



## Language Choice and National Identity among Young Malay Students in a University Domain

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### Authors' contributions

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

### Article Information

#### Editor(s):

(1) Dr. Atila Yildirim, Necmettin Erbakan University, Turkey.

#### Reviewers:

(1) Joseph Mukuni, Virginia Tech, USA.

(2) Gabriel Bazimaziki, University of Rwanda- College of Education, Rwanda.

Complete Peer review History, details of the editor(s), Reviewers and additional Reviewers are available in this link: <https://www.sdiarticle5.com/review-history/76191>

**Received 20 August 2021**

**Accepted 30 October 2021**

**Published 22 November 2021**

**Original Research Article**

### ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationships between national identity and language choices of Malaysian multilingual youths in the university domain of language use. One hundred Malay undergraduate students were selected as participants of the study. The participant were between 17 to 25 years old. A questionnaire comprising three sections was used to gather information about participants' demographic profiles, their language choices, and the concepts of their national identity. To investigate their language use and the relationships between variables, SPSS software was used. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the participants' profiles, as well as participants' used languages in the family domain of language use. A correlation coefficient analysis was used to examine the relationships between variables. The study found that the national language is dominantly used in their daily activities. Also, the national identity was found to influence the language choices of Malays.

**Keywords:** *Language choice; national identity; Malay language; university domain; multilingual; youth language.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not simply an assortment of words, but an entity that connects an individual to his state or nation. The sense of belonging to one state or nation requires the presence of symbols of various kinds through which people can be identified with. These can be flags, songs, nation's history, and on top of these is a common language [1]. A shared common national language that consolidates and coheres its users into one community is considered as a significant liaison. In fact, using a common language throughout the territory unites its inhabitants [2]. The common sense of a nation is formed based on a shared language as an important factor that links a group of people to their nationality. As a result, people usually make an intimate symbolic linkage between their language and their nationality. Therefore, language provides a tool of communication through which the users melt into a national mass [2]. In other words, language is defined as an identity and unity for those people who use it as a communicative tool. Judt and Lacorne [3] state that language is an important factor that assists individuals to express their memberships inside their nation. Further, the issue of language choice, especially in multilingual countries, is attributed to an individual's identity [4] who has tendencies towards using a particular language in a particular communicative event, rather than the social situation [5].

To trace back this relationship between language choice and national identity, we need to go back to the eighteenth century. Gottfried Herder was the first to postulate the indispensable relationship between national identity and language. So long as the word nation is linked to one language, different nations express different importance toward their own language [6]. Therefore, some consider language amongst the most important factors that tie up all those people who use it, while the common denominators in other nations can be their ethnicity or religion [7]. According to Baker [8], language is considered an avatar of identity. Further, language has a significant role in forming national identity, especially in the colonized multilingual countries where English is used as a formal language. In such cases, national identity usually plays a key role in language choice with aboriginal people as it is considered as an allegiance to their nation. The formal use of the English language poses some challenges for those people and they are forced to forgo their national language and use

English instead. Therefore, the relationship between language and national identity entices several scholars in different communicative events.

However, little is known about the relationship between national identity and language choice in different domains especially in the Malay society [4]. Indeed, the inclination to national identity existed when students' language conflicts by local, national, and international literacy issues [9]. This conflict usually occurs in a university domain within an international community and it is known as national and international language tension. From a historical perspective, the meaning of language is different from one nation to another. For instance, the Georgian language played the role of the foundation in the modern Georgian nation, whilst in the pre-modern time, culture and ethnic ties played this role [10]. Furthermore, the orientation to different ethnic identities that existed in a multilingual society can be considered as a conflict to a single national identity [11]. However, several studies (Granhemat 2017; [12,5] have been conducted to investigate this relationship between language and national identity in Malaysia. In addition, Granhemat (2017), who investigated this relation in a family domain, concluded that in multilingual Malaysian society, more research is needed to understand how the Malay national identity is correlated with the choice of languages used in different domains.

As a result, this study aimed to examine the relationships between the language choice of the Malay youth and their feelings towards their national identity. Attention was directed to the impact of national identity on language since the latter is considered as a nexus through which its users melt into a national mass. Hence, national identity was considered as an independent variable and language choice as a dependent variable to find the most used languages and the extent to which it is affected by the sense of national identity of the students in the university domain. Hence, the research was guided by the following questions:

- 1) What is the dominant language used by the young Malay students in the university domain?
- 2) What is the relationship between the dominant languages used by the young Malay students and their national identity in the university domain?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity-related factors are deemed amongst the most significant factors of social life. Recently several studies have investigated the relationship between these factors and the choice of language [13,4,6,14]. National identity and ethnicity have been investigated widely in the literature. Hence, several studies reported a controversial result as different people accord different importance to language in relation to their national identity (Pavlinko, 2002). Furthermore, different studies have investigated different domains to assess the relationship between language choice and national identity like in the family domain and suggested that this relationship needs to be investigated in different domains [4]. Given that, students' inclination towards their own nationality affects their language choice, especially when their language conflicts between local, national, and international literacy issues [9] as they live within an international community.

The trend of research on language practice among Malay has focused on linguistic choice in different communicative events. To trace down this trend, we can find that Abdullah [15] was the first one who examined language choice among Malaysians in different domains to find the relationship between language and identity. He stated that there are four major factors that determine language choice in different domains. Firstly, whether the personal repertoires of the speakers were equal. Secondly, whether certain personal relationships were shared leading to the forming of a homogenous group. Thirdly, the degree of formality. Fourthly, the setting of the locale.

In addition, Maya Khelmani David [16] investigated this relationship among Malaysian in general. While Rahman et al. [5] investigated language choice among Malaysians in the family domain with different ethnicity. They found that different ethnic groups preferred their respective ethnic languages with people who have the same ethnic backgrounds. In addition, using Malay among non-Malays and English increased regardless of ethnicity while the speakers belong to different ethnic backgrounds.

Therefore, amongst the most important variables, language identity is considered an important factor that affects language choice in the field of sociolinguistics, especially in multilingual countries [4].

Given the fact that language is seen as an important requisite for national identity, different communities express different importance towards their own language. For instance, Eight out of ten or more British, Hungarians, and Germans believe that speaking their national language is an important indicator of their nationality. In contrast, Canadians and Italians are the least likely to link language and national identity. This relationship holds an important meaning especially in multilingual countries where English is imposed as a formal language besides the national one like in Malaysia.

Due to these inconsistent perceptions towards both language and national identity, inconsistent literature can be seen clearly in reviewing the related past studies. Firstly, Omar (1998) investigated whether there is a correlation between the use of language with an individual's national identity among Malaysian in general or not. The findings showed that language choice in the individual is not inborn and not fixed, but changes with the individual's development, environment, and situations of language use. Omar (1998) concluded that language choice is no longer important to be considered as a marker of national identity for Malaysians. Instead, they use other markers such as shared values and socio personality traits, food, clothing, and religious and cultural celebrations that can be considered as important markers for national identity. In another study, Patrick [17] conducted comparative research between Arctic communities and among Southern urban Inuit in Ottawa. The author focused particularly on language and national identity in light of local, national, and global processes that help shape conceptions of Indigeneity and Inuitness. He contended that the mutual relation between both language and the sense of belonging for the country makes this feeling towards the country an important indicator for language choice.

In contrast, McCarty et al. [18] investigated the same issue among Navaho, implied that a fundamental link is perceived between Navaho language and Navaho identity and concluded that language is an essential indicator of nationality. Hence, to be a Navajo one could speak Navajo. In addition, McCarty stated that language helps to preserve their own identity. In another study, Denton [19] investigated the use of language among Nuyoricans and Caribbeans, as multilingual people, and its relation to their own national identity. Denton affirmed that using Spanish is stigmatized among Nuyoricans. In the

same study, Denton also investigated the use of English among Caribbean inhabitants and he concluded that using English is a betrayal of Hispanic heritage and identity in Puerto Rico.

Williams [20] investigated the importance of national identity and its direct effect on language in the coastal town of Caernarfon. The author found out that attitudes towards national identity and the role of the language are equivocal. On the contrary, Searle (2010), who investigated the link between land and language, found that there was a strong link between language and people's sense of nationalism. He concluded that the ability to speak the aboriginal language is equated with the ability to be a part of this society and the sense of belonging to this land.

From the aforementioned literature, we could conclude that language functions as a significant factor for individuals' identity (Hafriza, 2006). This can be seen clearly especially, where one language is more important than others in a specific domain like English which is used formally in a university domain (Granhemat, 2017). Accordingly, it is clear that there is a lack of understanding of the relationship between national identity and language choice in different contexts. Therefore, this study sought to find whether language is correlated with national identity in the university domain among Malay students or not.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This section states the research design along with the samples included and the implemented instrument. It provides detailed information about data collection and data analysis. In brief, to answer the research questions and address the aforesaid gap in the literature, this study implemented a qualitative non-experimental design as will be explained further in the next section.

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study was carried out to investigate national identity as a significant factor that determines the choice of language in the multilingual Malay society. As a result, the study adopted a non-experimental correlational coefficient research design. The researchers aimed to investigate the existence and the strength of this relationship between national identity and language as an important indicator in determining the issue of language choice among Malay students in the

university domain. A questionnaire of three parts was utilized to collect information about students' demographic profiles, their language choices in the university domain, and their national identity.

#### 3.2 Samples

The participants for the current study were 100 undergraduate students from University Putra Malaysia. The Survey method involved random sampling inside the targeted population. The participants were selected randomly from the faculty of science, the faculty of modern language and communication, and the faculty of engineering. In addition, most of the participants (72%) were female and their ages ranged between 18 to 22 with a mean of 22.5. In this age, it is believed that they can discern their daily linguistics experience and comprehend identity-related questions. See Table 1 for more information.

**Table 1. Respondents profile**

<b>Age</b>	18-20	34%
	21-23	60%
	23-25	6%
<b>Faculty</b>	Modern language	18%
	Science	45%
	Engineering	37%
<b>Gender</b>	Female	76.3%
	Male	33.7%

#### 3.3 Instrument

To collect the data, a questionnaire was used as the only instrument in this study. The questionnaire was adapted from Granhenat (2014) to examine the issue of language choice and its relationship with their national identity among Malay in the university domain. This questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part collected biographical information. The second part posed 10 communicative events in the university domain. In this part, the participants were asked to choose the language they usually use in these events. This part was adapted from Granhenat (2014), who investigated the issue of language choice in the family domain, to be used in the university domain. The respondents were instructed to answer the second according to the employed five-Likert scale. This scale ranged from a minimum score of 1 (Very frequently) to 5 (Never). Finally, the third part, the National Identity Measure (NIM), was adopted from

Granhenat (2017) to investigate the importance of national identity for youth students. The respondents were instructed to answer this part according to the employed five-Likert scale. This scale ranged from a minimum score of 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected within two weeks. The questionnaire was sent via WhatsApp to the targeted participants. All the information regarding the identity of the researcher as a student at University Putra Malaysia and the reason for data collection were stated clearly in the online questionnaire. No name or any identifying information was requested except their ethnic background. The reason was stated clearly that this study was implemented to understand the issue of language choice among Malay students. Thus, we ensured that the participants understood the procedure. Moreover, they were also informed that the data was used for academic purposes rather than being a personal initiative.

### 3.5 Data Analysis Procedures

The study adopted a quantitative approach to analyze the data. The data was uploaded to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Two statistical tests were run to address the two research questions. Hence, to answer the first research questions and determine the language used between Malay undergraduate students in the university domain, a descriptive analysis was used. This was achieved by calculating the mean scores of the agreement level from the students on the responses among the chosen language in different communicative situations inside the university. The mean scores of the responses for each item ranged from 1- 5. According to Hanson, et al. [21] The mean scores of agreements range from 1.00 to 2.33 are considered as low, mean scores from 2.34 to 3.67 are considered moderate, and mean scores range from 3.68 to 5.00 are considered high. In addition, to answer the second research question, to determine the relationship between national identity and language choice, a correlation coefficient analysis was employed. Correlation coefficient analysis was used to find the strength of the relation between the two variables. The strength of this relation was determined by calculating the value of (r). According to Lee Rodgers & Nicewander [22], this value ranges from -1.0 to 1.0. Further, -1.0

shows a perfect negative correlation, a correlation of 1.0 shows a high positive correlation. Finally, a correlation of 0.0 shows no relationship between the two variables.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to investigate the dominant language in daily communication among Malay students in the university domain. In addition, it aimed to investigate the relationship between the sense of nationalism and their language choices in the university domain. However, in less than one week, the researchers received a total of 100 responses from the targeted population. Thus, the data was analyzed quantitatively and presented in two parts as it is shown below.

### 3.1 Language Used in University Domain

The participants' language choices were examined by presenting 10 social events. In each social event, the participants were asked to indicate their choice(s) of language(s) for the two languages (Malay and English) according to the five-point Likert scale (Very frequently =5 to Never =1).

As a multilingual country, the Malay students have two language choices with a combination of both. Accordingly, 3 choices of language were identified and codified as follows: 1=Malay, 2 =English, and 3 =mixed use of Malay and English.

Moreover, according to the five-point Likert scale employed, each participant could achieve a score ranging from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 50 with a median score of 25 for each language. The median of a scale can be deemed as a cut-off point for categorizing data, the mean score of 25 was selected as a cut-off point to decide each participant's most used language(s) in each social event.

In addition, Table 2 shows the comparative scale that was used to determine the dominant language in the university domain. Accordingly, if the ranking of any score from the participants for the 3 codes (Malay, English, and English - Malay) was equivalent to the cut-off mark or greater than the median, the code was assumed to be the language(s) most used or the language(s) of the individual participant's preference in the corresponding social event in the language university domain.

**Table 2. Languages in the University Domain of Language Use (Adopted from Granhemat & Abdullah, [4])**

Participant's Choice of language(s)	Scale
1=Malay	IF score of Malay= 25 or> 25 and score of English<30, the choice of language was considered Malay.
2=English	IF score of English= 25 or> 25 and score of Malay<30, the choice of language was considered English.
3= Mixed-use of Malay and English languages.	IF score of Malay= 25 or> 25 and score of English= 25 or> 25, The choice of languages was considered a mixed-use of Malay and English.

\*25= Median of participants' language choice

**Table 3. Participants' most used languages in the university domain**

Languages	Responses	Pct.	Pct. of Cases
Malay	473	45.5%	454.8%
English	350	33.7%	336.5%
Mixed-use	217	20.9%	208.7%
Total	1040	100.0%	1000.0%

Accordingly, Table 3 shows that the three languages were used by the participants. Moreover, the Malay students used more of the Malay language (45.5%) than the English language(33.7%). Moreover, according to the data, the Malay language scored the highest mean (= 3.2). Moreover, the first code (the Malay language) got the highest loading item and scored 90 (in a range of 18-90) in the third situation in the questionnaire. Furthermore, the second code (the English language) got the highest loading factor and scored 85 in the 12th item. Finally, the participants used a mix of English and Malay (20.9%) as well. The third code (English and Malay) got the highest loading factor and scored 70 in the first situation of the questionnaire.

Accordingly, the most used language was the Malay language (45.5%), the English also was used (33.7%), but less than the national language. In addition, the result showed that some students chose both languages.

However, even though English is the official language in the university domain, the result showed that Malay students, in the university domain, frequently use their own national language more than the official English language. Therefore, this result is compatible with several scholars (Granhemat, 2017; Mei et al. [23]; Ying 2015) who found that the national language is the dominant language and is used more than the formal second language among

the aboriginal people in different communicative events.

### 3.2 Language and National Identity

Firstly, the participants answered the 18 items of the NIM according to the five-point Likert scale (5=strongly agree to 1=strongly disagree). Thus, their national identity ranged from a minimum score of 18 to a maximum of 90 (Mean = 44.88, SD = 2.48). In addition, item number 17 was the highest loading item and scored 90 (in a range of 18-90), while item number 18 was the lowest loading factor and scored 55. Then, the respondents' national identities were categorized as low, moderate, and high.

**Table 4. Frequency Distribution of Respondents' national identity**

NI	No	Percentage
Low	7	4
Moderate	12	6
High	81	90

Table 4 shows that most of the participants (90%) were identified with a high sense of nationalism. Accordingly, this study indicated that the sense of national identity among the younger generation in Malaysia was considerable. To some extent, this is compatible with Granhenat & Abdullah but in contrast to Mokhtar & Lokman's [24] study that indicated that solidarity and integration in a multi-cultural society like Malaysia is still a question mark.

**Table 5. The relationship between national identity and language choice**

<b>Independent variable</b>	<b>Dependent variable</b>	<b>Correlation coefficient (r)</b>	<b>Sig (p)</b>
National identities	Language choice	.0658	.050

A correlation analysis (Using the Pearson correlation test) was conducted to determine the relationship between national identity as a dependent variable and language choice as an independent variable.

The result in Table 5 shows that there is a significant positive correlation ( $r = .0658$  and  $Sig = .050$ ) between national identity, as an independent variable, and language choice, as a dependent variable. This positive relationship supports the suggested hypothesis by the literature that assumes the existence of a significant relationship between an individual's feelings towards his nationality and his language choice. As a result, this study may suggest that students who have a sense of belonging to their national identity may use their national language frequently more than any other official language in their multilingual context.

However, the link between language choice and national identity can be explained by referring to Fishman [25]. Fishman considers language as the symbol of uniqueness and authentic nationalism. Further, he argues that our feeling toward our identity resides in our language. Therefore, linguistic differentiation is often used to highlight the separateness of people, whereas linguistic similitude is often used to highlight the unity of people. Additionally, within the national domain, language is much more than a simple code for communication. The national language is a symbol infused with values and morals and people usually make an intimate symbolic linkage between their national language and national identity. Consequently, unlike a national anthem or a national flag, a national language produces and performs an important meaning towards our national identity. Further, the national language of the aboriginal people melts the whole citizens, who use this language, into a national mass (Vogl & Hüning, 2010). Based on the result, it can be said that language is deemed to express as well as to help in creating national communities [26].

Finally, it is not surprising to find that language plays an important role in unifying a nation together [27]. As a result, the current study is consistent with several scholars who investigated this relationship between language and identity.

For example, Friedman [28] stated that feelings towards our nationality play a significant role in the process of language choice. In addition, Bilaniuk [29] contended that, consciously or not, our feeling towards our nationality is a determinant factor in the process of language use and choice in daily communication. In contrast, despite this harmony between this result and the literature, this result is different from Peacock [30], who stated that national identity is not the only factor that affects language, especially for youth. In addition, Peacock stated that feeling towards our identity is changeable, not just from one person to another, but from time to time as well, as it is context-dependent. According to this unstable feeling, peacock gave less priority to the role of national identity in the process of language choice.

It is important to mention that the mix-use between the two aforesaid languages can be attributed to different variables besides the identity-related factors. Some variables like educational level, religion, and language proficiency may affect language choice also in a multilingual context like in Malaysia [31].

It is noteworthy to mention that this study was conducted among Malays, hence it cannot be generalized among Malaysians. The Malaysian nationality is composed of two main nationalities, namely, Indian-Malay and Chinese-Malay, besides the Malay people. Hence, the current findings are bounded among Malay. Moreover, although data in this study offered meaningful results, the researchers attest that one hundred students can be considered as a restriction to the current finding and may jeopardize generalizing the inference of our study.

Finally, despite the above-mentioned limitations, this study has opened the door for more new and unprecedented issues that call the need for more studies to investigate the relationship between the notion of national identity and its crucial effect on the language of adolescence. Research that investigates identity during this age when the ties to one's parents begin to weaken and s/he begins to ask the question, who am I in relation to everyone that surrounds me?

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study endeavoured to examine the extent to which national identity is widespread among the younger generations of Malay youth students in a university domain. Even though English is considered the language of instruction formally in the university, it was found that the national language is dominantly used in their daily activities.

As for the relationship between national language and national identity, the result supports the suggested hypothesis by the literature that assumes the existence of a significant relationship between identity and language choice. Thus, this study offered clear evidence for the hypothesized relation between language and national identity among the youth in a multilingual context. Accordingly, students who have a sense of belonging to their national identity may use their national language more than any other language inside their multilingual context.

Finally, future studies may investigate this issue among Malaysian citizens involving Chinese-Malay and Indian-Malay, as their own ethnic languages can be considered as variables as well. Such a study can provide a holistic view of Malaysian society and may provide different or complementary results to the aforementioned variables. Furthermore, including more samples in this study may present more meaningful results to test this relationship in future studies.

Due to the legacy of British colonial rule and because of the effects of language policy and education, the English language is ubiquitous among Malaysians [32]. In an academic context, where English is dominantly used as a language of instruction, identity is still an effective means to encourage the use of national language among aboriginals. Therefore, governmental policies may encourage the use of a particular language in order to unify people for nation-building activities in the university domain.

#### CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, Participants' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

#### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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## APPENDIX

### First part: demographic information

Age

18-20 / 21-22 / 23-24

Faculty

FBMK (Faculty Of Modern Languages And Communication)

FASSA (faculty of science)

Engineering

### Second part: data related to the choice of language

#### Part 1. National Identity Measure (NIM)

- 
- 1 I am a worthy member of the nation I belong to. 1 2 3 4
  - 2 I feel I don't have much to offer to the nation I belong to. 1 2 3 4
  - 3 I am a cooperative participant in the nation I belong to. 1 2 3 4
  - 4 I often feel I'm a useless member of the nation I belong to. 1 2 3 4
  - 5 I often regret that I belong to this nation. 1 2 3 4
  - 6 I often feel that it is not worthwhile to be a member of the nation to which I belong to. 1 2 3 4
  - 7 I feel good about the nation I belong to. 1 2 3 4
  - 8 In general, others respect the nation that I am a member of. 1 2 3 4
  - 9 I feel that being a member of this nation is worthwhile. 1 2 3 4
  - 10 My nation has very little to do with how I feel about myself. 1 2 3 4
  - 11 The nation I belong to is an important reflection of who I am. 1 2 3 4
  - 12 The nation I belong to is important to my sense of the kind of person I am. 1 2 3 4
  - 13 In general, belonging to this nation is an important part of my selfimage. 1 2 3 4
  - 14 The nation I belong to is superior to other nations in many aspects. 1 2 3 4
  - 15 My nation is not as important as many other nations in the world. 1 2 3 4
  - 16 The nation I belong to plays a more important international role than other nations. 1 2 3 4
  - 17 In competition with others my nation comes off worse. 1 2 3 4
  - 18 My nation has been successful in its international policy. 1 2 3 4
  - 19 I admire important Malaysian people. 1 2 3 4
  - 20 One of Malaysia's strengths is that it emphasizes events of national historical importance 1 2 3 4
  - 21 Malaysia has a strong historical heritage. 1 2 3 4
- 

### Third part: National Identity Measurement (NIM)

Social events adapted from Granhenat & Abdullah (2017).

#### The Family Domain and its 12 Social Events

The domain of Language Use	Social Events: What language do you use?
University domain	1. Speak to your lecturer in the class
	2. Speak to your lecturer alone
	3. Express your happiness towards your friends
	4. Express your anger towards your friends
	5. Discuss a personnel matter with your friend
	6. Watch movies/television shows
	7. Speak to a Malay classmate
	8. Speak to a Chinese classmate
	9. Speak to an Indian classmate
	10. Speak to your friends in the presence of students of a different race

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Peer-review history:  
 The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:  
<https://www.sdiarticle5.com/review-history/76191>