EMPOWERING THE POWERFUL: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the issue of graduate employability in Malaysia as construed in public discourse in English, a language of power in Malaysia. The term employability itself has many definitions depending on the requirements of government and industry, and in the case of Malaysia, the English-language ability of graduates is inseparable from graduate employability. Data were collected from three socially significant English-language publications: a mainstream newspaper (the New Straits Times), an alternative newspaper (The Malaysian Insider), and a government document outlining the national approach to improving graduate employability in universities (the Graduate Employability Blueprint). The data were collected between 2012 and 2013, a significant two-year period of time due to the publication of the Graduate Employability Blueprint in 2012, and the five-yearly Malaysian General Election in 2013.

Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995), the study employs Transitivity analysis (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) and Appraisal analysis (Martin & White, 2005) from Systemic Functional Linguistics. The analysis looks at the grammatical roles and evaluation of important social actor groups in the graduate employability issue (e.g. government, government link companies, employers, graduates, parents and teachers). The findings show that government, the government programs and the employers are construed favourably, while the graduates are depicted unfavourably. Parents and teachers are largely excluded from the discourse.

Significant government expenditure and national resources from public and private organizations are dedicated to improving the employability of graduates in Malaysia. However,
the public discourse on graduate employability in the powerful English language appears unlikely to contribute to a social context where the aims of the groups with a key interest in graduate employability will be achieved.
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CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND

1.0 Introduction

Every year about 180,000 students graduate with diplomas and degrees from institutions of higher learning. To assist unemployed graduates, the Government will launch the Graduate Employability Blueprint by end-2012. The Blueprint will focus on strengthening the employability of graduates. In this regard, the Government will establish the Graduate Employability Taskforce with an allocation of RM200 million.

Najib Razak (2012)

The above excerpt, from the Prime Minister’s speech during the Malaysian National Budget, tabled in 2012, is an illustration of graduate employability becoming a contentious issue in Malaysia. Graduate employability as a social issue that involves many global and local stakeholders and actors, including governments, employers, businesses, students and academic associations, professional governing bodies, and the media. The discussion of employability now revolves around higher education institutions’ strategic partnerships with industry, collaborations across institutions, and government funding to improve the marketability of unemployed graduates and future graduates. Therefore, this thesis reports on research into the public discourse of graduate employability as played out in the Malaysian English-language mass media (represented by two online newspapers), and the English-language discourse of Malaysian government institutions (represented by the government’s Graduate Employability Blueprint). This chapter provides the background and context of the issue of graduate employability, how it accelerated in the news, and how this led to the launching of the Graduate Employability Blueprint (henceforth GEB) mentioned in the Prime Minister’s speech.
1.1 What is Employability?

The term ‘employability’ is used widely by scholars, government, and industry, and there has been a range of research conducted on graduate employability in the Malaysian context (Mustafa et al., 2008; Yusof, 2008; Yuzainee, Zaharim, & Omar, 2011; Azami Zaharim, Ahmad, Yusoff, Omar, & Basri, 2012). Employability refers to specific skills required by employers, including specific sets of knowledge, abilities and attitudes that fulfil job requirements (Gracia, 2009). The concept of employability skills was initiated by educators, primarily those working on programs specifically designed to facilitate employment (Harvey, 2001).

Employability is clearly a complex mixture of elements. These elements may differ from job to job but the basic outcome is the same: they make a person a useful and therefore desirable employee (Saterfiel & McLarty, 1995). According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), these elements represent employers’ expectations of graduates that they possess technical and discipline competences from their degrees, and also the requirement that graduates demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that includes teamwork, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial abilities. However, this employment scenario has changed dramatically as a number of employers have begun assessing the foundational skills of (potential) employees, primarily in reading, communication and mathematics (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). Clearly, the higher the employability skills held by a person, the higher chances of him/her being employed, and of maintaining a job (Hillage & Pollard, 1998).

In Malaysia, employability means that graduates not only have technical skills but also the skills of communication, teamwork, critical thinking and problem solving, life-long learning, information management, entrepreneurship, ethics, and moral and professional leadership (MOHE, 2006). Furthermore, the term ‘employability’ in Malaysia is now almost synonymous with ‘English communication skills’, since academic and political debates in Malaysia have
always associated English proficiency with the issues of graduate unemployment, soft skills deficiencies, and the need for unemployed graduates to be retrained (N. A. Ismail, 2011; Noor Azina, 2011; Yusof, 2008).

On the other hand, the mass media as a tool of ideology dissemination has also altered and moulded society’s perspective on graduate and related issues. The present study aims to investigate the issues of ‘English ability’ and ‘graduate employability’ in Malaysia as represented in English-language newspaper discourse and in government documents, in order to further our understanding of the public discourse on this important social issue, and the influence of such discourse on government policy and funding, and on the related practices of industry and institutions of higher learning (IHL) in Malaysia.

1.2 Graduate Employability Issue in Malaysia
1.2.0 Introduction

Before 2010, the level of graduate unemployment was still manageable, but increased as years passed by. By 2010, the Graduate Tracer Study, conducted by the Ministry of Education, revealed that more than 30% of graduates were unable to secure a job due to poor communication skills and skills mismatch (Education, 2012). The graduate employability issue has affected institutions of higher learning (IHL) in Malaysia since at least the time of the Graduate Tracer Study (GTS). The government, concerned with the issue, implemented intervention programs by spending extra capital to enhance graduate employability. Furthermore, the debates around graduate employability issues were further exacerbated when the Department of Statistics Malaysia revealed that about 28,000 to 34,000 graduates from the year 2008 – 2010 had failed to secure employment even two years after graduation (Graduate Tracer Study Supplementary Data, 2010).
One motivating factor for the government intervention was the Vision 2020 project, envisioned by the previous Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, which encouraged Malaysia to become a member of the global economy and community (Jeshurun, 1993). The Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006) had also envisioned that human capital would be the most critical element in achieving the national mission. The unemployed-graduates issue would affect the nation’s growth towards Vision 2020, so graduate employability was seen not only as an issue affecting unemployed university graduates but the society and nation as well. One of the ways to facilitate the graduates was by appointing government-linked companies to conduct specific courses - especially soft-skills courses - and on-the-job training for unemployed graduates. Certain incentives were also given to the unemployed graduates and the government-linked companies who participated in the programs (EPU, 2013).

This issue of graduate employability involves a range of social actors and the relations between them. For example, this issue goes to the social roles, social status and social mobility of the graduates and their relations to employers, the universities and their relation to employers, and to the government and their relation to everyone. If graduates are not employable, there is a significant personal cost on an individual and family level (of lost income and potential related social problems), and also a significant social and economic cost to employers and the nation.

In the next sections of this chapter, programs planned and executed by the government in enhancing graduate employability are compared and discussed. Also discussed are the management of the graduate employability issue in the Malaysian setting through the implementation of soft skills modules in syllabi and research on graduate employability conducted in Malaysia.
1.2.1 Soft Skills Introduction in the Syllabus

One approach to enhancing graduate employability was the introduction of soft skills modules, which focussed on graduating students with attributes necessary for the workplace, based on the National Higher Education Plan (2007-2010). The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE) recommended that all public institutions incorporate soft skills training into their curricula. The MOHE (2006) identified seven soft skills, which were divided into 34 sub-soft skills, that university students were expected to acquire in the *Module Pembangunan Kemahiran Insaniah untuk Institusi Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia* (Soft skills development module for Malaysian institutions of higher learning).

The first category presents the soft skills every student must possess, and the second category outlines soft skills that are good to have. The first skills, which also implies the most important skills, that graduates should possess to be employable are communication skills. Students are not only required to communicate effectively in their first language but also in English as second language and lingua franca in the globalized world. Therefore, even though 'English' is not explicitly listed, a low competency in English represents a lack of communication skills (see Section 1.1 above and Chapter 2 below for further discussion).

Table 1.1 presents the soft skills as outlined by the MOHE in facilitating tertiary-level students to enhance employability.
Table 1.1: The elements of soft skills (Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOFT SKILLS</th>
<th>MUST HAVE ELEMENTS (SUB-SKILLS)</th>
<th>GOOD TO HAVE ELEMENTS (SUB-SKILLS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COMMUNICATION SKILLS</td>
<td>Ability to deliver ideas clearly, effectively and with confidence, either orally or in writing</td>
<td>Ability to use technology during presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to practise active listening skills and respond</td>
<td>Ability to discuss and arrive at a consensus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to present clearly and confidently to the audience</td>
<td>Ability to communicate with individuals from a different cultural background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to use technology during presentation</td>
<td>Ability to expand one’s own communicative skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to use non-oral skills</td>
<td>Ability to use non-oral skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS</td>
<td>Ability to identify and analyse problems in difficult situations and make justifiable evaluations</td>
<td>Ability to think beyond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to expand and improve thinking skills such as explanation, analysis and evaluate discussion</td>
<td>Ability to make conclusions based on valid proof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to find ideas and look for alternative solutions</td>
<td>Ability to withstand and give full responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to think beyond</td>
<td>Ability to understand and accommodate oneself to the varied environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEAMWORK</td>
<td>Ability to build a good rapport, interact and work effectively with others</td>
<td>Ability to give contributions to planning and coordinate group work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to understand and play the role of a leader and follower alternatively</td>
<td>Responsible towards group decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to recognize and respect others' attitudes, behaviour and beliefs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIFE-LONG LEARNING &amp; INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SKILLS</td>
<td>Ability to find and manage relevant information from various sources</td>
<td>Ability to develop an inquiring mind and seek knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENTREPRENEURSHIP SKILLS</td>
<td>Ability to identify job opportunities</td>
<td>Ability to propose business opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETHICS, MORALS AND PROFESSIONALISM</td>
<td>Ability to understand the economic crisis, environment and social-cultural aspects professionally</td>
<td>Ability to build, explore and seek business opportunities and jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEADERSHIP SKILLS</td>
<td>Knowledge of the basic theories of leadership</td>
<td>Ability to practice ethical attitudes, besides having a responsibility towards society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to lead a project</td>
<td>Ability to understand and take turns as a leader and follower alternatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to supervise members of the group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following these guidelines from MOHE, all academic programs and courses in universities would have to include the elements of soft skills. Other than embedding elements of soft skills
in the courses and programs, some universities went further by conducting 'Finishing Schools' under the scrutiny of the Students Development Centre in each institution of higher learning in Malaysia. According to Shakir (2009), who advocated for the Finishing School programs, these programs involved faculty identifying students who were severely lacking soft skills proficiency, and organizing special programs for these students. The program assisted the students to fully develop their soft skills in preparing them to face the competitive employment market. About the same time, studies were conducted that advocated the importance of soft skills or employability skills for graduates to survive and find employment that was, in terms of both the employers’ and students’ perceptions, commensurate with their qualifications (Devadason, Subramaniam, & Daniel, 2010; Husain, Mokhtar, Ahmad, & Mustapha, 2010; Shakir, 2009; Yusof, 2008). The soft skills module, as proposed and implemented in some universities in Malaysia, also projected communication in English as vital to employability (Yusof, 2008).

This relation between graduate employability and English-language education is discussed in detail in Chapter 2. For university students in Malaysia, English is a crucial subject. It is compulsory for all students to study English, many job advertisements specify a requirement for English-language ability, and many job interviews are conducted in English. For English-language teachers in Malaysian universities, graduate employability is a central concern in teaching, materials selection and development, curriculum development, and assessment, to the point where English for Specific Purposes (ESP) can be argued to be a disciplinary response to the issue of graduate employability, which emerged decades before the term 'graduate employability' was ever used.

Thus, the practices of English-language learning and teaching in Malaysian universities have long been closely related to issues of graduate employability (GE). Therefore, government policies on GE, and influential public discourse about GE, are a major concern for English-
language educators in Malaysian universities and for their students. Furthermore, the importance of the English language in Malaysia (Chapter 2) means that an understanding of English-language public discourse on graduate employability is of high importance. However, to date no such systematic study has been conducted.

1.2.2 Research on Employability in Education

Research into graduate employability in education in the Malaysian setting has provided recommendations for improving graduate employability. According to UNESCO (2012), the issue of employability in Asia fluctuates according to the characteristics of graduates, which may or may not make them employable. Based on this report also, graduate employability in Malaysia depends on academic qualifications, skills, and competences that include communication skills and problem-solving skills. The Graduate Employability Blueprint (GEB) (2012) also depicts employers’ complaints about graduates lacking interpersonal and communication skills. The government further extends the research on graduate employability with the assistance of the National Higher Education Research Institute (NAHERI) based in University Sains Malaysia (USM). The institute also assist the Ministry of Higher Education to design and implement new policies for higher learning institutions (NAHERI, 2015).

Bridgstock (2009) admits that, due to the growing demand of a global economy, universities have been pressured to produce employable graduates. In a study focused on the Australian context, Bridgstock proposes that graduate employability programs that emphasize individual skills and knowledge need to be complemented by targeted geographical and industry development, continuing (lifelong) education programs beyond university, and social inclusion initiatives, in order to be effective. In the case of graduate employability in Malaysia, the issue of graduate unemployment, according to the literature, has been concerned with communication skills as the prime factor, which reflects the recommendations by Bridgstock.
Singh et al. (2012), for instance, contend that Malaysian higher education institutions should be proactive in assessing students with different capabilities. In order to enhance graduate employability, they propose an approach focussed on assessment, and also that learning outcomes should widen the usage of the English language. There are also other studies that have advocated for English language as an important part of graduate employability (Nair-Venugopal, 2003; Shakir, 2009; Yusof, 2008; A. Zaharim et al., 2010). These studies also propose that, in order to fulfil employability requirements by industry, students need to be fluent in communication skills, especially in English. Pillai et al. (2012) state that enhancing soft skills through industrial training improves graduate employability, but that there are certain issues that Malaysian universities need to address, such as the possible mismatch between the tasks assigned to trainees and their areas of study, and the need to enhance English language competency and particular soft skills throughout their degree program. There have been many studies aiming to understand and improve graduate employability in Malaysia, as well as various programs planned and executed in the universities and sponsored by the government. For instance, the establishment of a government agency known as the Graduate Career Accelerated Program (GCAP), under the Prime Minister's Department, supports unemployed graduates. Two private-education centres appointed and linked with the government, Scicom Education Group and MyPartners, provides six weeks’ training for unemployed graduates who have scored cumulative grade point averages of between 2.0 and 3.0. Upon completion of the training session, these firms assist graduates to find employment in the service sector, including commercial banks and multinational companies ("Govt training stint to help graduates get jobs," 2012). These examples above show that the issue of graduate employability has not been resolved, and continues to be discussed, especially in the media. In 2012, the government published the Graduate Employability Blueprint as a policy for all Malaysian higher education institutions to follow in enhancing graduate employability. At the
same time, the connection between graduate employability and the English-language proficiency of graduates remains strong (Pillai, Khan, Ibrahim, & Raphael, 2012) and English remains a marker of social status and social power in Malaysia (Saran Kaur Gill, 2005). Therefore, it is timely that the graduate employability issue, as construed in the Malaysian English-language media and in important government documents that are also written in English, is studied in order to discover how the issue has been played out in Malaysian public discourse intended specifically for the educated and powerful (i.e. those in Malaysia who read English media and government documents). In the present study, critical discourse analysis using Systemic Functional Linguistics as an analytical tool is employed to examine the ways in which the graduate employability issue and relevant actors are represented in the media, as well as to explore the ways in which the issue and actors are evaluated and positioned in these influential discourses.

1.2.3 International Studies of Graduate Employability

Graduate employability is a worldwide issue, and studies have been conducted in many countries to improve employability through better government policy (Morley, 2001); though studies of graduate employability issues in the UK (Helyer, 2007; Lindsay, 2007; Brown, 2004), Europe (Prokou, 2008; Schomburg & Teichler, 2011) and Australia (Bridgstock, 2009; Sheldon & Thornthwaite, 2005), for example, are more sporadic and detailed than those on the Malaysia context (see section 1.2.2 above). Most current studies on employability deal with employability discourse and how transnational, national and local discourses on employability have been translated and re-shaped, and how they are manifested in different practices (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). Due to the pressure of globalization, especially when local graduates are claimed to have low competence in English (Gill, 2005; Nair-Venugopal, 2001; Shakir, 2008), changes have been made in the Malaysian
national education plans to improve them in this respect. However, improvement on the English language policy is still considered necessary to some extent to achieve globalization (Saran Kaur Gill, 2005). In an example of this, Nuan (2011) proposes ideas and methods to improve graduate employability in China, particularly in a technical university. Some of the methods proposed by Nuan (2011) include focused career plans as anticipated by the university during the students' study years. However, the needs for graduates to be employable varies depending on the country’s requirements of their workforce in preparing the nation (Bridgstock, 2009; Hamid, Islam, & Manaf, 2013).

Apart from a focused career plan, Tomlinson (2008), in an earlier study conducted in the UK, argued that personal, behavioural and social credentials are important in ensuring the employability of graduates, which he referred to as soft credentials. Students also need to understand that their future labour market outcomes are more complex and more competitive. This is in line with the graduate employability issue in the Malaysian setting, where the market outcomes are always in search for the best.

According to Brown et al. (2003) the major problem with research on employability issues is the lack of theoretically informed studies. Furthermore, they argue that the policy discourse regarding graduate employability is usually dominated by employer and government concerns about the supply of graduates. Their argument has yet to be proven in the Malaysian setting; but most programs aiming to enhance graduate employability in Malaysia have been planned and executed by government-linked companies (see section 1.3.1). On the other hand, Garsten et al. (2004) identified that employability is a matter of individual attributes and responsibility, which would place agency on the graduates and their ability.

One important contribution of the present thesis that it addresses the need for theoretically informed studies on graduate employability as identified by Brown et al. (2003). Another is to show that, in the Malaysian setting, employer and government concerns do receive more
attention than the concerns of the graduates and of the universities (in line with Brown et al, 2003 rather than Garsten et al, 2004), and that this is achieved in the ways that the different actors are represented in the influential public discourses of mass media and government documents, and also in the evaluation of these actors in the same documents. This, in turn, has important ramifications for government policy, and therefore for the lives of individual graduates, for the educational practices of universities, including practices of English-language education, and for the future of the Malaysian economy and society.

1.3 Context

1.3.0 Introduction

My own interest in this topic is the result of my experience teaching English for Specific Purposes in a technical university, and personal involvement as a teacher in programs such as those discussed in the dataset analysed in this thesis. The discourse on graduate unemployment, marketability and employability in Malaysia has become a significant part of the government’s agenda since the early 2000s. There are two important elements in the construction of social actors in the discourse of the graduate employability issue. Firstly, there is the role of the Ministry of Education in the attempt to ensure that all graduates are employable after graduation. Problems of unemployed graduates occurs when graduates are unemployed 6 months to two years after graduation (Shakir, 2009). Therefore, in ensuring that graduates are employable, various government intervention programs have been organized to retrain unemployed graduates. The retraining of the graduates promotes the government’s positive reaction in enhancing graduates' employability.

Secondly, the media in Malaysia began publishing news on the issue of employability regularly when the Graduate Tracer Study, conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education, revealed that
more than 40,000 graduates remained jobless 6 months after graduation in 2006 (70% of grads from public institutions jobless, 2006). In this case, the role of the media in Malaysia - especially on the graduate employability issue - affected the perceptions and reactions of the nation in the treatment of the issue. The events pertaining to the graduate employability issue, therefore, shall be studied therefore, in the present thesis is studied through the government's Graduate Employability Blueprint document, and media reports from two prominent online newspapers.

1.3.1 Government Program

One of the ways the government tracks graduate employability is through the Graduate Tracer Study, conducted in all public higher institutions. Its aims are to identify the success of graduates who have managed to land employment, and to know whether there was a mismatch between the graduates and the jobs offered in the real world (Ministry of Education, 2002). The Graduate Tracer Study, started in 2002, is conducted online, and graduates have to complete it immediately after graduation.

Due to the increase in unemployed graduates, as presented in the Tracer Study from 2008 to 2010, the government initiated programs to help unemployed graduates. As mentioned in an earlier section of this chapter, the report from the Tracer Study revealed that over 30% of graduates (Graduate Tracer Study, 2012) were unable to secure a job 6 months after graduation. Some of these programs, as planned, initiated by the government, and executed by universities and government-linked bodies, are shown in Table 1.2.
Table 1.2: Programs initiated by government if graduates are unemployed after 6 months of graduation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programs</th>
<th>Organizers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Industrial Skills Enhancement Programs (INSEP) (began in 2006)</td>
<td>Ministry of Higher Education in collaboration with the industry and conducted in a few selected institutions of higher learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Skim Latihan 1 Malaysia (SL1M) 1 Malaysia Training Scheme (began in 2011)</td>
<td>Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Graduate Employability Management Schemes (GEMs) (began in 2011 - initiated by and a subsidiary of Talent Corp)</td>
<td>Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister Office and TalentCorp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Talent Corp (to organize programs for unemployed graduates) (2011- present)</td>
<td>Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Graduate Career Accelerated Programs (GCAP) began in 2011</td>
<td>Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister Office, TalentCorp with the collaboration of selected institutions of higher learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are also programs organized by the universities and initiated by the government - the Finishing Schools (also mentioned in an earlier section). These schools were conducted for students during their final semester prior to graduation, to enhance the graduate employability. The programs also inculcate soft skills as required by the module, which include job hunting skills for the students. However, there have been no specific studies conducted to measure the effectiveness of these programs.

On the other hand, there were arguments from the Centre for Policy Initiative, a non-government organisation, that more than RM20,000 million was spent in the name of ‘graduate employability’ with no viable results as to how many had benefited from the programs (T. G. Lim, 2009). Nevertheless, the government initiatives also encouraged many unemployed graduates to participate in the programs organized (Nair et al., 2012).
In facilitating the Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL), the government, with the collaboration of the universities and industries, decided to devise a blueprint to guide all public universities. This became the Graduate Employability Blueprint, which was published by the Ministry of Education in 2012. The GEB serves as a guideline for higher educations to inculcate elements of employability in the curricula of IHLs in Malaysia.

The GEB was planned and written by a group of experts from public universities, consultants and industry, and the Graduate Employability Taskforce was formed with the allocation of RM200 million to enhance graduate employability (National Graduate Employability Blueprint, 2012). The Blueprint shows the intensity of government efforts to overcome the graduate employability issue, and is an important document that represents the government's public position and intentions regarding the graduate employability issue. The Blueprint (GEB) is analysed together with relevant stories from the mass media in Chapters 6 and 7 of the present thesis.

### 1.3.2 Online Media in Malaysia: Representation of Social Actors in Online Newspapers

There are different genres of news, but the 'mainstay' of news organisations is so-called 'hard news', which has the purpose of presenting ‘facts’. Hard news differs from commentary (found in opinion columns, letters to the editor, editorials and so on), and from the more reflective 'soft news' (found in feature stories), both of which deal with ‘opinions’ and assessment of the 'facts' of hard news (Bell, 1991; cf. Iedema, Feez & White, 1994).

Hard news can be found in broadcast news (e.g. radio and TV), in traditional newspapers, and more recently in online news, the latter which has emerged with technological and social developments over the last two decades, making the news easily accessible to many readers (Boczkowski, 2004).
Online news has become an important arena for public discourse in recent years. For instance, the online media influenced the perceptions of people during the 12th general election in Malaysia, in a context where the mainstream print media is controlled by the government (Brown, 2005). The impact of online media during the general election was considered massive, and an important factor in the National Front or Barisan National was not able to maintain their majority in the parliament. This election result also showed how online news has a significant impact on socio-political and cultural phenomena (Massey & Levy, 1999; Tapsell, 2013).

One of the earliest newspapers to go online in Malaysia was the New Straits Times in 1993, specifically for subscribers only. In 1998, it was extended into interactive online services. Other online news media in Malaysia are mostly alternative online newspapers such as MalaysiaKini and The Malaysian Insider. The Rakyat Post also flourished, particularly after the restriction of the printed media act (Anuar, 2007). As a result, more people were turning to the internet for news that offered alternative viewpoints to those of the government (Fischer, 2009). Studies of Malaysia’s online media progressed, especially during the ‘Reformasi’ movement and prior to General Elections in 2003, 2008 and 2013 (Kim, 2001b; Lumsden; Tapsell, 2013). The restrictions on the media ("Communication & Multimedia Act," 1998) raised questions about the freedom of media in Malaysia (Sani, 2005; Weiss, 2013), further highlighting the social role of online news in Malaysian public discourse. Because of the impact online news has had on Malaysian political scenarios, it is reasonable to expect that online news in Malaysia will also be an important site where ideas about the graduate employability issue are construed and contested publicly.

1.4 Research Questions

This study aims to answer questions related to the issue of graduate employability in English-language, written, public discourse in Malaysia, as represented by:
The research questions for the study are as follows.

1. How are the key social groups with an interest in graduate employability represented in the public discourse on this issue? Which groups are represented as powerful, which as without power, and which are unrepresented in this discourse?

2. How are these groups evaluated in this discourse?

3. On the basis of the previous two questions, which groups are construed favourably in the public discourse on graduate employability, and which groups are not? Whose interests are served by these representations?

The study conducted aims to answer the social problem that lies at the intersection of three phenomena. Firstly, a large number of graduates remain unemployed despite high levels of education and education in English; secondly, the media has construed social groups in the graduate employability issue; and thirdly, the emergence of the Graduate Employability Blueprint. The emergence of the Blueprint also coexists with the country’s budget at the end of 2012 and general election in mid-2013. The Blueprint also specifically emphasizes that graduates lacking English language proficiency find it difficult to find employment, and insisted that institutions of higher learning follow the graduate employability attributes and be responsive to the growing demands of the industry. The need to conduct a study in the Malaysian setting is due to the increase of the graduate employability issue in media discourse, despite the various programs organized by the higher institutions to facilitate graduates’ employability. Apart from that, government programs executed by government-linked
companies are also on the rise, with exorbitant funding by the government. The increase of the
news by media on graduates lacking soft skills, especially in English, and graduate
unemployment, despite the programs organized by the universities, has created a significant
pressure for teachers in the universities, especially those teaching English. Therefore, a research
to study the playing out of these issues by the social actors involved should be conducted.
The research reported in this thesis aims to provide a better understanding of the public
discourses in the media and government documents, of graduate employability in Malaysia,
including a stronger understanding of whose interests are represented and/or endorsed, and
whose interests silenced and/or criticised. Such an understanding of the framing of government
policy, and public expectations of universities and graduates, is a necessary first step in a move
towards a productive and inclusive approach to graduate employability that takes account of
the interests of all parties in this important social issue. The key social actors in the graduate
employability issue are identified as graduates, the government, government programs,
universities, employers and government-linked companies, students, parents and teachers. The
focus of the study is to discover how the social actors in the issue of graduate employability
mould social practices as represented in online news and government documents. The study of
the government’s Graduate Employability Blueprint is also expected to provide a comparison
of the social actors’ representations between different social institutions - i.e. news
organisations and the government.

The first part of the study investigates the issue of graduate employability in the Malaysian
English media and government documents. This is realized through a study of the construal of
social actors using Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday 1978). The second part of the study
investigates the evaluation of social actors in the same sources using the tools of the Appraisal
framework (Martin and White 2005).
1.5 Overview

The next chapter presents a literature review in the areas of the English language and Graduate Employability in Malaysia, media discourse, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Chapter Three discusses the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, focusing on the ideational meaning of Transitivity Analysis, and the interpersonal meaning of Appraisal Analysis, particularly Attitude.

Chapter Four sets out the methodology applied in this study.

Chapter Five presents the first part of the analysis and findings: the grammatical representation of social actors in the public discourse on graduate employability, and how these social actors are represented as, for example, the key players and the less powerful in the issue.

Chapter Six presents the second part of the findings, which is on the analysis of the attitude of social actors towards each other as construed in the same discourses.

Chapter Seven, the final chapter, presents the summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the graduate employability issue in the Malaysian setting, which is closely related to English language education policy and practice, as is discussed in detail in Chapter 2. It has given an overview of the social context of this issue, including governmental responses and a consideration of the public discourse surrounding the issue. The research questions have been provided, and the analytical approach taken has been briefly introduced in broad terms.

Graduate employability has been introduced as an important social issue for individuals, and for Malaysia as a society and nation. The following chapters present theoretically-based
research into the public discourse of graduate employability in Malaysia, in order to understand whose interests are advanced, and whose are not, so that appropriate responses can follow.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the background and introduction to the graduate employability issue in Malaysia. This chapter is divided into three sections, which present a literature review on the role and importance of the English language in the Malaysian education system and with respect to the sociocultural aspects of Malaysia more generally. The first section discusses the English language and graduate employability issue in the Malaysian setting, and the relevant background and debates. The second section highlights media discourse and the study of media. The final section discusses the theories underpinning the framework of this study.

2.1 English-language Ability and Graduate Employability in Malaysia

2.1.0 Introduction

As a developing country and as one of the countries colonized by the British, the English language is valued in Malaysia as an important factor in achieving a globalized nation and to be at par with other developed nations. In fact, the role of the English language in gaining information in science and technology has intensified the government’s agenda to enhance English usage and the nation’s ability to be conversant in the language (Asmah, 1996). The role of English as the second language in the Malaysian education system, economy and industry has augmented the importance of the English language in Malaysia. The focus of this section is on the English language in the Malaysian education system and other settings, including schools, tertiary educations and industry. This section also highlights how the English language is important for local graduates to master in order to gain employment after graduation.
2.1.1 English Education Policy and Planning in Schools

Study of the issue of English language education and policy in the Malaysian setting has revealed a progression of planning activities since the independence of Malaysia (Saran K Gill, Tollefson, & Tsui, 2004). The government, in facilitating the nation towards being part of the global economy, established that English language is to be taught as a compulsory subject both in primary and secondary schools. In placing English as a compulsory subject, the time allocated for English lessons has also increased as the policy has changed. Through the Integrated Curriculum, before 2010 (prior to the introduction of reform discussed below), the time allocated for the subject English in primary schools was around 450 minutes per week, while 200 minutes per week was allocated at the secondary level (Malaysia, 2000).

In ensuring the importance of the English language, there are also three major national examinations throughout the school years that feature English as a core paper, which are compulsory to pass. The first is at the end of Year Six (UPSR or Primary School Evaluation Certificate), the second at the end of lower secondary in Form Three or Year 9 (PMR or Lower Secondary School Certificate), and the third at the end of secondary in Form Five or Year 11 (SPM or Malaysian Certificate of Examination) (Malaysia, 2010).

In 2003, the government took a radical step by introducing English as the medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science (Hashim, 2003), in order to improve the standard of English in schools and tertiary institutions. The policy mandating the use of English to teach science and mathematics or Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris (PPSMI) was implemented from 2003 onwards. The policy was controversial, as the members of the three ethnic main groups in Malaysia, Malays, Chinese and Indians, opposed it. This is revealed by Kirkpatrick (2011), who cited that the objections revolved around issues such as the lack of teachers who were trained and able to teach these two subjects in English, primary
students being unable to cope if they possessed a poor command of English when they entered school in Year One, and the perceptions of the nationalist Malays and the Chinese, who perceived the policy as undermining their ethnic interests.

Consequently, on July 8 2009, only seven years after the policy was implemented, the government did an about-turn and announced that the medium of instruction for mathematics and science would revert to Bahasa Malaysia in national schools. The reversion to teaching Mathematics and Science in Bahasa Malaysia was based on studies commissioned by the Ministry of Education after the *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* (UPSR) or Primary School Test, although there were mixed response from many parties. For example, the Parent Teacher Action Group (PAGE) was quite proactive in speaking out against the policy reversal, while the Stop the PPSMI Movement group lauded the move. During the controversy regarding the PPSMI, two studies were conducted that showed that students from rural areas had difficulty in understanding the teaching of science and mathematics through English, since their English proficiency was at a nominal level (Isahak, Abdul Latif, Md Nasir, Abdul Halim, & Mariam, 2008; Singh, Rahman, & Hoon, 2010). The policy reversal suggested that the Ministry of Education showed concern for the socioeconomic divergence between rural and urban pupils at school levels, taking into consideration the poor English ability of many rural students, despite many criticisms of the reversion from parents and teachers (Pandian, 2006; Pandian & Ramiah, 2004).

After the reversal of PPSMI, the Ministry of Education introduced a new policy, of the *Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia, Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris* (MBMMBI), literally meaning ‘Upholding Bahasa Malaysia, Strengthening Command of English Policy’, in 2010. The new policy presented the planning of the national and global language as a balancing act which aims to maintain the higher status of Bahasa Malaysia and simultaneously empower the English language ("Plan will boost BM, English," 2010). The new policy had also increased the
time allocated to learn English in primary schools with an additional 300 minutes, while an additional 200 minutes were given to secondary school.

Competence in English is highly valued in many fields, and students are aware that getting a good grade in English will increase their chance of being accepted in local or foreign universities, as well as providing a coveted edge in the workplace (Saran Kaur Gill, 1999). At school level, students are required to score a distinction as an indicator to enable them to get into prestigious courses such as Teaching English, Law, Science and Technology and Medicine in university. However, during a school life of 11 years for a child in Malaysia, he or she has to sit for three national exams. For many of these students, they are trained and drilled to answer exams but not to embrace education for surviving in the outside world. This leads to issues in English-language education in universities, and in graduate employability, as discussed in the following two sections.

The many transformations of the Malaysian education scenario are related to the government’s intention to achieve a globalized nation. This is also envisioned in the latest education blueprint, which is the National Education Blueprint (2013-2025). Through the transformational change of education in Malaysia, the education system will be improved. The National Education Blueprint proclaims its intention to build on five system aspirations, and six student-specific aspirations, the latter which emphasize ethics and morality (ethics and spirituality, leadership skills, and national identity), and knowledge and skills (language proficiency, thinking skills, and knowledge) (MOE, 2013). The emphasis on language proficiency - both on the national language (Bahasa Malaysia) and the second language (English) - suggests that the government is interested in facilitating the nation's human capital.
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