TEACHERS’ PERCEPTION ON THE VITALITY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT
In this multilingual milieu, Malaysians in their early age are given choices to use particular language in the various domains of usage. As such, it is rather common to have Malaysians speaking at least two if not more languages. Bringing the attention to English language, despite its status as the second most important language in the nation and is commonly known as the second language, English is gradually slanted towards a foreign language more than a second language (Platt & Weber, 1980; Nunan, 2003). Thus, it is of interest to examine the vitality of languages at the primary level of education as indicative of an early stage of language vitality. Although studies of language vitality are often linked to minority and indigenous languages, language vitality in the present study has broadened to encompass the main languages in the nation. Qualitative methodological approach was employed. Interviews were conducted with primary school teachers to obtain insights on the vitality issues. The study identified possible higher vitality of English language when students become older. It is seen that there are many folds of the vitality of English language and that it cannot be measured by scale alone. It is found that social milieu (in the sense of urban area versus rural area), socio-economic background and language policies contribute to the differences in the experience of the English language among students and thus influencing the vitality of the language.

Keywords: Language vitality, English language, Vitality perception, Teachers’ interviews

INTRODUCTION
In tracing vitality, reference is often made to seminar findings made in the 1960s and 1970s. Among them is Stewart (1962, as cited in Bell, 1976) who defined vitality as “whether or not the language possesses a living community of native speakers ... A language may lose its vitality as its L1 community dies out” (p. 148). According to Stewart (1962), a language is guaranteed its vitality as long as it has speakers who use the language as their first language. A strong L1 community intrinsically establishes strong vitality of a language. Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) meanwhile constructed three indicators dealing with status, demography and institutional support which are the basis of another type of vitality which is known as Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV). EV refers to that “which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations” (p. 308). A group that has little or no vitality would cause its members to shift to using another language. Both definitions of vitality from Stewart (1962) and Giles et al. (1977) imply that the speaker is an important factor in determining the vitality of a language. The United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2003 declared that a language without speakers has low or no vitality and this situation will cause it to die. In short, Language Vitality (LV) is the ability of a language to live and survive. In order for a language to do so, its speech
community has to ensure maintenance and sustainability; otherwise, in the long run, language shift could occur, resulting in a language being in danger of extinction. Karan (2000), however, sees vitality as “motivations and opportunity – a language uses motivations and opportunity to learn and use the language” (p. 71). In other words, there is a wider interpretation of the term ‘vitality’.

The Theory of Vitality is in dire need of new directions. Although EV or Group Vitality (GV) has been the highlight and precedent of many research studies, it is contended that the Theory of Vitality has advanced very little during the last 30 years (Yagmur & Ehala, 2011) since its inception, except for few extensions of the notion, such as Age Vitality (Giles, Kutchukhides, Yagmur, & Noels, 2003) and vitality as a belief system (Allard & Landry, 1986). Moreover, with the language vitality assessment proposed by the UNESCO’s Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (UNESCO, 2003), many studies have concentrated on indigenous and minority languages in order to examine the survival and endangerment of these languages with the idea that they should be preserved. Vitality should become more encompassing, involving not only the indigenous or minority languages.

Van Der Avoird, Broeder, and Extra (2001) and Plüddemann, Braam, Broeder, and Extra (2004) concentrated on linguistic experiences in their investigations. The study of Van Der Avoird et al. included language monopoly, language proficiency, language choice, language dominance and language preference as determinants. Plüddemann et al., meanwhile, emphasized home languages, language repertoire, language choice, language proficiency, language dominance and language preference, language subjects, and content subjects as vitality indices. These studies built on the earlier concept of vitality, with an intention to loosen “the potentially problematic link between language on the one hand, and ethnic group and culture, on the other” (Plüddemann et al., 2004, p. 38). Different socio-cultural settings produced different outcomes in such a way that a proposed framework may not be appropriate for a particular context. Therefore, instead of focusing on exterior elements such as the material, the speaker, and the support, the indicators for vitality assessment should concentrate on the intrinsic structure of a language used in the community so that the instrument captures information that is more representative of a language’s strength or weakness in relation to its main role in people’s interaction.

In the Malaysian multilingual society where Malay, English, Mandarin and Tamil are the main languages spoken, undoubtedly, these languages are ‘safe’ according to the definition given by Krauss (2007). Safe languages are those taught as compulsory subjects or used as a medium of instruction in primary schools, are learned as mother tongue by children, have the support of the government and have speakers around the world. English is recognized as an international language and is used in Inner, Outer and Expanding Circle countries (Note: Inner Circle countries are where English is native language, Outer Circle countries use English as a second language, while Expanding Circle nations use English as a foreign language). Vitality should be interpreted distinctively in line with the languages that are used by the majority. In other words, vitality is given a new interpretation as to how a major language is faring in terms of its current use. Vitality in the present study, is a construal of strength evaluation of English relative to the other languages that coexist in the same linguistic sphere where there is ongoing interaction in the use of first, second or third language.

Malaysian students are either bilingual or multilingual because they are taught many languages since young. According to the Malaysian Ministry of Education in 2013 there were a total of 5,233,286 preschool, primary school and secondary school students in this country. Of that total, 2,743,237 were primary school students. As primary schoolers are the biggest group of students in Malaysia, the Report on Education Reform
and Process of Consultation suggests that the government invest in them by raising the standard of English among primary students rather than concentrating on secondary school or university students (ASLI-CPPS, PROHAM & KITA-UKM, 2012). This means the foundations of vitality should be built at an early age and become entrenched in their life. As vitality is mouldable (Abrams, Barker, & Giles, 2009), rectifications could be carried out to improve the vitality of English if it was found to be low at primary school level.

Related to the issue of language vitality is the question of language choice. In other words, it is human agency that determines a language’s vibrancy in daily experiences of linguistic contexts. Within the ecology of multilingual Malaysia, the use of languages is seen as a ‘competition’ to establish importance or status. The most significant current attention is the “shared reality” behind the use of the four main Malaysian languages (i.e. English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil). In this sense, this vitality study attempts to establish the importance and status of the English language in relation to the other languages.

**Research questions**

This study aims to use the various vitality indicators: language use, language preference, language dominance, language choice, language attitude and motivation and language proficiency to investigate the vitality of the English language among other languages in Malaysia. The following question will be asked during investigation work:

1) How do teachers perceive English language vitality among primary school students?

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research design and instrument**

The research utilizes a design that employs qualitative method which involves interview sessions with primary school teachers to seek their opinions regarding the vitality of English language among their students. The research instrument consists of a semi-structured interview protocol which was formulated to guide the researchers in carrying out the interview with the teachers. The construction of the instrument was guided by language vitality indicators laid out by previous studies (Van Der Avoird, Broeder, & Extra, 2001; Pluddemann, Braam, Broeder, Extra, & October, 2004; and UNESCO Report, 2003). The indicators used are:

1) Language Preference
2) Language Dominance
3) Language Use
4) Language Choice
5) Language Attitude and Motivation
6) Language Proficiency

These vitality indicators serve to capture the language situation within the speech community and to encapsulate language experience among students.
Sample
For the purpose of understanding the overall strength (vitality) of English language vis-a-vis other languages in the primary schools in Selangor state, teachers who taught English were selected for interview. They are considered as language experts who have knowledge about the language and are experienced in teaching language to primary school students.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with 18 teachers for the purpose of getting their views on the vitality of the English language. They were chosen based on recommendation from their respective school authorities. These teachers have between 3 and 30 years of experience teaching English at the primary level. Before the interview was conducted, the teachers were briefed on the concept of language vitality that was being studied.

Sample Selection of School Teachers

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<tr>
<th>English teacher</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>National-type Chinese</th>
<th>National-type Tamil</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
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Semi-Structured Interview
The interviews were conducted in compliance with the interview protocol. There were 11 broad-based open-ended questions to give additional insight into the issues at hand. The questions were constructed around the concerns of the vitality indices. English was focused on as the study forefronts the language in comparison with the other languages. The questions were:

1. Do you think the country provides a good environment to learn or speak English? Please elaborate.
2. Do you think the primary school system provides a good environment to learn or speak English?
3. Does the school provide opportunities to strengthen English language use?
4. Should English be the main language used in school? Please elaborate.
5. Is English a language that students prefer? Please give examples.
6. Is English the language they are best at?
7. How frequently do students use English compared to other languages? Please elaborate.
8. What is their attitude and motivation in learning English?
9. Do you think students’ language proficiency will affect the use of the English language in Malaysia in relation to other languages?
10. Based on the existing environment, are you able to predict the future of the English language in relation to the other languages in this country? (Do you think English will continue or will it cease to be one of the main languages in Malaysia?)
11. Is English strong or weak when compared to other languages used in Malaysia?

The audio-recordings from the interviews were converted into an mp3 format that was suitable for the application with the NVivo 10 (30 days trial) software. The software allows the audio recordings to be played at the desired speech thus enabling the researcher to transcribe the interviews into text, add time codes and duration as well as to
label the clips. After transcribing the interviews, the transcriptions were coded according to the themes and aligned with the vitality indicators.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews conducted with the national and national-type English language teachers revealed that the vitality of English language among the students was dependent on a host of factors. Among the significant threads that emerged were government policies, the social background, and the urban-rural setting.

Factors Influencing the Vitality

Government Policies

The teachers reported that the government had implemented a number of English language programs for teachers such as English courses in short and long durations and programs using native foreign speakers in collaboration with The British Council and Cambridge University to remedy their language proficiency and teaching methods.

The government had also provided sufficient programs for the students. One of the programs, according to National Primary School (NPS) English teacher 2, is “MBMMBI programme whereby for level 1, you have to conduct activities based on the both languages, English and Malay.” NILAM activity had also been implemented to ensure “these children have to read a book, an English book a day.” TPS 6 said that the students were given encouragement and opportunity to acquire the English language through the English camp for weeks and months. NPS 3 also added that the English textbook syllabus was emphasized by the ministry with the purpose to strengthen the position of the language in the country and to accelerate the level of English language proficiency among students. They commented that these programs catered for an improved environment for the students to gain exposure to the language.

Interview Excerpts:

[NPS 3] I think the country provides a good environment for learners to learn or speak. Even like the English syllabus is something they emphasize on because there are ongoing programs and syllabus... that...they try to renew the syllabus every 10 years to make the English learning better and to make the students to be more proficient in English.

Nevertheless, while the teachers noted the positive steps taken by the authorities, concerns were expressed over the manner of handling the fundamental issues of implementation of the actions taken. A core issue is the perception that English is still neglected compared to the vernacular languages and Malay in the schools. National Primary School English teacher 2 (NPS 2) believed that to overcome the problem, the responsible agencies had to implement more drastic measures such as imposing a compulsory pass of the English language as an examination subject in school and also to make it a criterion for university entry. Barbour (2010) stated that the role of a language in the educational system would dictate the attitudes expressed towards the language. Thus, through rigorous and firm language policy and implementation, students would have alarming awareness on the importance of the language:

“But we should enhance the usage of English in schools ... and make it a compulsory thing ... like entry for university for [as] a subject for entry and for qualification, those days it was like if you don't pass, it's fine, you still get the certification, but now they should make it...”
compulsory that in order to get the full certification, English is one of the requirements. In that way, the pupils will make it a point to study the language and use the language.” – NPS 2

When asked about how English and Malay language are posited in terms of their importance, given that in reality the former is vital in international platform whereas the latter is a significant language in the national standing, TPS 4 stated that the mastery in English language is vital, but “you cannot deny having Malay language in Malaysia.” NPS 4 provided the example of MBMMBI (To Uphold Malay language and To Strengthen English Language) as a policy that renders focus on two languages and indicated that “we have to go side by side but the main language is still Malay language.” Another teacher (TPS 2) also expressed the difficulty of vernacular schools to allocate balanced attention to three languages (English, Tamil and Malay language) which very likely caused negligence of the English language as priority was given to Malay language as the national language and to the mother tongue used as the medium of instruction. Although emphasis should be given to Malay language as the national language, the English language, according to the teacher (NPS 2), should be given more attention:

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<th>Interview Excerpts:</th>
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<td>TPS 2</td>
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<td>NPS 2</td>
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Based on the findings, government language policies that are carried out in various forms are crucial to impact the vitality of a language. In general, it determines one’s language promotion and relegation that in a way will affect the public’s language perception as well as their language practice in respect of their choice and use of the language. This can be seen from the interview with TPS 2 who said that priority was given to Malay rather than the English language as the relevant authority has mandated that Malay is a must-pass subject before students are allowed to proceed to higher level (Form 1). The top-down language policy is, thus, a key component in the choice of language used in the school as the principals and teachers dutifully carry out the educational policies.

**Social Background**
The use of English language as well as its vitality is very much dependent on the social background of the students such as their parents’ occupation as well as their home environment. The teachers emphasized that knowing English was actually a privilege for those who were from a family where English was spoken at home. NPS 1 highlighted that children whose parents are professionals and from English speaking background tended to speak English with their teachers. NPS 7 linked professionals with English speaking characteristic and added that if they are on low level, they only speak Malay. TPS 2 and CPS 4 (Chinese National-type Primary School English teacher 4) were also on the same
page on the matter with the former acknowledging the possibility of children with educated parents speaking English and the latter pointed to the influence in their learning because of their background. These students have an added advantage in being more proficient in the language compared to the students who did not come from a similar background.

"Those who come from the English language background family, they are very proficient compared to those who come from the BM, their mother tongue, the background of Bahasa Melayu. So they speak very limited English.” – NPS 4

“For those who are coming from good background, they have learnt English since they were born, they are using the language in the house, so they are more on English. For those who are not, they are focusing on their mother tongue.” – TPS 1

For some students, English might have been their third or fourth language and the only place to use the language was in school. Taking the circumstances into account, the teachers implied that English could be considered as a foreign language for some of the students.

“They are from a group of pupils whom they don’t speak or hear the language at home. So, it’s only in school. ... First [language] is their mother tongue ... And also they are aborigines. Asli people, they have their own mother tongue. So, here is decided that [English is] third or fourth language. It's not even a second language. ... In Malaysia, it's supposed to be the second language, but it's being used as foreign language. As I said, they used Malay in school, they have their mother tongue and then they have another language which they used at home. And this is one, two, three, and then with English as fourth, so fourth is considered the foreign language.” – NPS 2

Although the students receive formal English language lessons in the school, NPS 7 said that the school did not play the sole role in contributing to the language experiences of the students. The social environment, which refers to the world outside of the school, she stressed was a more significant contributor to the students’ acquisition of the English language.

“So, it's not the school per said, the environment outside the school also plays an important role. ... There are few who are excellent in English because they used to talk English in their home. But it's for speaking. Maybe writing something else.” – NPS 7

The different home backgrounds affected the vitality of the language among students as many did not come from an English-speaking environment. As such, they were more familiar in using their mother tongue at home and this was further perpetuated in school. As a result, it is therefore not surprising that many of these students are weak in the English language.

Urban-Rural Setting
The next issue is the rural and urban setting which gave rise to a divided scenario in English language use. The teachers affirmed that the use of English in the rural areas was solely confined to the classroom resulting in inadequacy in its use and practice. Students in the rural areas lacked the opportunity to listen to and use the language outside of the school environment. TPS 4 observed that students from urban areas had more opportunities to practise English compared to their colleagues from rural areas where such an environment was not available. He added that “the children need more space and
you must be in the environment to learn the language.” This is in line with the study of Azman (2006) which took note of the rural-urban division that prevents rural communities from acquiring proficiency in the English language. CPS 1 compared the environment between Banting (where he taught) and Kuala Lumpur (where he studied): “If from places like Banting area, pupils are not encouraged to speak in English. But in KL area, they have a very good environment for learning English.” The rural-urban dichotomy is reflective of Enever and Moon (2010) that stated the extent of language exposure is impacted by the rural-urban division and cause unequal English access to the children. CPS 3 added the environment influenced the use of the language: over here in Telok (Telok Datok), the pupils have less exposure to English-speaking community, so they speak less in English. TPS 3 indicated that in the rural areas, English was used only in the classroom. Even within the compound of the school, the students tended to use their mother tongue:

“They only speak English in a classroom ... they come to school, they also tend to use mother tongue. So, it's not giving a sufficient time for them to use English. ... The environment makes them not to really use the language.”

NPS 5 meanwhile, revealed that “the students are not actually exposed to English. Their environment is such” and hence, this passive environment took a toll on the acquisition of the language among the students. NPS 4 mentioned that in the rural area, “to them, English is just merely a second language which they are forced to learn.” The finding on urban-rural division is also supported by the study of Gobel, Thang, Sidhu, Oon, and Chan (2013) which indicated that there is a competence difference in English among students in the rural-urban divide.

The interviews with teachers revealed that the status of English as second language did not reconcile with the situation in reality. Thus, students need to have a more conducive and encouraging avenue or platform to use the language for without an appropriate environment, the learning of English cannot be facilitated. When social milieus and the public arena mirror limited usage and exposure in English and orient towards the use of other languages, not only would it cause less opportunity to apply the language into real life practice, the language is also having less salience in daily linguistic experiences among language users. In other words, the moulding of the social milieu on the linguistic environment underlies the degree of vitality.

Other Concerns

Language Use

From their experiences and observations, the teachers contended that their students were reluctant to speak in English and seldom used the language. Despite all the measures to promote English language use such as organizing English Day, the students still opted to use their mother tongue. This was said by NPS 1:

“Even every Tuesday every month, for the first Tuesday in a month, we held an English day, but not all can speak English. They still speak in their mother tongue language, which is Bahasa Melayu”

Another example given by the teachers was that the students would use English in their teacher’s presence but would switch to mother tongue once the teacher went away. This was confirmed by NPS 7 and TPS 5:
“As I said, Bahasa is their mother tongue, so even we do the speaking, they tend to speak in their mother tongue when we are monitoring the other group. So, maybe in front of us, they try to speak English and then when we go to another group, they start using their mother tongue.” – NPS 7

“When English teachers conduct the lesson or are with them, they speak English. If the English teachers are not with them, definitely they will start speaking [mother tongue].” – TPS 5

The teachers also observed that students would use their mother tongue instead of English for communication purposes. In other words, English only served as a means of communication with the teacher within the classroom setting. Beyond that another language (i.e. the mother tongue) would fulfil this function.

Thus, the use of English was evident only in the class rather than outside of it. Burhanudeen (2004), in her study, stated that the decision to implement English as merely an academic subject has reduced the use of the language among students compared to the time when English was the main language in school. Since that policy on English was implemented, the language is only used in the period allocated to it as a school subject. This was confirmed by CPS 2:

“The students only tend to speak English for maybe 30 minutes or 60 minutes. After that, when they are out of English class, they tend to speak their mother tongue and then they speak Bahasa.”

The introduction of the vernacular language as the medium of instruction at the primary education stage stretched the use of Mandarin and Tamil to encompass not only its usage at home, but also in school. This had the effect of reducing the use of the other languages particularly English. This was mentioned by CPS 4:

“In primary school because we have our mother tongue as medium of learning, so they will speak English less, use English less unless they are forced to. It means when we have programme, when we have visitors, foreigners whom they need to talk to or work with, so they will use the language.”

Hence, beyond the classroom setting, the students needed to be forced to use English. Without force, they would not speak the language. However, force was only applied when the teacher was present. Without the presence and force applied by the teacher, students would not speak the language. This finding is corroborated by Ali (2003) who reported that at primary level, opportunities to use English in the Malaysian school setting is limited. Language use is restricted to the classroom. Communication in English is practically non-existent among students outside the classroom. She found that despite students having the ability to read and write in English, they have problems with speaking and listening skills, which require more practice and application.

The teachers also described English as a subject that was being used for academic and examination purposes only. NPS 1 stated that “They use only for academic purpose, for primary school, usually like that”. This was confirmed by NPS 4: “They only learn when they know that they have to sit for the exam. Then of course they would learn and study hard for the language itself ... also as I said we have exam on oral skills, then they use English.” When a language was only learned for examination purposes and the element of force was present, the vitality of the language would be affected.

Instead of using English, students strongly preferred to use their mother tongue in most circumstances. It could be said that artificial reinforcement did not work well. When
the students seldom used the language and force had to be applied to make them use the language, it is justifiable to state that for these school-going children, English is regarded as a school subject rather than a common language that could be used in immediate environment or beyond though Yamat, Fisher, and Rich (2014) stated that English language learning in the context of Malaysia should be aligned with language exposure, opportunities to use the language, conducive environment, and increment in English language use. When the public space and home setting do not serve as the platform for English language practice, the school is deemed as the last ray of hope to deliver messages about the significance and relevance of English language to the students.

Language Preference
The teachers acknowledged that English was not a preferred language among their students as compared to the mother tongue. NPS 3 and TPS 4 said:

“Students prefer to communicate in their first language because it is easier for them to get, to send the message they are trying because they are not familiar with English. Even though they are Indian students, Chinese students or Malay students, they prefer to use their mother tongue.” – NPS 3

“No body likes to use secondary language. If possible, they like to speak in their mother tongue, or maybe Tamil or Malay where they communicate more. They express more in their mother tongue. I don’t think they prefer English.” – TPS 4

Therefore, their language preference is linked to their ability to use the language and their feelings towards the language. TPS 2 stated that “It all comes from the students’ ability. If the students are comfortable with English, they prefer English; for those who have lower capability of using English, they choose not to talk in English”. In other words, language competence plays a part in influencing their language preference; they either use a language comfortably or avoid using it. TPS 6 also did not think her students liked English and highlighted lack of vocabulary as the problem. She said that “When comes to words and usage of words, they are out of that because most of the time they are using it in their mother tongue”. This hints at the discomfort of using English among her students. The preference to use a language is also connected to the degree of difficulty in acquiring the language. When a language is difficult to learn and use, the students are prone to not using it. This is supported by Ting and Sussex (2012) who found that language choice is subject to language preference and proficiency.

Another teacher, on the other hand, said that some of her students prefer English as much as they prefer their mother tongue:

“So me of the children, not to say they love Tamil much, but they love English more.”

She added that although her students were excellent in English language, they still loved Tamil which was their mother tongue. A teacher (NPS 8) reported that her students were fond of learning English, however without a natural and spontaneous setting, the students found it hard to sustain their interest.

Language Proficiency
It is evident that the students had acquired a wide range of proficiency in English. As mentioned by the teachers, some are excellent in the language, whereas some are very weak.
Given the range of proficiency, this would also mean that it would be difficult to give a more objective view of English language vitality if proficiency is used as a yardstick for evaluation. Some teachers stated that the criterion for proficiency was being able to read, understand and communicate with teachers via the language. Others operationalized it in terms of listening, speaking and writing, vocabulary, pronunciation and examination results. NPS 8 states that at the primary level, the students are deemed to have reached the learning outcome if “they are able to read, they are able to understand, and they are able to communicate with the teacher.”

Some teachers attributed the proficiency gap of their students to the home background difference. NPS 7 said “There are few who are excellent in English because they used to talk English in their home. But it’s for speaking. Maybe writing something else.” TPS 3 stated that “Like educated parents, the children are quite good. So, I think the level of proficiency is severe in this role.” TPS 6 felt that “home background plays a big part.” In other words, the family background plays a vital role in the students’ level of proficiency in English.

An English teacher (TPS 6) gave an optimistic view that the students while encountering problems in English language usage at primary level would, however, be able to improve in the language later. This implied that at a later stage, the vitality of the English language would be higher at the post primary level when the students progressed to the national secondary schools. The use of mother tongue would be reduced to some extent and the use of other languages, including English could be more prominent. At the primary level, it was found that the schools appeared to perpetuate mother tongue use at the expense of the early learning of English which could lay the foundation for a strong subsequent development. This was explained by the English teacher as follows:

“... primary school, yes, the child will have some problem with English language. Once they come to secondary school, most of them are able to speak in English. ... Most of them are able to speak, able to understand English because they used English more for communication. In a secondary school, it’s all a mixture of all three languages, so they cannot speak more of their mother tongue. They have to communicate with the other students, they have to speak in English because their bahasa is also not very strong so most of the time they used English for communication especially secondary school. From Form 1, they will start speaking more in English if you notice. Primary school, no, because it’s all their kind. All the Malays in one school; Chinese, Indian in another school, so they speak their mother tongue. When they go to secondary school, all three is mixed together so they got no choice. They have to speak in English. So, it's there - no problem with it.”

Thus the debate on the viability of an ethnocentric approach versus a national concentration on the promotion of a ‘single’ national language or a language for international communication for the greater good in early language development for the society at large remains unabated. Nonetheless, data from stakeholders at the base line level will remain useful for insights into socio-linguistic views on language development in a particular multi-lingual locality and its language policy.

**Language Attitude and Motivation**

In the aspect of attitude, it was found that students generally had negative feelings towards the English language. Fear of using the language or fear of making mistakes was the common statement made by the teachers.

The students thought English was a difficult language as it was not their mother tongue. They were wary about using the language as they tended to make mistakes. Other negative feelings such as uncomfortableness with using the language (NPS 2; NPS 6),
indifference towards the language (NPS 4, NPS 5; CPS 1) and shyness and embarrassment to use the language (NPs 6, CPS 2). also impinged on their acquisition of English.

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<th>Interview Excerpts:</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Discomfort in using the language</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>[NPS 2] They don't feel comfortable because they don't have the vocabulary ... sometimes they want to express themselves, they don't have enough words.</td>
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<tr>
<td>[NPS 6] They feel uncomfortable because they usually didn't use this language.</td>
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<td><strong>Indifference towards the language</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>[NPS 4] There are two groups: one group with those who are good students - they like to learn English. But for poor classes, they do not really care whether they learn or not, whether they pass, they don't really care.</td>
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<tr>
<td>[NPS 5] I think they have no interest in English. The interest is very low.</td>
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<td>[TPS 6] If it's a good class, yes, they are very interested because they know the importance of English, they really want to learn the language, they question. If you have the weaker classes, they don't seem to be interested because they don't use the language at home.</td>
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<tr>
<td>[CPS 1] They are not very enthusiastic when it comes to learning English. They tend to over-rely on the teacher when it comes to learning English. They always wait for the teacher to explain the meaning in Chinese or in Bahasa Melayu.</td>
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<tr>
<td>[CPS 2] Attitude wise, they are not encouraging. They don't want to learn.</td>
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<td><strong>Embarrassed to use the language</strong></td>
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<td>[NPS 6] So, they feel sometimes shy and sometimes they don't have enough vocabulary to speak. That's why they didn't speak English.</td>
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<tr>
<td>[CPS 2] They are very shy. They are very shy. If they speak whether the friends will laugh at them or whether they made mistakes. They are very shy to speak in front of the friends. Although sometimes they know the words, but they are not confident to use it. So, they just tend to keep quiet.</td>
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They felt uncomfortable when using the language as lack of vocabulary restricted them from expressing themselves spontaneously. The students lacked enthusiasm and confidence in learning the language and were over-dependent on the teachers especially in terms of seeking the meaning of words. This manifests that low proficiency in the language attributed to negative attitude such as lack of confidence and awkwardness in using the language as supported by the study of Yahaya, Yahaya, Ooi, Bon, and Ismail (2010). Another teacher (TPS 6) noted that since the students were unfamiliar with the English language, they preferred to communicate in their first language or mother tongue as it enabled them to speak more naturally. However, teachers also noted that some students liked English and therefore had a positive attitude and motivation to learn the language.

There are some positive signs for the vitality of the language especially when teachers firmly acknowledged the importance of learning English. However, despite constant reminders of the importance of English, the students have yet to show a greater awareness about it. Teachers attributed the lack of awareness to their young age as the importance of the language is not yet apparent to them:
“Because they are still small, they do not really understand the importance of English language yet. Maybe if they go to tertiary education, they would be aware of the importance.” – NPS 4

“Teacher always tell them about it but since they are still young, they didn’t take it up to par. For them, it is the subject. Even though we told them so many times that when you go outside, you meet other people, you need to use English. When you work soon, you need to use English. Still, because they are young, they cannot feel.” – NPS 7

“They don’t realize the importance in school. Once they go to secondary school, once they face the PT3 and SPM, then only they realize its importance because in the school, they are not exposed to the outside world. They are very comfortable in their zone. ‘Oh this is school. I passed or failed, I still go to the next level’. But once they finish their SPM, they realize ‘Oh, outside everything is in English’. Then only they realize but that’s too late already. That’s why we always try to reinforce to them that English is worldwide. If you can use, control it, you can go to whole world”. – CPS 2

A teacher added that although students might realize the importance of English, they could not feel it as the language does not play a crucial element in their daily lives. English is regarded as unnecessary and they are able to survive without it.

A teacher (CPS 1) also expressed the view that students tended to isolate themselves from the language. The students, according to him, “(found) another escape route to escape English” by studying in the independent Chinese school where Mandarin is the medium of the instruction. He added “when it comes to long term, the pupils will think that ‘I learn Chinese. Next time I can go to the independent school. I don’t have to learn English anymore. It is not important.”

CONCLUSION
Vitality can be interpreted in many ways. As this study placed language preference, dominance, use, choice, attitude and motivation and proficiency as the indicators of vitality, the teachers voiced their opinions about the vitality of English language of their students in line with these indicators. One aspect noted in the interview was that social milieu (in the sense of urban versus rural), socio-economic background and language policies contributed to the differences in the experience of the English language among students and thus influenced the vitality of the language. The interviews also demonstrated a connection between individual and societal levels where environmental support and the social milieu influenced the individual establishment of the language vitality. This was supported by Van Driem (2007) who postulated that “the survival of individual languages was primarily determined by factors which had nothing to do with their intrinsic worth as a system for the articulation of human thought, but by economic, ecological and demographic factors affecting the individual language communities” (p. 303).

It seems that it is the English speaking environment that is moulded in the domains of use such as at home, in school and other social milieu would provide language contacts as well as opportunities to use the language in context; the use of the language would be maximized to some extent, thus facilitating positive attitudes, such as comfort in using the language. At the individual level, this would help to strengthen the vitality of the English language that could be transformed into the conspicuous use of the language as part of their linguistic experience. A degree of support from the responsible authorities is needed to gain a certain level of vitality. In short, if the home environment, the
immediate community and other social milieu brings high exposure of the English language and adds to it, a greater emphasis in English language in the government’s policies and implementation, then the vitality of the English language will be placed in a better position.

From the interviews, it can be concluded that within the classroom, the language is merely being used under three conditions: for communication with the teacher only, for simple communication and instruction purposes, and for examination. Beyond the classroom, the students used their mother tongue and rarely used the English language. Added to that, there is a forced element in making the students use the language which hints on the notion that the language is not being used voluntarily. Nevertheless, some teachers remarked that the students had made an attempt in practicing the language. As for another vitality indicator which is language preference, the teachers observed that some of their students preferred the language, whereas some did not. The preference towards the language was linked to their ease of use with the language as teacher stated “if the students are comfortable with the English, they prefer English.” On the other hand, not favouring the language is seen as a form of rejection towards the language which is very likely due to the low proficiency and difficulty in learning the language. The students were also found to have different English language proficiency levels. The high proficiency level at early age is due to English being their first language and spoken at home. In other instances, language proficiency is very much affected by the language practices as summed up by one of the teachers that “it is not being used widely in their daily lives, so I don’t think so.” The struggle to boost language proficiency as well as to expand the communication and practice space beyond the classroom setting for the elevation of the vitality need reconciliation of language use and proficiency. Attitude wise, ‘shy’, ‘embarrassed’, ‘afraid to make mistakes’, ‘feeling awkward speaking the language’ and ‘no interest’ are the gist of students’ reaction towards English language though some of the students set positive attitude towards the language. Che Mat and Yunus (2014) also reported similar negative attitudes among primary school students. These negative attitudes may persist until a later age as Talif, Chan, Abdullah, Wong, Noor, & Rashid. (2010), Yahaya et al. (2011), and Kamarudin and Long (2014) in their studies, observed the presence of such negative attitudes and feelings among tertiary level students. Teachers also revealed that students were conscious of the importance of the language but were not aware of it as they felt the need for English was limited. These perceptions were captured in such an array that opportunities for linguistic contacts in English language are largely determined by prior privileges such as an English speaking environment at home or in other social milieu taking into account the ambivalence in rendering equal concentration to languages since the teachers voiced that the emphases are commonly given to the national language and mother tongue followed by English. Hence, in general, efforts to improve and elevate the vitality of English language in their early phase of the students’ life or at the primary school stage are required to ensure the language vitality is on par with nation building and development. The vitality of the English language at the early phase of the schoolchildren’s life may not be satisfactory yet a different picture may emerge at the later phase (secondary education) as it is predicted by the teachers that the school milieu at the later phase may act as a momentum to increase the strength of the language given that the contact network would be expanded to involve people from different races instead of solely a single race, thus driving the children to utilize their second language which in this case refers to English.

In this study, the focus is on language vitality which is an offshoot of studies on Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV) which emphasized on the vitality of a group of users and traditionally language vitality dealt with indigenous and minority languages. However,
this research has extended from these conventional notions of language vitality to cover major languages in use in a multilingual environment. In essence, it concentrates on the vitality of the English language as a second language. The research focuses on the vitality of the English language among primary Malaysian school students who are initiated to acquire the language, thus giving baseline information about early language acquisition.

Though the findings are informative, the study is not without limitations. One of the limitations is the geographical boundary of the study. This study was limited to just one state. Future research could expand the geographical confines to obtain cross-sectional results to improve on the generalizability of the results. East Malaysia could also be explored as the different ethnic make-up could give rich information on language vitality. In addition, the study was confined to the primary level. It is suggested that the vitality research be extended to secondary and tertiary level students as the data would capture linguistic practices at different stages of their life.

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