

Learning English (and Arabic) in Malaysian Islamic Schools: Language Use and the Construction of Identities

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Abstract

The Malaysian schooling system celebrates the diversity of Malaysian ethnic groups by allowing different school types to co-exist since the independence of the Federation of Malaya (now Malaysia) from British colonial rule in 1957. Whilst ideologically young Malaysians can pick and choose where they want to learn, these schools are clustered around ethnicity, language and even religion. Only the majority national schools (or *sekolah kebangsaan*) reflect the diversity of the ideological Malaysian 'race' (or *bangsa Malaysia*). For national type schools (or *sekolah jenis kebangsaan*), these are almost exclusively subscribed by Tamil speaking students who are mostly Indians or by Mandarin speaking students who are mostly Chinese. The focus of this empirical paper is on a final school type, national religious schools (or *sekolah kebangsaan agama*), that represents the religious ideology of the Malaysian majority race, the Malay-Muslims. These are primary and secondary 'Islamic schools' that place heavy emphasis on Islamic education often through the medium of Arabic, for the Malay-Muslim majority in Malaysia. This paper focuses on the lived experiences of 30 first year university undergraduates who completed five to six years of secondary education in national religious schools. Data were collected from periodic focus group discussions and also written narrative 'reflections' of their Islamic school days with three cohorts of selected undergraduates from March 2016 to May 2017 at two university campuses in northern Malaysia. The stories they shared draw attention to how English, and to an extent Arabic language, influenced their school-based learning experiences and constructed their identities.

Keywords: identity construction, Islamic schools, language use, Malaysian education, qualitative data

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