



Language Use in the Plantation Industry: Insights from a Multinational Company in Malaysia

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Abstract. Purpose - This study aimed to investigate the extent to which employees use English and other languages in the various communication channels in an agricultural organisation.

Design/methodology/approach - Data were collected from a multinational agriculture company using the quantitative approach via questionnaire distribution. A qualitative approach based on interviews was employed to support the quantitative findings.

Finding - The results illustrated that flexibility exists where both employers and employees typically use either Bahasa Malaysia or English as the language that works best for a given situation and in the organisation's best interest.

Originality/value - The study offers greater clarity on language use and choice in agricultural companies in multilingual countries, such as Malaysia, which depends heavily on migrant workers.

Keywords: Agriculture · language · language use · multinational companies · corporate communication

1 Introduction

Both communication and language are necessary elements and critical to the success of any organisation. Organisations must be able to control, organise, manage and coordinate their employees. These activities require a suitable level of communication to ensure optimal performance within an organisation. Furthermore, organisations that practice effective communication strategies tend to achieve increased levels of success (Clampitt and Downs, 1993; Tourish, 1997; Argenti and Forman, 2002; Tourish and Hargie, 2004). Therefore, business communication is an increasingly significant field of study globally as organisations find it highly interesting to their employees and the organisation itself (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004; Varner & Beamer, 2005; Rogerson-Revell, 2007, 2008; Evans, 2010).

Language has a pivotal role in all the countries, including in numerous industries parallel to the increase in globalisation activities. As a developing country, Malaysia has to compete aggressively for foreign investments essential for the nation's development

and economic growth in facing globalisation challenges. Globalisation has increased language diversity in the workplace due to the distinct nature of the languages employees speak. Language is a problem in workforce diversity as a communication barrier and leads to various negative consequences in organisations. For example, language can become an occupational hazard as accidents and loss of productivity can occur due to employees having poor English and Bahasa Malaysia knowledge.

Language can become a formidable barrier in the workplace. Thus, both employers and employees find strategic ways to manage the language barrier in the workplace effectively. Previous studies on language use within multinational companies identified that multilingualism could cause a problematic managerial situation with significant implications for cross-cultural communication (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, and Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999b). Efficient communication is a crucial factor in raising the employees' productive output. Productive output cannot be increased if employers are not able to communicate their needs. Thus, identifying and choosing the preferred language in the workplace and its role aids the organisations to achieve their goals and ensure higher productivity.

The study aimed to investigate language use and choice practices in the agricultural workplace. The findings provide a better understanding of the roles of English, Bahasa Malaysia, and other languages in this industry by considering that both language and communication processes do not occur in a vacuum. Thus, the linguistic reality of the agricultural industry was identified by studying the language use and language choice of the users.

Studying language use and choice in a multilingual organisation is essential for critical awareness of language's complex and dynamic nature in the workplace domain. The understanding of practices, nuances and trends provide organisations with a better perspective on the corporate language use. The perspective helps organisations to re-evaluate language, training policies and the implications on organisations. Also, organisations can make informed decisions concerning language matters. Therefore, this paper attempted to provide answers to the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent are English or other languages used in different communicative events in the selected agricultural workplaces?
- 2) What is the perception of employees towards English in the workplace?

The agricultural industry has been given minimal attention in Malaysia. The language use and choice phenomenon in the agricultural industry can be understood better by examining the language use and choice within this domain. The understanding can be achieved by identifying the various communication channels and the employees' perception of English. Communication channels are essential components in this research and provide a clear picture of the communication landscape within the studied organisation. These findings aid organisations in managing their business effectively as language are fundamental in the workplace.

1.1 An Overview of Historical Background of English in Malaysia

The history of English in Malaysia is closely linked to the colonial past in the 18th century. The Anglo-Dutch Treaty, also known as the Treaty of London of 1824, allowed the British to control Penang, Malacca, and Singapore (Swee-Hock, 2012). Hordes of migrant workers were brought in from China, South India, and Ceylon to work in the tin mines and rubber plantations after the acquisition. These developments led to the establishment of the Federation of Malay States in February 1948. Malaysia was granted full independence in 1957, and the Malays were given political power, while the other ethnic races, namely the Chinese and Indians, were given citizenships (A. J. Abdullah, 2012).

A census conducted in 1957 indicated that there were three main ethnic groups with the following breakdown: Malays (50%), Chinese (37%), Indian (11%) and others (2%) (Fernandez, Hawley, & Predaza, 1974, p. 13). Malaysia inherited a British-oriented national infrastructure, including an education system, ranging from grade schools to higher education with Western intellectual, ideological, and political conventions upon independence in 1957 (Subramani & Kempner, 2002, p. 233).

Malaysia was formed in 1963 by joining Tanah Melayu, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. Nevertheless, Singapore decided to withdraw from Malaysia two years later to overcome the various problems that arose due to differences in nationalism and political belief (Lau, 1998). East Malaysia consists of Sabah and Sarawak and does not share the same development status as West Malaysia. Nevertheless, Asmah (1992) observed that there are close to one hundred languages spoken in Malaysia, including the various languages of the indigenous groups and foreign languages not conversed as mother tongue.

The independence of Malaysia in 1957 did not lead to the immediate removal of English from education and bureaucracy. Gill (2002, p. 77) highlighted that English was not drastically withdrawn from the official linguistic scene but instead accomplished gradually and pragmatically. The medium of instruction in schools was changed from English to Malay in 1969 (12 years post-independence), and the change in higher education only took place in 1983. The change was necessary for the interest of nationalism and to unify the various ethnic groups that made up Malaysia (Gill, 2005). The National Culture Policy was implemented in 1971 with its key objectives that the Malay language and traditions would form the core around the language, and traditions of other ethnic groups would be incorporated (Mandal, 2000, p. 1004).

Numerous changes were made in the next decade, specifically in the education sector. The Malay language replaced English as the medium of instruction in schools, whereas Chinese and Tamil schools were allowed to use Mandarin and Tamil as their respective medium of instruction. Bahasa Malaysia is the present national and official language in Malaysia. Bahasa Malaysia plays a central role in fostering socialisation and creating a national identity.

A complete reversal in the education policy took place in 2002 within West Malaysia when the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr Mahathir Bin Mohamad, announced that a bilingual system would be introduced in schools. The teaching of Mathematics and Science-based subjects would be conducted in English (PPSMI). In contrast, Bahasa Malaysia would be continued as a medium to teach Arts-based subjects, such as History,

Geography and Moral (Darus, 2010). The Ministry of Education deemed that Mathematics and Science should be critically taught in English to equip the students with the required knowledge and skills to compete effectively in the international arena (Gill, Nambiar, Ibrahim, and Hua, Gill et al., 2010).

Another rationale for the policy change was that the government felt that the change would increase students' English competency (Darus, 2010). Nevertheless, this policy was short-lived due to some major problems. The government was convinced that the policy was ineffective in helping students master English based on the one year of assessments and parents' feedback. Additionally, the government felt that using English to teach Science and Mathematics subjects was deprioritising the national language (Bahasa Malaysia). Thus, national unity might be affected, and a greater social exclusion among Malaysians would be created (Hammim and Othman, 2011).

Another reversal in the education policy was made in 2009 when the Education Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, announced that the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English would be discontinued from 2012 onwards. The country would revert to the earlier policy by reinstating Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction in schools. Indeed, the language planning and policy in Malaysia is not in tandem with the industry's needs, requiring high English proficiency.

The reversal from English to Bahasa Malaysia is an example of how language policies in Malaysia sway from the demands of globalisation and pressured by politicisation. In addition, Zaaba (Zaaba et al., 2011) and Gill (2012) highlighted the top-down nature of resolutions made regarding the language policy in Malaysia, where the federal government plays a critical role in deciding the Malaysian education system's future. The policy has come under fire from many quarters, specifically by targeting the Education Ministry that has been relentlessly criticised for sacrificing the globally acceptable English language for policies that lean towards emphasising Bahasa Malaysia.

According to Darus (2010, p. 12), some of the criticisms were as following:

The supporters viewed that Malaysians will lose the opportunity to emulate the economic success of English-speaking Singapore, Malaysia's nearest neighbour. Additionally, the change would be unfair on many parents because they should have the right to choose their children's education.

These criticisms are well-founded because English has a functional role in Malaysia due to economic benefits. In a survey with business organisations, Lan, Khaun, and Singh (2011) asserted that English proficiency is essential for career success. Both speaking and writing in English are considered the most critical skills by employers. Another survey carried out by the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) involving 205 companies revealed that the inability to communicate well in English is a significant issue among Malaysian graduates (Malaysian Employers Federation, Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF), 2004). Both surveys demonstrated a gap between industrial needs and the graduates' lack of English proficiency.

The inconsistencies and mismatch in the language policy has only worsened the situation as there are major drawbacks in the current language policy that subsequently has created critical challenges to future undergraduates and employers. In brief, the historical and often contradictory educational developments in Malaysia reflect a situation

where there is some form of “grudging” acceptance that Malaysia would be left behind in the quest for prolific economic growth without highly proficient citizens.

Dumaniga, David, and Symaco (2012) asserted that the top-down pressures in language policy and management have led to the competing roles between English and Bahasa Malaysia. The scholars also reported that there are discrepancies between the bottom-up practices and beliefs and top-down language practices. Thus, this study aimed to identify the role of English and other languages in the agricultural workplace to show a more realistic impact of these language planning policies. In addition, workplaces are important as micro-level sociolinguistic sites to investigate language use and choice. The agricultural industry, which is multilingual, is an essential context in exploring this complexity.

Consequently, these points demonstrated the inconsistencies in language planning and policies in Malaysia. A question that needs to be asked is whether Malaysia should align its educational policies to the nation’s needs and the world. The country’s needs must be at the heart of all language policies as the use of English in the workplace is essential and crucial. English language as the lingua franca in the business world will continue to develop in importance in the near future. Hence, this study aimed to investigate the language use and choice phenomenon in the agricultural workplace and shed some light on the future direction for Malaysia.

1.2 Agricultural Industry

The agricultural sector plays a vital role in the Malaysian economy. The agriculture sector contributed 7.4% to Malaysia’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020. Beyond contributing to the GDP, the agricultural sector also offers employment, increases the income of those in the rural areas and helps to ensure national food security (Dardak, 2014). The sector consists of various sub-sectors, including oil palm, rubber, livestock, forestry and logging, fisheries, aquaculture and other agricultural products such as paddy, fruits, vegetables, coconut, tobacco, tea, flowers, pepper, cocoa, and pineapple.

Malaysia’s agriculture sector has a great prospect of contributing massively to national income and supporting the ringgit’s foreign exchange valuation due to the increase in global demand for agricultural products, the growing world population, and a stronger world economy. The agriculture industry in Malaysia is also heavily dependent on foreign workers. Approximately 85% of foreign workers are from neighbouring countries such as India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal and Cambodia (Foreign Labour in Malaysia: Selected Works, 2017).

There is a dearth of studies that empirically explored language use in the agricultural industry currently. Hence, this study endeavoured to fill this gap by identifying the use and role of language in the plantation industry.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Site and Research Methods

The present study obtained data from a multinational company involved in the agricultural industry. PlantOrg is a Malaysian-based diversified multinational corporation

involved in many sectors, including plantations. PlantOrg has 41,201 employees in Malaysia and was listed on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (KLSE) in 2017. The researcher investigated the plantation headquarters and the downstream operation in one of the estates.

2.2 Data Collection

The primary data for this study was collected via survey questionnaires that complemented interviews conducted. A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed to the organisation, and 65 were received, representing a response rate of 65%. The questionnaire in this study was adapted from the questionnaires by Briguglio (Briguglio, 2005b) and S Rafik-Galea et al. (2010).

Briguglio (Briguglio, 2005b) observed the use of English as a global language in multinational settings. The questionnaire in her study was designed to investigate language practices in multinational companies in Hong Kong and Malaysia. Conversely, S Rafik-Galea et al. (2010) studied language use and management communication practices in agricultural-related organisations in Malaysia. Both the questionnaires were identified as the current research questions closely reflected both studies' subject of investigation, namely language use and communication practices in the workplace context.

Twenty-five interviews were conducted to identify the types of communicative functions prevalent in the organisations and the languages used to communicate effectively among employees. The interviewees were allowed to talk about the descriptions and experiences that were relevant to the study. Each interview conducted took approximately 30 to 50 min and were transcribed. All the interviews were conducted on the research site premises, at the headquarters and estate in Kempas, Melaka.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data gathered through the surveys and interviews were analysed using both qualitative and quantitative analysis methods. Firstly, the data obtained from the questionnaire completed by 65 respondents were analysed to establish an overview of the respondents' demographic background, language proficiency, mother tongue, education level, job designation, length of employment, perception, language use and choice trends in the various communicative events and channels used in the organisations.

The questionnaires were coded before entered into the statistical programme for analysis. A descriptive and inferential statistical analysis of the survey results was generated using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) (Version 16). The comments section (open-ended questions) were analysed using the standard processes of sorting qualitative data to identify significant themes. The interview data were analysed for their content by identifying the keywords, episodes and phrases.

Relevant quotes were also highlighted during the close reading. The researcher listened to the recordings and identified pivotal episode to understand factors influencing language choice in the workplace. The combined analysis of the interview notes and recordings gave the researcher a better understanding of the situation, although the process was time-consuming.

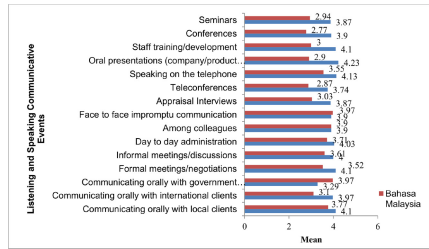


Fig. 1. Frequency of Listening and Speaking Communicative Events in English and Bahasa Malaysia at PlantOrg

3 Findings

3.1 Listening and Speaking: English and Bahasa Malaysia in PlantOrg

Figure 1 indicates that the respondents in PlantOrg used English frequently in spoken presentations (M4.23) and speaking on the telephone (M4.13). The language choice here is influenced by the formality of the speech event and the language background of the employees (Evans, 2013). Approximately 55% of the employees rated themselves as having good or excellent proficiency in oral skills.

These findings are consistent with other research that found English primarily used for spoken presentations and telephone conversations, specifically by business professionals, engineers (Kaewpet, 2009; Kaneko, Rozycki, & Orr, Kaneko et al., 2009; Male, Bush, & Chapman, Male et al., 2009; Evans, 2010; Kassim & Ali, 2010; Spence & Liu, 2013) and professionals in European multinationals. English has been adopted as the corporate language of many European multinationals (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Lutz, 2009; Maclean, 2006; Heikkilä & Smale, 2011).

Alternatively, Bahasa Malaysia is most frequently used in speaking and listening activities such as face-to-face impromptu communication (M3.97) and communicating orally with government agencies (M3.97). Data indicate that English and Bahasa Malaysia are the preferred languages for listening and speaking during communicative events. The mean scores for the communicative task during interacting orally with government organisations and clients indicate that Bahasa Malaysia is used more frequently than English. Hence, Bahasa Malaysia is the lingua franca in dealing with these public organisations.

The evidence is illustrated by two informants who highlighted the role of Bahasa Malaysia in dealing with government agencies and supported the findings from the survey, as shown below:

SDSusan: With government agencies sometimes we use BM (Bahasa Malaysia) and if their people can speak English, we will use English also. For example, when the Labour Department come to visit, they will speak in English and BM.

SDUsha: If it involves the government department, it will be in Bahasa (BM).

The findings from the two informants are similar to Phang (2006), who asserted that the government sector is the only sector in Malaysia still using Bahasa Malaysia. The finding is consistent with the language planning policies made by the government in

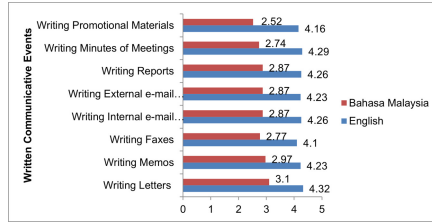


Fig. 2. Frequency of Written Communicative Events in English and Bahasa Malaysia at PlantOrg

enforcing the National Language Act of 1967 to declare Bahasa Malaysia as the official language for Malaysia.

Bahasa Malaysia is constitutionally used for all official ceremonies, government administration, communication between the government and the public and as the medium of instruction in schools and university as the national and official language. Thus, Bahasa Malaysia is the chosen language to best serve the employees’ communicative purposes in dealing with government agencies. Hence, the organisations have accommodated the governmental organisations’ needs by opting for Bahasa Malaysia.

3.2 Written Communication: English and Bahasa Malaysia in PlantOrg

Similarly, Fig. 2 shows that English is the leading lingua franca in PlantOrg. The data indicate that English has a mean of 4 and above, compared to Bahasa Malaysia in writing tasks. Thus, the employees spent most of their time using English for writing tasks because PlantOrg’s corporate language is English, and the writing tasks are formal communication.

English is most frequently used in writing letters (M4.32), writing internal emails (M4.26) and writing minutes of meeting (M4.29) in PlantOrg. In addition, the mean for Bahasa Malaysia is below 3, proving that Bahasa Malaysia is infrequently used in PlantOrg. PlantOrg is a multinational company with subsidiaries and economic activities worldwide in comparison with the other two organisations.

Another informant from PlantOrg, Rosie, an engineer who works as a Project Manager, reported that the management expects emails to be written in English:

SDRosie: My email and written communication will be in English. I normally communicate with the staff in my department and with the consultants and contractors.

According to another informant, a Communication Manager at PlantOrg, there is no written policy on the use of English, but the corporate language in PlantOrg is English.

SDUma: Mainly the corporate language is English but there is no written rule for this. We are expected to use English in all our communication dealings.

The fact that English plays a prominent role in writing is due to the inevitable consequence of globalisation. Globalisation has resulted in numerous organisations and businesses expanding their economic and trade activities to other countries and has affected workplace communication as English is the default lingua franca in the business world. The findings indicated that English language competency is vital for the

agricultural workplace. Communicative efficiency is a priority in PlantOrg, and institutional factors such as company policy and expectation can influence language use in written communication.

3.3 Perceived Importance of English at PlantOrg

The overall responses from the respondents on their perceived importance of English are presented in Fig. 3. The majority of employees from PlantOrg believe that English is necessary for their jobs (4.39) and an important language for business (4.39). The majority of the employees in PlantOrg also stated that there is a need to use English daily at work (4.29), and English is used frequently at the workplace (4.29). Nevertheless, they also perceived that English is vital for doing their job well (3.13).

The final part of the questionnaire required respondents to view whether the ability to speak English and Bahasa Malaysia is essential in their organisation and the reasons. The following are some of the responses provided by the respondents in the comment section (Table 1).

Clearly, English plays a more dominant role in the employee’s working lives for written communication than Bahasa Malaysia. The findings confirm that English is the dominant language of choice in written communication in the Malaysian agricultural

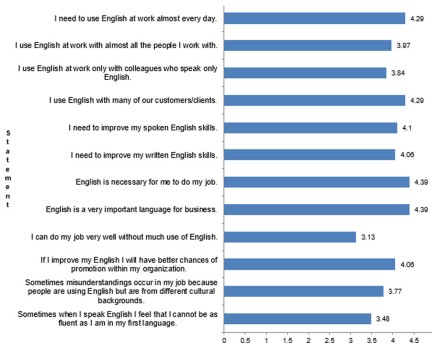


Fig. 3. Perceived Importance on English at PlantOrg

Table 1. Extracts from Questionnaire on Importance of English

Respondent	Extract
SDP83	Everything is conducted in English in our company. We have to learn and also use it at all times
SDP95	As we are a multinational company. We need English to communicate with people around us and our clients overseas.
SDP98	English is important because we need to compete in this organisation.
SDP99	We must always use English with our friends and clients in our company. So, it is important we work on improving it.

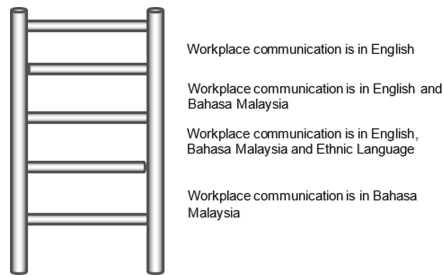


Fig. 4. Language Combinations for PlantOrg

industry. Moreover, in the interviews conducted with the employees, English was identified as their corporate language. Therefore, the use of English in writing letters, emails, meeting minutes and other forms of written communication is governed by the corporate language policy. The language policy is not formally documented but rather an expectation cascaded from the top management to all employees. Sanden (2020) warns that implementing a corporate language may create more complications and this must be managed efficiently by organisations.

Top management and those in the lower organisational hierarchy view language matters in the workplace differently as top management is comfortable operating in English. The findings also support the concept of a language ladder proposed by Piekkari et al. (2014) that explains the way boards approach the issue of language over a duration of time. Similarly, the language combination illustrated in Fig. 4 can also be used to describe and explain the approaches used in PlantOrg's language practices based on the data obtained from the interviews and survey.

The first combination indicates communicative events that deal with local or domestic matters and without any presence of foreign members. The second combination depicts a composition of multilingual employees due to employees with diverse language backgrounds. Language use is significantly dependent on the target audience and situation. Workplace communication is partially conducted in English and Bahasa Malaysia, while the documents pertaining to the communicative event is prepared predominantly in English in the third combination. The final combination which is the fourth indicates the organisation fully adopting English at all levels of communication.

In summary, the placement of an organisation within the ladder is not upwards or downwards. The findings denote that the position of PlantOrg within the different language combinations is heavily dependent on the employees' composition, hierarchal levels and language competency of the employees.

The findings further suggest that the employees felt and understood the importance of English in their work needs, and their attitudes towards communication in English are positive. Their attitude is likely influenced by instrumental considerations such as promotions and career opportunities that depend on English competence. Additionally, the findings also indicated that employees still recognise the economic opportunities and values attached to English proficiency. However, they do not need to use much English in their daily interaction.

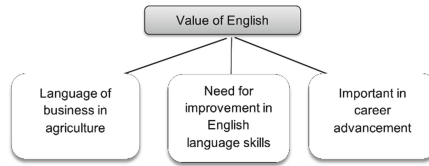


Fig. 5. Value of English in PlantOrg

Similarly, this situation results from the role English plays as the lingua franca in the business world and the positive attitudes underlying its use in these organisations. The employees also recognise that proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia alone is inadequate for career progression in the business sector. Flexibility in communication is practised and valued in PlantOrg. The management understands that many employees, specifically from the lower level, are not proficient in English. The approach is logical and pragmatic because organisational productivity and profitability are at stake and to ensure organisational needs are met.

Additionally, the respondents' language perception could be viewed as an indication of prevailing language attitudes in Malaysia. In that case, English is expected to continue to be an essential language in Malaysia, although used alongside Bahasa Malaysia, the national language. Figure 5 shows the shared perception of the organisations. In a nutshell, the three shared perceptions were:

- Firstly, the importance of English in the domain of agriculture.

Secondly, the need for improvement in English language skills. Thirdly, English is considered essential for career advancement purposes.

Thus, the perception of the role and value of English in communication can influence language use and choice in the workplace. The preference for using English in the workplace is primarily connected with the perception that English is the language for business and career advancement. According to Abdullah (2008), Malaysians learn English for education and improved career opportunities. English is not solely studied because it is compulsory in schools but also because it guarantees excellent careers.

4 Conclusion

The study's findings show that English is the dominant language in agricultural workplaces while Bahasa Malaysia plays a supportive role by filling in the gaps that English fails to deliver. The data demonstrated that English is used pervasively among the higher hierarchy as they are competent in English. The higher management has expectations that all forms of formal written communication vertically should be conducted in English. However, the dominant language is Bahasa Malaysia or the ethnic languages of the workers when dealing with the estate workers or those from lower hierarchies.

The present study has demonstrated that English and other ethnic languages play a crucial role across language barriers in the agricultural workplace. The role of English has been highlighted as not just merely a vehicle of transferring information and knowledge

as the employees who are competent in English also have the necessary competitive advantage in the agricultural workplace for career progression.

The workplace demands indicate that English is the lingua franca of the business world, contrary to the Malaysian language policy. Hence, Malaysian students are not equipped with the fundamental language abilities that the workplace demands. The conflicting policy and workplace demand explain why Malaysian graduates lack the necessary employability skills to be hired in the corporate sector.

The conflict between the national educational language policy that stresses the importance of Bahasa Melayu highly instead of English and the demands of the agricultural workplace has to be resolved and managed practically to fulfil the needs of Malaysian economic agenda.

Acknowledgments. The title "ACKNOWLEDGMENTS" should be in all caps and should be placed above the references. The references should be consistent within the article and follow the same style. List all the references with full details.

Authors' Contributions. The title "AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS" should be in all caps.

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