of jobs: women not in paid employment (103), professional jobs such as doctors and lecturers (86), administrative jobs such as clerks and assistants (82), managerial and technical jobs (46), business (45) and blue collar workers such as labourers and cleaners (38). Almost half of the Chinese parents in this study had secondary education (46.50%), and the percentages of those having college (20.75%) and university education (24.00%) are similar. A small percentage had primary education (8.75%).

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of participants with children in Chinese and Malay medium primary schools

Demographic variables		Parents with children in Chinese medium primary school (n=200)	Parents with children in Malay medium primary school (n=200)	Total (n=400)	Percentage breakdown within demographic categories (%)
Gender	Female	129	127	256	64.00
	Male	71	73	144	36.00
Age	20s	10	6	16	4.00
	30s	124	79	203	50.75
	40s	55	86	141	35.25
	50s	10	25	35	8.75
	60s	1	4	5	1.25
Level of education	Primary	16	19	35	8.75
	Secondary	92	94	186	46.50
	College	40	43	83	20.75
	University	52	44	96	24.00

### 3.2 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The questionnaire elicited the participants' responses on what they felt were the consequences of enrolling their children in Chinese- or Malay-medium primary school, particularly in the aspects of their children's academic capabilities, personal characteristics and career prospect. This section consisted of 12 items using a 10-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). For example, "I believe that studying in Chinese school is better than Malay school in job prospects" and "I believe that qualifications from Chinese school are more valuable than those from Malay school". Besides job prospects and qualifications, the other aspects of attitudes towards Chinese and Malay medium schools were appreciation of Chinese culture, proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia, English and Mandarin, capability in mathematics and science as well as personal characteristics such as diligence, open-mindedness and openness to other races. Items on personal characteristics were included to find out whether the Chinese parents believe that immersion in the Chinese- or Malay-medium school environment would shape their children's attitudes differently. The items were adapted from other questionnaires on attitudes towards school. For instance, "qualifications from many English-speaking countries are more valuable than Taiwanese qualifications" used by Chen and Zimitat (2006) was changed to "I believe that qualifications from Chinese school are more valuable than those from Malay school" in order to fit this study. This measure has shown strong reliability with Cronbach coefficient alpha of 0.942.

Demographic information such as ethnic group, age, gender, qualifications, job and number of children were also obtained. Participants were also asked to state the medium of their own primary education because when people in Malaysia say that they are "English-educated" or "Chinese-educated", they refer to the language of instruction used in their primary school education. Two sets of questionnaires were prepared so that the parents who sent their children to Chinese-medium primary school read items mentioning Chinese-medium primary school whereas the parents who sent their children to Malay-medium primary school read items mentioning Malay-medium primary school. During coding, the responses were reversed accordingly so that they reflect agreement or disagreement with one form of the statements (Table 3). The questionnaire was translated to Malay but only two Chinese-medium primary schools requested to have the Malay version.

The data collection was conducted in a four-step process. First, the list of schools from the Sarawak State Education Department website was examined to identify and select seven Chinese- and seven Malay-medium national primary schools out of 151 primary schools from Kuching and Padawan District Education Office (*Pejabat Pelajaran Daerah (PPD)*). However, the number of Chinese parents in the seven selected Malay-medium national primary schools was too low. Hence, the number was increased to 24 schools in order to get enough participants. There was no problem recruiting enough Chinese parents to participate in the survey from Chinese-medium primary schools because of the dominant Chinese student population in these schools. Second, the approval from the Ministry of Education and Sarawak Education Department was obtained and the approval letter for conducting the research was sent to the principal of selected schools. Third, appointments with the principals of the selected schools were made in order to explain what was involved in the study. All the principals granted permission for the study to be conducted at their school. Fourth, the questionnaires were distributed either through the principal or directly to participants. For

questionnaires distributed through the school, the principals instructed the class teachers to distribute them to their students. In this case, the first researcher returned to the school one or two weeks later to collect the completed questionnaires. For schools where the principals requested the researcher to contact the parents themselves, the first researcher went to the school during the lunch hour and after school to talk to the parents and seek their assistance to fill in the questionnaire. The estimated time to complete the questionnaire was 15 to 30 minutes.

Altogether 726 questionnaires were distributed and 539 were returned but 139 were not complete, leaving 400 usable questionnaires for data analysis (200 in Chinese and 200 in Malay medium primary school). An equal number of participants in the two groups was sought to facilitate comparison of the results. For the analysis, the means and standard deviation for each of the 12 items were calculated.

## 4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Influence of Parents' Educational Background on Choice of Medium of Education for Children

Table 2 shows the educational background of the Chinese parents with children in Chinese- and Malay-medium primary one. The results showed that out of 200 Chinese parents who enrolled their children in Chinese-medium school, 85.5% (or 171) had also studied in a Chinese-medium primary school but only 34.0% of the 200 Chinese parents with children in the Malay-medium primary school were Chinese-educated. Table 2 shows the remaining 66% of parents with children in Malay medium school were either English-educated (59 participants or 29.5%) or Malay-educated (73 participants or 36.5%) but the percentages are very low for Chinese-medium primary school (10.5% and 4% respectively). In other words, the Chinese-educated parents were more likely to enrol their children in Chinese-medium primary school and the Malay- and English-educated parents were more inclined to enrol their children in Malay-medium primary school. Looking at the results in another way, Primary One students in Malay medium primary school have an almost equal chance of having parents who are English-, Malay- or Chinese-educated but Primary One children in Chinese medium primary school are likely to have parents who are Chinese-educated.

**Table 2** Frequency and percentage of Chinese parents with English, Malay and Chinese educational background

Parents' own educational background	Parents with children in Chinese medium school (n=200)		Parents with children in Malay medium school (n=200)	
	Number (n)	%	Number (n)	%
English	21	10.5	59	29.5
Malay	8	4.0	73	36.5
Chinese	171	85.5	68	34.0
Total	200	100%	200	100%

There was a change in the medium of education from English to Bahasa Malaysia in Malaysian public schools after the independence of the country. In Sarawak, the Malaysian state where the study was conducted, the use of Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of education began in 1977 at primary one level and was completed at Form Six level in 1989 (Ting, 2001), meaning that the last cohort of English-educated Sarawakians is 45 years old in the year 2014 and the first cohort of Malay-educated Sarawakians is aged 44. Some of the older Chinese parents in this study are English-educated but those below 44 are either Malay- or Chinese-educated unless they had attended a private school which uses English as the language of instruction. However, the number in the latter category is negligible. A Chinese educational background cannot be identified based on age because Chinese-medium schools have existed in Sarawak until now.

Two possible reasons may explain the influence of educational background on parental choice of medium of education for children's education, the first being familiarity with the medium of education. Based on his study in Australia, Goh (2007) pointed out that parents are more likely to send their children to school where the child's sibling or family's member have been (p. 96) because this experience is a good source of information for their current school choice (Bussell, 1998 as cited in Goh, 2007, p. 96). Surprisingly, in Goh's study, a substantial number of parents who went to government school were not likely to send their children to the same type of school. Witte (1990), for example, attributed the parents' choice of other options to their dissatisfaction with

their previous school (cited in Goldring & Hausman, 1999, p. 474; see also Martinez, Thomas, & Kemerer, 1994). Second, the parents could have been satisfied with their own experience of studying in Chinese-, English- and Malay-medium schools. These two reasons emerge from the comparison of the results with related studies on parental choice of school, but the Chinese parents in this study were not asked directly if these were the attitudes underlying their action. This can be an area for further investigation using interviews to elicit personal justifications of their school choice.

Nevertheless, what the results show clearly is the influence of parents' own educational background on choice of medium of education for their children's primary education. A majority of the Chinese-educated parents in this study chose Chinese-medium school for their children's primary education (71.55%). The Chinese-educated parents were immersed in Chinese culture and Chinese language (see Ku, 2003; Lee, 1997, 2009; Tan, 1997), and they chose the same school environment for their children. The same can be said of the Malay-educated Chinese parents in this study as 90.1% (73 out of 81) of them chose Malay-medium school for their children. The school environment is more ethnically-diverse in comparison and Malay is often not only the language of instruction but also the common language of communication among the students and between teachers and students. The English-educated Chinese parents could not choose English-medium education for their children unless they were prepared to enrol their children in private schools. This is because Malaysian government schools no longer use English as the language of instruction, and most of the English-educated parents (73.75% or 59 out of 80) chose to enrol their children in Malay-medium primary schools rather than in Chinese-medium primary schools. There are currently only three private schools in Kuching, and of these, only Lodge School offers the alternative of English-medium education. The other two private schools, Tunku Putra and St. Joseph's private school, use Malay as the language of instruction but the schools have an English-speaking environment – the students communicate among themselves in English, and with teachers in English as well. In St. Joseph's private school, for example, science, mathematics and religious education are also taught in English, thereby increasing the number of subjects taught using English as the language of instruction. In other words, private schools have a stronger English-speaking environment although their curriculum is largely the same as Malay-medium government schools. As private schools charge expensive school fees, the students tend to be from middle to upper income families. Inherent in the choice of school is the selection of the social class context (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1995).

#### **4.2 Perceived Impact of Language of Instruction on Children**

Table 3 shows that the perceived impact of Chinese- and Malay-medium education on their children's academic capabilities, personal characteristics and career prospect. As the Likert scale is from 1 to 10, the mid-point for the mean scores is 5.5, and mean scores above 5.5 indicate positive attitudes. The one-way ANOVA showed that the Chinese-, Malay- and English-educated parents are significantly different in their beliefs on the perceived impact of the medium of education on their children, with the exception of Item 7 whereby all the Chinese parents agree that students from Chinese-medium schools have a better mastery of Mandarin (Table 3). The multiple comparison results were obtained to determine which of the three groups of parents differ on the perceived impact of medium of education. The results showed that the Chinese-educated parents have significantly different beliefs from the Malay- and English-educated parents ( $p < 0.05$ ), but there is no significant difference between the Malay- and English-educated parents ( $p > 0.05$ ). The details of the differences are described next.

**Table 3** Parents' perceptions of the impact of Chinese- or Malay-medium primary education on their children

Attitudes towards school	Chinese-educated parents (n=239)		English-educated parents (n=80)		Malay-educated parents (n=81)		ANOVA results on significant difference
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1. I believe that studying in Chinese school is better than Malay school.	6.98	2.55	4.71	2.81	5.44	2.35	F(2,397) = 27.797, <i>p</i> = .000
2. I believe that studying in Chinese school is better than Malay school in job prospects.	6.63	2.48	4.81	2.90	5.22	2.30	F(2,397) = 19.821, <i>p</i> = .000
3. I believe that qualifications from Chinese school are more valuable than those from Malay school.	6.44	2.59	4.72	2.76	5.32	2.08	F(2,397) = 16.090, <i>p</i> =.000
4. I believe that Chinese school students are better than Malay school students in appreciating Chinese culture.	7.18	2.55	5.81	2.99	6.00	2.32	F(2,397) = 11.537, <i>p</i> =.000
5. I believe Chinese school students are better than Malay school students in Bahasa Malaysia.	5.38	2.42	3.86	2.54	4.42	1.85	F(2,397) = 14.519, <i>p</i> =.000
6. I believe Chinese school students are better than Malay school students in English.	6.21	2.61	4.65	2.76	4.91	2.36	F(2,397) = 14.719, <i>p</i> =.000
7. I believe Chinese school students are better than Malay school students in Mandarin.	7.91	2.49	7.12	2.99	7.62	2.39	F(2,397) = 2.778, <i>p</i> =.063
8. I believe Chinese school students are better than Malay school students in Mathematics.	7.46	2.55	6.62	2.87	6.79	2.54	F(2,397) = 4.088, <i>p</i> =.017*
9. I believe Chinese school students are better than Malay school students in Science.	6.99	2.42	5.61	2.86	6.16	2.41	F(2,397) = 10.169, <i>p</i> =.000
10. I believe that Chinese school students are hardworking than Malay school students.	6.59	2.57	5.40	2.98	5.79	2.40	F(2,397) = 7.306, <i>p</i> =.001*
11. I believe that Chinese school students are open-minded than Malay school students.	6.26	2.38	4.88	2.64	4.99	2.16	F(2,397) = 14.822, <i>p</i> =.000
12. I believe that Chinese school students are open to other races than Malay school students.	6.21	2.34	5.44	2.64	5.16	2.29	F(2,397) = 7.192, <i>p</i> =.001

\*Significant difference between Chinese- and English-educated parents only

The results show that Chinese-educated participants (171 with children in Chinese-medium primary school and 68 with children in Malay-medium primary school) believed that studying in Chinese-medium school is better than Malay-medium school (Table 3, Item 1, mean of 6.98). They believed that a Chinese primary education gives their children better job prospects (Item 2, mean of 6.63) and more valuable qualifications (Item 4, mean of 6.44). They also believed that their children would develop better competencies in English, Mandarin, science and mathematics (Items 5-9, means range from 6.99 to 7.91). In terms of Chinese identity, this group of parents believed that their children would appreciate Chinese culture better than children in Malay-medium school (Item 4, mean of 7.18). In addition to these, they also believed that Chinese school students are more hardworking, open-minded and open to other races than Malay school students (Items 10-12, means range from 6.21 to 6.59). In short, the Chinese-educated parents believe that Chinese education gives their children an edge in academic capabilities, career prospects and personal characteristics except for mastery of Bahasa Malaysia.

However, English-educated participants (21 with children in Chinese-medium primary school and 59 with children in Malay-medium primary school) did not believe in the value of a Chinese-medium primary education (Table 3, Item 1, mean of 4.71). They were also not convinced that Chinese-medium school students would have better job prospects and qualifications (means of 4.81 and 4.72 for Items 2 and 3 respectively). This group of participants also did not believe that Chinese school students would be proficient in Malay (mean of 3.86) and English (mean of 4.65) but acknowledged that Chinese-educated students have a better command of Mandarin (mean of 7.12), mathematics (mean of 6.62) and science (marginally positive at 5.61). This group of parents are marginally positive (mean of 5.81) that students in Chinese-medium primary school would be more appreciative of Chinese



culture but they did not believe that Chinese schools nurture more hardworking, open-minded and racially tolerant students (Items 10-12, means range from 4.88 to 5.44). In other words, the English-educated parents believed that by not studying in a Chinese primary school, the children would only lose out in their achievement scores for Mandarin, mathematics and science and possibly appreciate Chinese culture less than students from Chinese schools. They might not have chosen Chinese-medium primary school so that their children would be more proficient in Malay and English, and develop more open-mindedness and racial tolerance from interacting with classmates from other ethnic groups in Malay primary schools. Chinese-medium primary schools have a Chinese dominant student population – the 2014 primary school enrolment data from Sarawak Education Department (*Jabatan Pelajaran Negeri Sarawak*) revealed that Chinese students accounted for more than 80% and 12% of the student population in Chinese- and Malay-medium primary schools in Kuching respectively.

Finally, the 81 Malay-educated parents are in between the other two groups in their beliefs (8 with children in Chinese medium primary school and 73 in Malay medium primary school). They are more or less neutral on Chinese school students having better career prospects and more useful qualification. Like English-educated parents, the Malay-educated parents disagreed that Chinese school students would be proficient in Malay and English (means of 4.42 and 4.91 respectively) but acknowledged that they would be better in Mandarin, science and mathematics (means of 6.16 to 7.62). Similarly, they are convinced that Chinese school students would not be more open-minded and racially tolerant than Malay school students. However, the Malay-educated parents are different from the English-educated parents in one respect – they marginally agreed that Chinese school students are more hardworking (Item 10, mean of 5.79) whereas the English-educated parents reported a marginal disagreement (mean of 5.40) but the difference is not significant. The mean for the Chinese-educated parents is higher (6.59).

Overall, the Chinese parents believed students in Chinese-medium school would develop better competency in Mandarin, as expected. This is because Mandarin is not only used during the Mandarin lesson but also for learning other subjects and for communication in the school. Moreover, the Chinese books used in Chinese-medium schools are also more difficult than those used in Malay-medium schools.

An interesting result from this study is the unquestioning acceptance by parents, regardless of their educational background, that Chinese-medium school students would have better achievement in science and mathematics. The outstanding performance of Chinese students in mathematics has been documented elsewhere. For example, Miller, Kelly and Zhou's (2005) study showed that Mandarin-speaking children outperform American children in mathematics. Miller *et al.* (2005) explained that the Chinese mathematics advantage is due to the transparency of the base-ten number system and the Chinese number naming structure facilitates the learning process (Fuson & Kwon, 1991 as cited in Miller *et al.*, 2005, p. 170). Similarly, Ho and Fuson (1998) found that Chinese-speaking children who take advantage of the base-ten number system outperformed the English-speaking children who used Arabic numeral (cited in Miller *et al.*, 2005). Miller *et al.* (2005) asserted that language is one of the factors affecting the early mathematical development (p. 176). Chinese words used for numbers up to 10 are in single syllables whereas numbers between 11 and 100 are in two syllables. Using fewer syllables is believed to speed up the cognitive processes during the mathematical computations. If the parents chose Chinese-medium school because they wanted their children to excel in mathematics, this would be categorised as academic reasons for school choice, which is one of the main considerations of school choice in other settings (Armor & Peiser, 1998; Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Denessen *et al.*, 2005; Elacqua *et al.*, 2005; Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Moe, 1995; Weiher & Tedin, 2002; William, Hancher, & Hutner, 1983). However, in the present study, the parents were only asked if they believed that Chinese school students are better than Malay school students in mathematics. In future studies on parental choice of school, they can be directly asked whether they choose Chinese/Malay school because they want their children to excel in mathematics. In this future direction of research, the focus would then be on behaviour rather than beliefs. There are also popular beliefs reported in newspapers that Chinese parents are choosing Chinese-medium schools because of the quality of education but this needs to be verified through research.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The study showed that the parents' educational background influenced their choice of language of instruction for their children's primary education. The Chinese-educated parents in Kuching are more likely to enrol their children in Chinese-medium schools while English- and Malay-educated parents prefer Malay-medium schools. The Chinese-educated parents choose Chinese-medium

school as they believed that their children would have better career prospects, more useful qualifications, academic competencies, particularly in Mandarin, mathematics and science, and greater appreciation of Chinese culture. The Chinese-educated parents also believed that their children would be proficient in English and Bahasa Malaysia, and learn to be hardworking, open-minded and racially tolerant but the English- and Malay-medium educated parents disagreed on these perceived impacts of Chinese education and believed that their children studying in Malay-medium schools are just as likely to have these characteristics. This study has uncovered some of the reasons underlying the Chinese parents' choice of medium of education for their children's primary education, and identified some of the individual, societal and achievement orientations valued by the Chinese parents. In the context of national type schools, the findings may be of interest to policy makers, educators and practitioners in the education and learning arena.

\*An earlier version of the paper was published as Lee, D. P. Y., & Ting, S. H. (2014, May 27-29). *Selecting language of instruction for children's primary education and perceived consequences of choice*. Proceedings of 9<sup>th</sup> Language for Specific Purposes Seminar & 6<sup>th</sup> Global Advances in Business Communication Conference (LSP-GABC), Kuching, Malaysia.

## REFERENCES

- Ali, N. L. 2012. English in Primary Education in Malaysia: Policies, Outcomes and Stakeholders' Lived Experiences. *Current Issues in Language Planning*. 12(2): 147–166.
- Ali, N. L. 2013. A Changing Paradigm in Language Planning: English-medium Instruction Policy at the Tertiary Level in Malaysia. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 14(1): 73–92.
- Armor, D. & Peiser, B. 1998. Inter-district Choice in Massachusetts. In *Learning from School Choice*. Edited by P. E. Peterson and B. C. Hassel (Eds). Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Ball, S. J., Bowe, R. & Gewirtz, S. 1995. Circuits of Schooling: A Sociological Exploration of Parental Choice of School in Social-Class Contexts. *The Sociological Review*. 43(1): 52–78.
- Bauch, P. & Goldring, E. 1995. Parent Involvement and School Responsiveness: Facilitating the Home-school Connection in Schools of Choice. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. 17(1): 1–22.
- Breakwell, G. M. 1992. *Social psychology of Identity and the Self Concept*. London: Surrey University Press.
- Bridge, R. G. & Blackman, J. 1978. *A Study of Alternatives in American Education IV: Family Choice in Schooling*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.
- Bussell, H. 1998. Parental Choice of Primary School: An Application of Q-Methodology. *The Service Industries Journal*. 18(3): 135–147.
- Campbell, Y. M., Chuah, K. M., & Ting, S. H. 2012, November 7–9. *Connecting the Dots: Views on Promoting Bidayuh Language Learning via E-Folktales*. Proceedings of International Conference on Linguistics, Literature and Culture (ICLLIC 2012), Pulau Pinang, Malaysia.
- Chen, C. H., & Zimitat, C. 2006. Understanding Taiwanese Students' Decision-making Factors Regarding Australian International Higher Education. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 20(2): 91–100. doi: 10.1108/09513540610646082.
- Coldron, J., & Boulton, P. 1991. 'Happiness' as a Criterion of Parents' Choice of School. *Journal of Education Policy*. 6(2): 169–178.
- Coser, L. A., Nock, S. L., Steffan, P. A., & Spain, D. 1991. *Introduction to Sociology*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Crocombe, R. 1994. Pacific Science in the 21st Century. In *Science of the Pacific Island Peoples- Education, Language, Patterns and Policy*. Edited by J. Morison, P. Geraghty, and L. Crowl (Ed.). Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies. 4154.
- Dang, T. K. A., Nguyen, H. T. M., & Le, T. T. T. 2013. The impacts of globalisation on EFL teacher education through English as a medium of instruction: An example from Vietnam. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 14(1): 52–72.
- Denessen, E., Driessena, G., & Slegers, P. 2005. Segregation by Choice? A Study of Group-specific Reasons for School Choice. *Journal of Education Policy*. 20(3): 347–368.
- Department of Statistics Malaysia. 2014. Population distribution and basic demographic characteristic report 2010: Ethnic composition. Retrieved November 11, 2014, from [http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com\\_content&id=1215](http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&id=1215).

- Edwards, J. 1977. Language in Group and Individual Identity. In *Social Psychology of Identity and the Self Concept*. Edited by G. M. Breakwell (Ed.). London: Surrey University Press. 129–146.
- Elacqua, G. Gobierno, E. & Ibanez, U. 2005. School Choice in Chile: An Analysis of Parental Preferences and Search Behaviour. *National Centre for the Study of Privatization in Education*. 1–35.
- Federal Constitution. 1957. *Laws of Malaysia*. Retrieved July 5, 2012, from <http://www.jac.gov.my/images/stories/akta/federalconstitution.pdf>.
- Fishman, J. 1972. *Language and Nationalism: Two Integrative Essays*. Rowley: Newbury House.
- Fishman, J. A., & Garcia, O. 2010. *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity: Disciplinary and Regional Perspectives*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fuson, K. C., & Kwon, Y. 1991. Chinese-based Regular and European Irregular Systems of Number Words: The Disadvantages for English-speaking Children. In *Language and Mathematical Education*. Edited by K. Durkin and B. Shire (Eds.). Milton Keynes: Open University Press. 211–226.
- Gal, S. 1979. *Language Shift: Social Determinants of Language Change in Bilingual Austria*. New York: Academic Press.
- Goh, E. 2007. *Primary School Choice Selection: Examining Parental School Choice Decision Behavior Using the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Theory of Planned Behavior*. Retrieved July 18, 2013, from [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&ved=0CDMQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fro.uow.edu.au%2Fcgi%2Fviewcontent.cgi%3Farticle%3D1617%26context%3Dtheses&ei=kbvwUZzCA8\\_jrAfhxYH4DA&usg=AFQjCNH4qUpgPU06Q-An1IetYq-99j2Ewg&bvm=bv.49784469,d.bmk](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&ved=0CDMQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fro.uow.edu.au%2Fcgi%2Fviewcontent.cgi%3Farticle%3D1617%26context%3Dtheses&ei=kbvwUZzCA8_jrAfhxYH4DA&usg=AFQjCNH4qUpgPU06Q-An1IetYq-99j2Ewg&bvm=bv.49784469,d.bmk).
- Goldring, E. B., & Hausman, C. S. 1999. Reasons for Parental Choice of Urban Schools. *Journal of Education Policy*. 14(5): 469–490. doi: 10.1080/026809399286161.
- Gudykunst, W., & Ting-Toomey, S. 1990. Ethnic Identity, Language, and Communication Breakdowns. In *Handbook of Language and Social Psychology*. Edited by H. Giles and P. Robinson (Eds.). London: Wiley. 307–327.
- Halverson, C. B. 2008. Social Identity Group and Individual Behaviour. *Effective Multicultural Teams: Theory and Practice*. 3: 43–79.
- Hamid, M. O., Nguyen, H. T. M., & Baldauf, R. B. 2014. Medium of Instruction in Asia: Context, Processes and Outcomes. *Current Issues in Language Planning*. 14(1): 1–15.
- Hashimoto, K. 2014. 'English-only', but Not a Medium-of-Instruction Policy: The Japanese Way of Internationalising Education for Both Domestic and Overseas Students. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 14(1): 16–33.
- Ho, C. S. H., & Fuson, K. C. 1998. Children's Knowledge of Teen Quantities as Tens and Ones: Comparisons of Chinese, British, and American Kindergartners. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 90(3): 1536–1544.
- Huebner, T. 1986. Vernacular Literacy, English as a Language of Wider Communication and Language Shift in American Samoa. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 7(5): 393–411.
- Hurtado, A., & Gurin, P. 1995. Ethnic Identity and Bilingualism Attitudes. In *Hispanic Psychology*. Edited by A. Padilla (Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 89–103.
- Immerfall, S. & Therborn, G. 2010. *Handbook of European Societies: Social Transformations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York: Springer.
- Immerfall, S., Boehnke, K., & Baier, D. 2010. Identity. In *Handbook of European Societies: Social Transformations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Edited by S. Immerfall, & S. Therborn (Eds.). 325–353. doi:10.1007/978-0-387-88199-7\_11, 325.
- Jackson, C. & Bisset, M. 2005. Gender and School Choice: Factors Influencing Parents When Choosing Single-Sex or Co-Educational Independent Schools for Their Children. *Cambridge Journal of Education*. 35(2): 195–211.
- Jaspal, R., & Coyle, A. 2010. *My Language, My People: Language and Ethnic Identity Among British-born South Asians*. Retrieved May 26, 2014, from <http://epubs.surrey.ac.uk/577003/1/Coyle%202010%20My%20language%20my%20people.pdf>.
- Kleitz, B., Weiher, G. R., Tedin, K., & Matland, R. 2000. Choice, Charter Schools, and Household Preferences. *Social Science Quarterly*, 81(3). Retrieved November 11, 2013, from <http://orion.luc.edu/~rmatlan/pdf/2000ChoiceCharterSchools.f>.
- Ku, H. T. 2003. *Education and Identity: A Study on Chinese Secondary Education in Malaysia (1945-2000)*. Xiamen: Xiamen University Press.
- Lee, K. H. 1997. Malaysian Chinese: Seeking Identity in Wawasan 2020. In *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*. Edited by L. Suryadinata (Ed.). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 72–107.
- Lee, Y. F. 2009. *Everyday Identities in Malaysian Chinese's subjectivities*. Retrieved November 10, 2012, from [http://www.ukm.my/penerbit/akademika/ACROBATAKADEMIKA75/akademika75\[02\].pdf](http://www.ukm.my/penerbit/akademika/ACROBATAKADEMIKA75/akademika75[02].pdf).

- Liebkind, K. 1992. Ethnic Identity: Challenging the Boundaries of Social Psychology. In *Social Psychology of Identity and the Self Concept*. Edited by G. M. Breakwell (Ed.). London: Surrey University Press. 147–185.
- Loh, F. K. W. 2002. Developmentalism and the Limits of Democratic Discourse. In *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices*. Edited by F. K. W. Loh and B. T. Khoo (Eds). New York: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. 19–50.
- Martinez, V., Thomas, K., & Kemerer, F. 1994. Who Chooses and Why: A Look at Five Choice Plans. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 9: 678–681.
- Miller, K. F., Kelly, M. K., & Zhou, X. 2005. Learning Mathematics in China and The United States: Cross-cultural Insights Into the Nature and Course of Mathematical Development. In *Handbook of Mathematical Cognition*. Edited by J. I. D. Campbell (Ed.). New York: Psychology Press. 163–178. Retrieved April 28, 2014, from <http://www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/life/Readings2007/Miller%20Ed%20Reading%201.pdf>.
- Miller, P., & Hoogstra, L. 1992. Language as Tool in the Socialization and Apprehension of Cultural Meanings. In *New Directions in Psychological Anthropology*. Edited by T. Schwartz, G. White and C. Lutz (Ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press. 83–101.
- Ministry of Education Malaysia. 2012. *Preliminary Report: Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025*. Retrieved April 26, 2014, from <http://www.moe.gov.my/userfiles/file/PPP/Preliminary-Blueprint-Eng.pdf>.
- Moe, T. M. 1995. Private Vouchers. In *Private Vouchers*. Edited by T. M. Moe (Ed.). Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press. 1–40.
- Myhill, J. 2003. The Native Speaker, Identity and the Authenticity Hierarchy. *Language Sciences*. 25(1): 77–97.
- Omar, A. 1985. *The Language Policy of Malaysia: A Formula for Balanced Pluralism*. Retrieved July 5, 2012, from <http://sealang.net/sala/archives/pdf8/asmah1985language.pdf>.
- Phinney, J. 1990. Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults: A Review of Research. *Psychological Bulletin*. 108(3): 499–514.
- Phinney, J. S., Romero, I., Nava, M., & Huang, D. 2001. The Role of Language, Parents, and Peers in Ethnic Identity Among Adolescents in Immigrant Families. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 30(2): 301–322. Retrieved December 5, 2012, from [http://potowski.org/sites/potowski.org/files/Phinney\\_et\\_al\\_2001.pdf](http://potowski.org/sites/potowski.org/files/Phinney_et_al_2001.pdf).
- RM15.5m for Chinese Primary Schools. 2013, April 10. *The Borneo Post*. Retrieved July 31, 2013, from [http://www.pemandu.gov.my/gtp/Media\\_Coverage-@RM15@5m\\_for\\_Chinese\\_primary\\_schools.aspx#sthash.uPItIVGk.dpuf](http://www.pemandu.gov.my/gtp/Media_Coverage-@RM15@5m_for_Chinese_primary_schools.aspx#sthash.uPItIVGk.dpuf).
- Roberts, R. E., Phinney, J. S., Masse, L. C., Chen, Y. R., Roberts, C. R., & Romero, A. 1999. The Structure of Ethnic Identity of Young Adolescents from Diverse Ethnocultural Groups. *Journal of Early Adolescence*. 19(3): 301–322. Retrieved December 5, 2012, from <http://sites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic551690.files/Roberts%20et%20al.pdf>.
- Rossell, C. H. 1985. What is Attractive About Magnet Schools? *Urban Education*. 20(1): 7–22.
- Simanu-Klutz, F. 1999. *Language of Instruction: Choices and Consequences*. Retrieved February 28, 2014, from [https://www.google.com/search?q=Language+of+Instruction%3A+Choices+and+Consequences+By+Fata+Simanu-Klutz+T&aq=chrome..69i57.875j0j7&sourceid=chrome&espv=210&es\\_sm=93&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=Language+of+Instruction%3A+Choices+and+Consequences+By+Fata+Simanu-Klutz+T&aq=chrome..69i57.875j0j7&sourceid=chrome&espv=210&es_sm=93&ie=UTF-8).
- Spolsky, B. 2009. *Towards a Theory of Language Management*. Retrieved April 14, 2012, from [http://assets.cambridge.org/97805217/35971/excerpt/9780521735971\\_excerpt.pdf](http://assets.cambridge.org/97805217/35971/excerpt/9780521735971_excerpt.pdf).
- Tan, M. G. 1997. The ethnic Chinese in Indonesia: Issues of Identity. In *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*. Edited by L. Suryadinata (Ed.). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 33–65.
- Ting, S. H. 2001. When is English not the Right Choice in Sarawak, Malaysia. *English Today*. 65: 54–56.
- Ting, S. H., & Campbell, Y. M. 2013, November. *Salience of Language as an Ethnic Marker: A Snapshot of the Bidayuh of Sarawak, Malaysia*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Languages 2013 (ICL2013), Phuket, Thailand.
- Ting, S. H., & Rose, L. 2014. Ethnic Language Use and Ethnic Identity for Sarawak Indigenous Groups in Malaysia. *Oceanic Linguistics*, 53(1): 92–109. DOI: 10.1353/ol.2014.0002.
- Topping, D. 1981. The Decline of Pacific Languages. *The New Pacific* (July/August issue).
- Weiher, G. & Tedin, K. 2002. Does Choice Lead to Racially Distinctive Schools? Charter Schools and Household Preferences. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. 21(1): 79–92.
- Williams, M. F., Hancher, K. S. & Hunter, A. 1983. *Parents and School Choice: A Household Survey*. Washington DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Witte, J. 1990. Choice and Control: An Analytical Overview. In *Choice and Control in American Education: The Theory of Choice*

*and Control in American Education*. Edited by W. Clune and J. Witte (Eds.). Bristol, PA: Falmer Press. 11–46.

Yusof, A. 1998. *Implementation of Education Policy in Malaysia*. Retrieved April 6, 2012, from <http://azman97.tripod.com/essay8.html>.