

## **Multilingualism and Personality Traits among Malay Primary School Students in Vernacular Schools**

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**Abstract:** *The study investigates a group of Malay students who study Malay, Chinese and English languages at eight vernacular (Chinese) schools in a state of Malaysia. The focus of the study is to examine the process of the students acquire the second and third languages (Mandarin and English) and at the same time they struggle to master their mother tongue or their first language, Malay. Most importantly, the study seeks the dominant personality traits of the students and tries to find the relationships between personality traits and multilingualism. Interviews with the students and teachers and also class observation have helped the researcher to understand the challenges faced by the students. The study reveals some findings which closely related to sociolinguistics aspects which show that the students have to sacrifice their first language in order to master the target languages which are Mandarin and also English. They have a strong belief that although they have sacrificed a lot of time and effort in mastering the target language, they try their best to uphold their personality traits and self-identity.*

*Word count: 150 words*

**Keyword:** *personality traits, Malay, Mandarin, Vernacular school, Chinese, Self-identity and Multilingualism*

### **I. Introduction**

This sociolinguistics study investigates on how Malay primary school students from eight different vernacular (Chinese) schools preserve their Malays identity and at the same time how the surrounding has geared them to acquire and master their second and third languages which are English and Mandarin languages. The students are considered as multilingual learners who have to undergo a more complex process in mastering three languages compared to those who study at national schools in Malaysia who just learn two languages: Malay and English languages.

In Malaysia, there were four types of school during British colonization. They were the English-medium, Malay-medium, Chinese-medium and Tamil-medium schools. Each used different mediums of instruction and provided a different syllabus. However, after undergoing a major evolution in after independence, at present there are only two types of school: vernacular schools (Chinese and Tamil) and national school. The vernacular schools use their mother tongue as a medium of instruction and though Malay and English are treated as compulsory subjects, whereas in national school, Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil are not taught.

At vernacular school, English is regarded as the third language that the students learn after their first language or mother tongue (Malay) and Mandarin as their second language (Figure 1). Therefore, the students are involved in three different types of language acquisition throughout their six-early years of learning. The term “language acquisition” became commonly used after Stephen Krashen contrasted it with formal and non-constructive “learning.” Today, most scholars use “language learning” and “language acquisition” interchangeably, unless they are directly addressing Krashen’s work. However, “second language acquisition” or “SLA” has become established as the preferred term for this academic discipline (Dumas, 1999).

Figure 1: Allocation of time (in minutes of national schools and vernacular schools)

SUBJECTS	TYPES OF SCHOOL	
	SK (LEVEL 1) IN MINUTES PER WEEK	SJK (LEVEL 1) IN MINUTES PER WEEK
ML	360	270
EL	240	90
Mandarin	-	360
	SK (LEVEL 2) IN MINUTES PER WEEK	SJK (LEVEL 2) IN MINUTES PER WEEK
ML	300	180
EL	240	120
Mandarin	-	300

*SK – national school, SJK – vernacular/Chinese school, ML – Malay language, EL – English language.*

A lot of studies on the acquisition of word order have shown that most learners begin with a word order based on their native language (Pinker, 2000). This indicates that certain aspects of inter-language syntax are influenced by the learners' first language, although others are not. Thus in Mandarin, the learner also learn this language begin with a word other based on their native language which is Malay.

In order to learn second language (Mandarin) and be able to acquire that language, few factors may contribute to it. Pinker (2000) believes that community attitudes toward the language being learned can also have a profound impact on SLA. Where the community has a broadly negative view of the target language and its speakers, or a negative view of its relation to them, learning is typically much more difficult. On the other hand, if the community has a positive view of that language, the learning process will be much easier (Bialystock, 2001).

Other common social factors include the attitude of parents toward language study, and the nature of group dynamics in the language classroom. If the parents of the learner give an encouragement and full support to the learners to learn second language, then it will be easy for the learner to master the second language or third language as well (Hong, 2006). Thus, full support from the parents is very important and contributes to the successful of the second language learners. As a result, early attitudes may strengthen motivation and facility with language in general, particularly with early exposure to the language.

However, the most effective factors that are related to the successful of acquiring the languages are the learner's emotional state and attitude towards the target languages. Research on the effect of language learning is still strongly influenced by Bloom's taxonomy, which describes the affective levels of receiving, responding, valuing, organization, and self-characterization through one's value system. It has also been informed in recent years by research in neurobiology and neurolinguistics (Curtain, 2004).

From other crucial angle, Personality is the ability to get along in adult situation; it is the person's type of action, reaction, opinion and mood, a set of physical and social traits (Mullanattom, 1993). It is judged as a social character. It is only in relation to others that we are usually judged and our consciousness of ourselves arises only in our interactions with other members of the society (Carson, Butcher & Mineka, 2000).

Personality is a critical psychological mechanism that guides a behaviour. Genetic and environmental influences determine the set of psychological characteristics comprising personality (Schaffer 2005). Among many personality theories, trait models emphasizing individual differences in thoughts, feelings, and behaviours assume that personality consists of several dispositions. Since personality traits tend to form a stable pattern of reactions in any given situation, they can explain the mechanisms of an individual's information behaviour with little variability (Phares 1991). A widely used personality model, McCrae and Costa's NEO Five Factor Model, or "Big Five Model" (1990), consists of the following personality components: neuroticism, extroversion, and openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness.

### **Research Objectives**

This small scale research has 2 major objectives:

1. To investigate how Malay students maintain their Malay self-identity at vernacular schools
2. To know the challenges faced by Malay students in mastering three languages.
3. To find out the dominant personality traits possessed by the student
4. To determine the relationships between personality traits and multilingualism

Based on the research objectives, the researcher come out with the research questions:

1. How do Malay students maintain their self-identity at vernacular schools?
2. How Malay students acquire three languages at vernacular schools?
3. What are the roles of the teachers in developing student's language acquisition and maintaining student's self-identity?
4. What is the dominant personality traits possessed by the student?
5. What is the relationship between personality traits and multilingualism?

### **Statement of Problem**

Marchman (2004) stresses that speech-language problems are less likely to occur when languages are introduced early and simultaneously. There is a greater possibility of problems if children are introduced to a second language during the preschool years after other languages were used exclusively. He says that some people believe that if a second language is introduced before the first language is fully developed, the development of the first language may be slowed or even regress. He also stresses that the more the dominant language being acquired by the learner, the bigger the chance of the language to 'concur' learner's identity.

The research is prove the hypothesis that codeswitching in multilingualism are a natural occurrence which can support academic achievement, cognitive development, and multilingualism. Therefore, the

researcher is interested in understanding how a multilingual child code switches in a natural environment. Also, do they lose their self-identity as a Malay as being surrounded in non-Malay vicinity? And how do personality traits relate with multilingualism?

## **II. Literature Review**

Multilingualism refers to more than two languages. In simple words, multilingualism means the ability to communicate in more than two languages but with the possibility of greater skills in one language.

Wolff (2006) believes that educationists believe that there are different theories on the "best" way to teach a child to use languages. According to him, most researchers agree that a child, who is exposed to more than two languages at an early age, and simultaneously, will naturally learn to use the languages. Children can be expected to go through some periods of mixing the languages and borrowing vocabulary to express ideas, sometimes within the same sentence. This occurs because vocabulary may exist in one language but not in the others. Or words from one language may convey a message that is not easily translated into the other languages. A separation of the languages will occur gradually. Bennet (1999) adds that children may also experiment with the languages to create special effects or to express themselves in specific settings. For example, one language may be identified as less formal and used for information about events related to home and family. The other language may be identified as more formal and used for activities outside the home. There may also be periods when one language is used more than the other. The opposite occurs with a change in the environment.

Bialystok (2001) believes that children may not be equally skilled in all languages. It is common for there to be greater understanding than actual use of one language. Less confusion will occur if children learn to associate the languages differently, for example if one language is used while speaking to the parents and the other while speaking to friends.

In Bialystok's studies (2001) of literacy acquisition across languages, she has focused on bilingual / multilingual children learning different pairs of languages in an attempt to isolate the linguistic, literacy, and cognitive factors that are responsible for learning to read and to determine whether bilingualism / multilingualism influences the acquisition of literacy. The aim is to distil what can be uniquely attributable to bilingualism / multilingualism. She also reported that phonological awareness predicts English reading but not Chinese reading and that phonological awareness correlates across languages but reading does not. She concluded that the cognitive advantages of bilingualism confer small benefit to literacy acquisition and that phonological awareness is common across languages but only facilitates reading in alphabetic systems. The vocabulary deficit among bilinguals turns out not to make a big difference. The main bilingual / multilingual advantage is in the transfer of skills for reading in similar systems.

Multilingual, bilingual and multilingual children have to undergo a very complex process of language acquisition which very much depends on interrelated factors. However, both bilingual and multilingual children have to deal with more challenges in mastering the languages due to the complexity of the languages.

Personality traits play important roles in academic achievement. Johnson (1997) reported a study where they examined the relationship between personality traits and academic achievement in gifted students. Results showed that there significant correlation between ten personality traits and academic achievement. According to Panda & Samal (1995) comparative study of personality and academic achievement of adolescent daughters of working and non-working mothers, it was found that working mothers' daughters were more extroverted, independent, aggressive, and confident. Personality Traits A critical psychological mechanism that guides a behaviour. Genetic and environmental influences determine the set of psychological characteristics comprising personality (Schaffer, 2005)

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## **III. Methodology**

A simple mixed mode research (Miles and Huberman, 1994) which involves a questionnaire of 24 items about personality traits has been used which involved 100 students of Year 6, 5 and 4 from all SJK (C) in Terengganu. Eight in-depth interviews with 24 Language Teachers (Malay, Mandarin and English) were carried out, nine observations that is in/outside of the classroom were also recorded in interpreting Malay students behaviours and lastly content analysis based on students academic achievement were scrutinized.

The Maudsley Personality Inventory which created by Eysenck was used to determine the dominance of student's personality traits, in which the items on the inventory were listed in a YES/No form. A 'YES' was counted 1 and a 'NO' as 0. In analysing the score, the highest scored was counted as 16. Next, the subjects who scored between 10-16 were counted as EXTROVERT, 7-9 as AMBIVERT (middle) and 1-6 as INTROVERT.

Based on the findings, the analysis was adapted from Jung's types in which 'Extrovert'

Is considered as outgoing, embraces the world, responsive to social & physical stimulation, insensitive to stimulation ('stimulus hungry'), sociable, outgoing, interactive, expressive, sensation seeking, acts first, think later, dislikes being alone. Whereas 'Introvert' is considered as hesitant, reflective, withdraws from social & physical stimulation, sensitive to stimulation ('stimulus shy'), private, reclusive, reserved, quiet, inward, sensitive, thinks before acting, exhausted by groups. Ambivert is between the two groups.

This is a mixed-method research are chosen because primary school students are easy to cooperate when we talk to them and they listen to what we instruct. Eight groups of Malay students from eight different vernacular (Chinese) schools were involved in this study. The schools are from an urban and a rural area school. The rational of choosing all different locations of schools is to ensure that the findings would be rich and comprehensive. Altogether, there are eight vernacular school in the state but has been chosen as the pilot study and the other seven were involved in collecting the data. Each groups consisted of five to seven Malay students from Primary Three (nine years old) until Primary Six (twelve years old). Malay students are considered as a minority group. From the researcher's observation, the researcher could say that both schools have 95% Chinese teachers and students, and the rest 5% is Malays and Indians. So, all in all, one hundred students were involved in the interviews and answering the inventory. The instrument 'Focus group discussion (FGD)' was chosen in collecting the data with the students due to its rapid assessment where semi-structured data gathering method in which a purposively selected set of participants gather to discuss issues and concerns based on a list of key themes drawn up by the researcher.

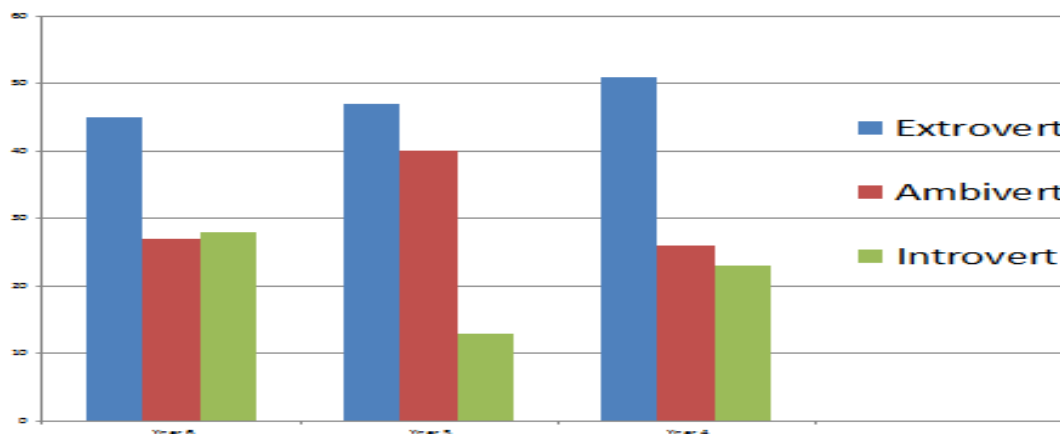
On the other hand, twenty language (Malay, English and Mandarin) teachers were involved in the in-depth-interviews which were conducted in Malay and English, which three to four teachers from each school. Each teacher was interviewed for about 40 minutes. Shockingly, only one male teacher was involved in the interview because normally language teachers are female at the vernacular schools. Whereas, students who were involved in the interview session which took 30 minutes each were interviewed in Malay medium because their English was not so good and at the same time the researcher could not speak in Mandarin. However, majority of them said they would prefer to be interviewed in Mandarin, the researcher had asked the teacher to interpret it. On top of that, the observation involved a-six-month-observation pertaining to student's involvement inside and outside (school compound) of the classroom.

In summary, this mixed-mode research is rich with data because the Focus Group Discussion has helped and guided the students to express themselves freely and due to that the researcher had to be selective in analysing the data which involved data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification following Miles and Huberman (1994)

#### IV. Findings

##### Analysis (Inventory)

The inventory shows that the trend of the score is 45% of Year 6 students were found Extrovert, 28% Introvert and 27% Ambivert. 47% of Year 5 students were found Extrovert, 13% Introvert and 40% Ambivert. 51% of Year 4 students were bunch together in Extrovert category, 23% Introvert and 26% Ambivert. The score of the inventory can be seen below:



##### Classroom Observations

Based on the classroom observation, the researcher noticed that the students were able to communicate and learn well in Mandarin compared to that of Malay and English. The students seemed more actively participated and

looked more comfortable in learning Mandarin. Evidently, they have had better results in Mandarin compared to two other languages. They seemed more comfortable to use Mandarin due to the stimulated Mandarin environment especially because the Chinese students were more willing to use Mandarin rather than conversing in Malay or English. It can be seen in FGD below:

Student 1: *...why we should use Malay? We are more comfortable to be in Mandarin setting*

Student 5: *Mandarin is more understandable compared to other languages*

Student 6: *I feel there is a gap between me and my Chinese friends if I use Malay or English*

From other point of view, the researchers also recorded that Chinese teachers were so hardworking and creative in making sure that the learning objectives were achieved. They were approachable and friendly to the students and this contributing factor has helped the students to master the language. All schools practice a same approach in making sure those non-speaking Mandarin students (Malay and Indian) to be given additional attention throughout their stay in the schools. Obviously, there was no gap among the students in achieving academic excellence.

From other point of views, Malay students who are Introvert (and some Ambivert) tend to use more Malay language when they communicate and get less response from their peers. They are also left behind in academic. Extrovert students are more successful than that the other two groups of students. Next, are the Ambiverts who share the features of both Introvert and Extrovert students. Last, the Introvert. However, this gap is not typical and gradually changed when the students reach Year 6. Obviously, personality traits among Malay students are developed in line with language (Mandarin) development. Most of the Introvert students like to be involved in art subjects where they do not have to use Mandarin.

### **Interviews with teachers**

The researcher found that the teachers worked very hard in to ensure the students master the languages. However, the students did not get enough support from Malay parents to do any additional effort to enhance Mandarin and English languages. Likewise, the Chinese teachers who were teaching the English and Mandarin had given extra attention to all Malay students to master the language, realizing that the students were totally depended on the teachers to master the languages. This can be derived from FGD:

Teacher 2: *We are the one who develop their language; their parents just sent their children to school and let us teach their children, less support is given.*

Teacher 4: *We try our best to 'replace' their parent's role in developing children's language.*

The interview also revealed that students were really interested in learning their second and third languages compared to their first language (Malay) because they felt that Malay would come more naturally since their parents and family members speak in Malay but not in Mandarin and English. Shockingly, eight of the respondents had got lower grade in Malay subject compared to Mandarin and English. The factor of 'taking for granted' and 'being reluctant readers' played contributing factors in this phenomenon. Teachers also revealed that Mandarin reading habit is very important in making them 'living' in the language, so students are provided with abundance of Mandarin books and interactive aids (using computer). Based on the observation, the researcher could see that the respondents always brought Mandarin book everywhere they went. All teachers believed that whether they are raising (teaching) a monolingual, bilingual or multilingual student, it is important that the child receive the kind of stimulation that will encourage language development. The findings are totally in line with Pinker (2000) that the languages of a multilingual child learn are interconnected. This means that the level of competence a child attains at a certain point in a second and third language is largely dependent on the level of competence already achieved in their first language.

The teachers also stressed that besides teachers, parents should undisputedly play more important role in their children's multilingualism. The findings share the same ideas of Cummin's (2001) in which challenging children to use ever more sophisticated words as they express themselves, insisting on dinnertime conversations instead of passive television watching, and subtle corrections about proper language uses are all appropriate parental roles. However, according to the teachers, children also spend a great deal of time outside the home. Therefore, the time that children spend in the community and within school would definitely influence the duration of acquiring the languages. The teachers admitted that the practice of 'code-switching' was widely used among the teachers in maintaining and increasing the student's interest on the languages. The teacher's code-switch at word level, phrase level, clause level and at sentence level. More code-switches took place at clause and sentence levels compared to the word and phrase levels. They believed that code-switching is a way of life and is practiced for functional, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic reasons.

The researcher also found that Malay students who are able to master Mandarin will become more Extroverts, excel in academic, and have more friends (socializing) compared to that of poor Mandarin users. The teachers also agreed that Personality Traits of Malay students at vernacular schools are highly affected by the ability of mastering Mandarin, 1st. language (Malay) interference and sociolinguistic influence. They



believed that Introvert and Ambivert students would face problems when they enter secondary school level because they have been left behind in almost all aspects.

### **Interviews with students**

The interview which involved the students was carried out in staged ways in making sure that the data would be consistent and valid. It shows that the students put much effort in learning Mandarin and English compared to that of Malay language. They also prefer to have more classes or extra activities in their second and third languages than their first language (Malay). The factor of intrinsic motivation (student's awareness of the need and importance of acquiring other than Malay language) and external motivation (teacher's role) had made the students more interested in learning both languages.

Students also said that they preferred to read more Mandarin and English reading materials because they were easily available, interesting and had more pictures. They also believed that Malay was less important because they got more knowledge in reading Mandarin and English. Moreover, they would feel left out if they could not master Mandarin, especially. Most importantly, the students felt more effective if they could express their idea or answer in Mandarin, for instances, when they were angry or involved in public speaking or group discussion. Basically, when the students engaged in any activity, they felt that Mandarin is the most suitable and effective language that should be used. However, the drawback appears when the students are at home because Mandarin will hardly be used because their family members do not speak Mandarin. Students also highlighted that if they faced problems in delivering their ideas with their friends or family members they would code switch, either Malay to Mandarin or vice versa. English would be used only for formal discussion purposes. The findings are in line with Dumas's (1999) who said that bilingualism and multilingualism are possible because people have the capacity to easily store two or more languages. People can also function in two or more languages with relative ease. From other point of view, he believes that English comprehension and usage is very limited due to its degree of importance for the students. English is used only in the subject per say (during English lesson). This is why students do not feel the need to master the language at the moment. Nevertheless, in some cases, teachers try their best to include English vocabulary in their teaching to ensure that students can master all three languages even though obviously students are less motivated. Dumas (1999) stresses that the language a student uses in the classroom needs to be sufficiently well developed for them to be able to process the cognitive challenges that are presented. Furthermore, speaking, listening, reading, or writing in the first and second languages helps the whole cognitive system to develop.

The interview also reveals that code switching (Mandarin – Malay or Malay – Mandarin) is a very common practice among the students especially when they were discussing on formal topics due to lacking of vocabulary but it was hardly taken place in informal argument. The researcher feels that code-switching is a universal phenomenon and we cannot go against the world trend. They said that by code-switching it helped them to understand better, faster and make them feel more comfortable to study any subjects in Mandarin. In discussing the maintaining of self-identity, majority of the students agreed that they did not lose their identity although are more fluent in Mandarin and comfortable to be in the language because for them Mandarin is just an instrument to be better in their lives. However, sometimes they were confused when they were surrounded with Chinese environment. This can be derived from FGD:

Student 2: *I'm Malay. That's it. However, Mandarin makes me become better than other Malays.*

Student 3: *I still use Malay when I am at home; I still wear Malay costumes and eat Malay dishes but I do not know what wear, what to eat if I'm with my Chinese colleagues.*

Student 7: *My parents always remind me about our race and religion, but it's good to Malay-Chinese student (laughing).*

Student 8: *The more I learn Mandarin, the more I love Malay because I can see the uniqueness of both languages.*

In summary, the students believe that they are in better position compared to that their Malay colleagues who are at national schools owing to the languages that they are able to acquire. In addition, teachers have played their major roles in contributing student's success in the languages and not the parents.

### **The Roles of English**

To majority of the students, English does not play important roles at vernacular school compared to that of Mandarin. They felt that it was only an advantage to master English. This is due to the environment which needs them to put more attention on Mandarin. Nevertheless, they put much attention on English than Malay because schools are the only place that they learn and use English, compared to that of Malay that they use at home. The example responses from FGD:

Student 2: *I like Mandarin that English and Malay because Mandarin is more important.*

*Nobody speaks English and Malay to me.*

Student 4: *I feel ashamed if I cannot score in Mandarin but not in English.*

Student 5: *We can learn and master English and Malay anytime, anywhere but not Mandarin.*

Student 6: *I use English if I cannot find suitable word in Mandarin and Malay. My English is better than my Malay.*

Significantly, from other point of view, here is not much difference finding between two schools and it shows that the location of the school does not contribute any variables in the study.

## **V. Conclusion**

This study shows that Malay children can acquire the targeted language (Mandarin) due to its stimulated surroundings. The researcher can conclude that the respondents used linguistic relativity, where they not only acquire their new languages from their surroundings but also develop the language confidently. In addition, the motivational factors such as a great assistance from teachers and peers, reading readiness, teaching approaches and student's realization of mastering the languages are the major contributing factor of acquiring the languages. Schools represent speech communities (Nieto, 1992, 1999). However, outside of schools are discourse communities where students see themselves as insiders or outsiders in relation to the educational processes. In other words, if a multilingual student does not believe that his experience and multilingualism will help him or her interact in the speech community, then they will most likely strive for monolingualism (Cummins, 1996).

Other than that, realizing that language acquisition of Mandarin is more important in the respondent's life to communicate with other peoples in this world, the stress and motivation were given more on the language as well, both by the respondents and their parents. So, it becomes easy for them when they can acquire many languages and became multilingual persons. On the other hand, be able to acquire many languages will give a lot of advantages to them, especially being a Malay student at a Chinese school, at the same time, it will be easier for them in finding acquaintances and jobs.

Since, second language acquisition or second language learning is the process by which people learn a second language in addition to their native languages. The respondents unintentionally ignored their first language and did not pay much attention on their third language (English). Both groups of students showed a great similarities in language learning process even though they live and learn in different places/schools. Evidently, the researcher proves that codeswitching in multilingualism are a natural occurrence which can support academic achievement, cognitive development, and multilingualism. So, the traditional linguistic constraints only occur at the beginning of the language learning process which is called "initial error-making stage", slowly, children will be able to adapt and adopt with the language based on several deciding factors namely, surroundings, language motivation and parents and teacher's guide (Bialystock (2001).

On top of that, the researcher found that speech-language problems are less likely to occur when languages are introduced as early as Primary One (seven years old). Although a possibility of problems if children are introduced to a second language (Mandarin) and third language (English) during this early year of learning after Malay has been exclusively used at home, the students manage to catch up the language comprehension especially to the second language. The development of the first language become slow or even regress after the students may more attention to the second language. Hence, when the students have some delays in the languages, it is considered as a normal phenomenon because it is the characteristic of a multi-language learner (Cummins, 2001).

As the last conclusion, obviously the respondents adapt their second language through their surrounding, reading and use it in daily communication. Children who learn languages in a loving, supportive environment learn them well and those who learn languages in a stressful environment may have language development problems. This case study also proves that the dilemma faced by the students in understanding and mastering all the languages does not affect student's perception on their nationality or racial background, in fact, they become more receptive living in a multiracial society. The need for teachers and parents to work unison to provide rich and positive learning environments in which multilingualism can thrive. This is to develop a lifelong emotional, social and global benefits of multilingualism outweigh the efforts in long run. Essentially, based on the analysis, there is no the dominant personality traits possessed by the students because the traits were gradually develop based on language acquisition. In multilingualism environment, the mastery of mandarin plays the most important roles in developing personality among the students.

## **Recommendations**

The roles of Religious Teaching (Islamic Studies) should be given a tighter enforcement (JQAF) to overcome problems pertaining to personality traits. Remedial classes should be given more priority to Introvert and Ambivert students, instead of giving priority on 'Excellence in education'. The roles of schools and parents

should be revised so that learning environment will become more meaningful to the students especially to the Introvert students.

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