

Language and identity: Bilingual education policy in Malaysian society

Shi, Tiffany Rachel

Nguyen, Celine

Tsui, Ann

Lai, Klara

National Chengchi University, Taiwan



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Abstract

This paper critically examines the evolution and complexities of bilingual education policies in Malaysia, focusing on three major policy frameworks: Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris (PPSMI), Memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu, Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris (MBMMBI), and the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (MEB). Each policy reflects Malaysia's efforts to reconcile national identity, linguistic diversity, and global competitiveness. PPSMI aimed to improve English proficiency through the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English but was met with strong resistance due to concerns about equity, teacher preparedness, and cultural identity. MBMMBI, introduced as a more balanced successor, emphasized both the strengthening of Bahasa Malaysia and the enhancement of English through complementary programs such as the Dual Language Programme (DLP) and the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP). The Malaysia Education Blueprint introduced broader systemic reforms, including digital integration and equity-focused strategies, but continued to face challenges related to top-down implementation, teacher recruitment, and local adaptation. The paper also offers a comparative perspective by analyzing bilingual education in Singapore and Vietnam. Singapore's centralized and pragmatic approach has successfully elevated English as the dominant medium of instruction while preserving mother tongue education. In contrast, Vietnam's bilingual initiatives remain limited, largely due to resource constraints and implementation gaps. Compared to these countries, Malaysia demonstrates a more pluralistic but fragmented approach, marked by frequent policy shifts and ongoing debates over linguistic and cultural priorities. The paper concludes by advocating for more inclusive and stable language planning, teacher capacity-building, and school-level autonomy to ensure the long-term success of bilingual education in Malaysia's multilingual society.

Keywords: bilingual education policy, Malaysia education blueprint, PPSMI, MBMMBI, language and identity, comparative education

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1. Introduction

Malaysia is famous for being a culturally rich and multilingual country. Coluzzi (2017) referred to Malaysia as one of Asia's most linguistically diverse countries. With a population of approximately 34.1 million (2024) and a long history of migration, colonial rule, and globalization, Malays, Chinese, and Indians are currently the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. While Bahasa Malaysia is the official language, English is also highly favored, and is considered the second most important language in Malaysia. Bilingual refers to one's ability to use two languages in one's daily life (Grosjean, 2010). In the past, Malaysia had a history of English-medium education in primary schools. However, after its independence in 1957, new policies emerged, and many Malay-medium schools were established around the nation. This raised the need to develop Malay teaching materials in primary schools and a rearrangement of teaching English in secondary schools. By 1984, English-medium schools all over Malaysia had been transformed into Malay-medium schools. Malaysian public education is divided into two types of schools: National Schools, which primarily use Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction, and National-Type Schools, which use Mandarin or Tamil as the medium of instruction. While English is still widely used, it is currently taught as a subject at most schools. Bilingual education in Malaysia has gone through various transformations and changes, with policies emerging and shifting throughout the years. The paper discusses three of the most significant policies so far: *Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris (PPSMI)*, *Memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu, Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris (MBMMBI)*, and *Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB)*. The policies, their impacts, public reactions, and strengths and weaknesses will each be discussed thoroughly. Moreover, a comparative study section will discuss the differences in bilingual education in Malaysia and two of its neighbouring countries, Vietnam and Singapore.

1.1 Malaysian bilingual education policy analysis

Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris (PPSMI) - The *Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris (PPSMI)* policy was introduced in 2003 by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. The goal of this policy is to improve English language proficiency among Malaysian students by teaching Science and Mathematics in English (Desi, n.d.). This policy was implemented in phases, beginning with Year 1 primary and Form 1 secondary students in 2003, and fully applied by 2008 for primary and 2007 for secondary levels (Desi, n.d.).

Policy Background and Objectives - Historically, Malaysia's education system had been stratified by language, with English-medium schools often better resourced and attended by urban, wealthier students, while rural Malay-medium schools lagged behind (Noss, 1967). The PPSMI goal is to equip students with English proficiency to fit in with the global market, especially in science and technology fields. However, the policy faced significant challenges. Research such as that by *Permuafakatan Badan Ilmiah Nasional (PEMBINA)* highlighted poor teacher competency in English and the negative impact on students' comprehension and retention in Science and Mathematics (Faizal, n.d.). As a result, the policy was reversed starting in 2012 (Jebat Must Die, 2011).

Public Reaction: Students, Teachers, Parents, and Social Norms - Public reaction to PPSMI was deeply divided, with different social standings. Well-educated urban populations generally supported the policy as they view English proficiency as essential for global competitiveness and economic progress (Yunus, Sulaiman, & Embi, 2017). However, rural communities who possess low proficiency for English found the policy unfair as they struggle to learn complex subjects such as science and math in an unfamiliar language. Teachers also reported difficulties as there is inadequate training and increased workload (Faizal, n.d.). Parents' and guardians' opinions differ and are split between urban and rural communities. Some welcomed the opportunity for their children to gain English skills, equipping them with the ability to expand their children's job opportunities. On the other hand,

others feared the erosion of the Malay language and cultural identity. The opposition from groups such as *Gerakan Mansuhkan PPSMI* (GMP) showed broader anxieties about national language status and social equity (A. R., 2020).

The reactions to the policy clearly reflect how Malaysians understand and experience language as more than just a medium of communication. Language, according to them, is tied to identity, power, and opportunity. PPSMI disrupted the long-standing norm of using Malay as the main language of instruction. This inevitably stirred debate where on one side, there were strong sentiments about protecting linguistic nationalism, while on the other, some viewed the policy as a necessary step toward embracing globalization and improving access to global knowledge. Interestingly, the controversy also revealed deeper issues that go beyond language itself. For instance, urban and rural communities reacted differently, showing how socio-economic backgrounds can shape access to quality education and influence learning outcomes (Yunus et al., 2017).

Impacts and Social Norms Created by PPSMI - The PPSMI policy changed how language functions in education by introducing new norms that placed English at the center of access to scientific and technological knowledge (Faizal, n.d.). This move strengthened English as a global language, but it also unintentionally widened the gap for students who weren't fluent in it. As a result, doing well in English became closely tied to academic success and even social mobility. Therefore, local languages were gradually pushed aside in the classroom. When the policy was eventually reversed, it was a renewed effort to prioritize Malay as both a symbol of national identity and a foundation of the education system (Jebat Must Die, 2011). This shows just how strong language nationalism still is in Malaysia. Even today, the tension between using English to stay globally competitive and preserving local languages and cultures continues to shape how education policies are made (A. R., 2020).

Public vs Authorities: The Controversy - The PPSMI policy has sparked significant controversy. This policy is drawing criticism from teachers, parents, and political groups who oppose its top-down system of implementation and the lack of meaningful consultation (Faizal, n.d.; Desi, n.d.). Many felt that the government pushed the policy forward without adequately preparing teachers or creating space for public dialogue. The absence of transparency and failure to implement the policy in stages or support it with ongoing research deepened the sense of distrust of the public. By 2012, growing public pressure and research pointing to the policy's limitations led to its reversal (Jebat Must Die, 2011). Therefore, the PPSMI debate wasn't just about language, it reflected a larger tension between state-led efforts to modernize through English and grassroots movements to protect linguistic and cultural identities.

Policy Strengths and Weaknesses: Challenges and Issues - Despite the backlash, the PPSMI policy did bring some advantages. It was introduced with the goal of improving students' English proficiency, which is an important skill in this increasingly globalized world and for strengthening the country's future workforce (Yunus et al., 2017). By focusing on Science and Mathematics, the policy also recognized the critical role these subjects play in national development. Moreover, PPSMI symbolised a bold step toward educational reform, as Malaysia sought to keep pace with international standards, in response to the pressures of globalization (A. R., 2020). Nonetheless, the policy came with serious weaknesses. Many teachers were not fully equipped in terms of training and English fluency. This made classroom delivery uneven and often ineffective (Faizal, n.d.). This was especially felt in rural areas, where students struggled to follow lessons, leading to a noticeable drop in academic performance. The policy was rolled out too quickly, without gradual implementation, consistent evaluation, or meaningful involvement from the wider community, all of which added to public dissatisfaction and, eventually, the policy's failure (Desi, n.d.). On top of that, it failed to acknowledge Malaysia's rich linguistic landscape and the value of mother tongue education. By privileging English, the policy unintentionally created new social inequalities. It benefits those already proficient in English, which are the wealthier families who can afford English tutors, while leaving others behind. In the end, PPSMI had to confront the difficult challenge of promoting English for global competitiveness, while also respecting national languages and reducing educational gaps, while at the same time valuing deep-rooted cultural attitudes around language.

1.2 *Memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu, Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris (MBMMBI)*

Policy Background and Objectives - Since PPSMI had been criticized for its limited impact on improving students' academic performance in Mathematics and Science, the government decided to find a more balanced and culturally grounded replacement for this policy. On July 8, 2009, the Cabinet officially decided to abolish PPSMI. The new policy, MBMMBI, which is also known as “Memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu, Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris,” quickly filled the gap. The goal of MBMMBI is to uphold the Malay Language and enhance the English language proficiency of Malaysian citizens. The major contents of the policy include four key points: Language teaching reform, English enhancement programmes, teacher professional development and curriculum and teaching materials update. Notably, while MBMMBI rectifies the teacher-related shortcomings of PPSMI, its effectiveness is still a subject of considerable discussion.

The Process of MBMMBI - In 2011, Math and Science in elementary schools (Malay, Chinese, and Tamil — referring to the three language-medium elementary schools in Malaysia) first grade were changed to be taught in the respective mother tongues. Between 2011 and 2016, there was a transitional period. Schools could decide whether to teach Math and Science in English on their own. In 2016, Math and Science in whole elementary schools were changed to be taught in their respective mother tongues. Since 2017, governments have started to limit junior high schools to teach Math and Science in their respective mother tongues more strictly.

The Supplementary Policy and the Relevant Changes - To ensure the effectiveness of MBMMBI, the government set up some supplementary policies to consummate the whole system. DLP, Dual Language Programme, which was set up in 2016, allows students to choose to learn in English or Malay. In the same year, HIP, which is also known as Highly Immersive Programme, was launched. It creates a rich English learning environment and engaging activities, fostering students' motivation and confidence in learning English. In addition, from 2016, English became a must-pass subject for the award of SPM (Malay for Malaysian Certificate of Education). Those policies emphasize the importance of English and the mother language in Malaysia at the same time.

Policy Strengths and Weaknesses and Public Reaction - MBMMBI provides a non-mandatory environment of English learning, which then improves students' learning outcomes and motivation. It played a significant role in addressing the issues caused by PPSMI. However, there are still some problems. For example, though MBMMBI tries to fix the teacher-related shortcomings with Teacher Professional Development, which is aimed at upskilling the teachers' English proficiency, the problem still exists. Furthermore, the urban-rural gap is not filled completely either. The supporters of MBMMBI consider the policy efficient, since it strengthens the status of the national language and fosters national identity and enhances English proficiency to boost international competitiveness. On the contrary, people who oppose the policy put forward several arguments: Besides the shortage of qualified language teachers, teachers and school administrators also called for greater autonomy in curriculum implementation. Since the policy required schools to have at least one class using the mother tongue to teach, bilingual schools, which were not affected by PPSMI as they had already been using English to teach math and science, were forced to switch their teaching methods. Students and parents point out that mandatory instruction in the national language may hinder learning outcomes, due to the frequent changes in the policies. Linguists and Education Experts acknowledged the policy's intent, criticizing its frequent shifts and overemphasis on language transition at the expense of curriculum quality and teacher training. As for the media and public, some of them are afraid that this kind of switch will stir up interethnic conflict. Sin Chew Daily also warned that the effect of DLP may be weakened.

Our Recommendations - Since some of the problems are not fixed from PPSMI to MBMMBI, the government should focus on improving teacher quality and curriculum. Moreover, the policy should not impose restrictions that limit the actions of schools. Schools should be given greater autonomy to form the policies that best fit their students, while the government should fulfill its role of supervision and support.

1.3 Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB)

Policy Background and Objectives - The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (MEB), released by the Ministry of Education in 2013, is a 13-year roadmap to combat fundamental systemic issues impeding progress in the Malaysian education system. Among the issues are diminishing quality of education, low international competitiveness and sustained inequalities based on social origin and ethnicity. The blueprint was jointly worked out among local and international players, that is, the World Bank and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and was also influenced through wide consultation, such as the National Education Dialogue. The MEB presents 11 strategic thrusts including among others, to raise the level of HOTS among students, professionalize the teaching force, promoting greater involvement in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training), integrating digital learning infrastructure, and enhancing the equitable access of quality education for all regions and ethnic groups.

Implementation Effectiveness and Challenges - In the years since the start of the blueprint, many positive outcomes have been realized. In 2022, secondary school enrollment stood at 89.97 per cent from approximately 85 percent in 2011. Similarly, the dropout rate fell dramatically from 2.5 percent in 2011 to 0.99 percent in 2022. Classroom digitalization rose significantly as the use of more technology by teachers increased with the use of interactive whiteboards, projectors, tablets and digital platforms like Google Classroom, Frog Virtual Learning Environment (Frog VLE), and Zoom. These technologies have opened the way for more dynamic teaching and have allowed teachers to facilitate community-managed assignments, assessments and progress for whole groups of students without the complications of lots of pieces of paper. Nonetheless, the implementation has been patchy. Only 9 percent of teaching candidates came from the top-performing educational cohort, indicating both difficulty in attracting quality educators. Rural and resource-deprived schools are still plagued by antiquated facilities and inadequate access to digital technology, limiting the effectiveness of the nation-building reforms. The top-down implementation of the blueprint has also limited flexibility at the school level, stifling innovative capacity and responsiveness to unique community needs.

Reactions from Students and Teachers - Students have demonstrated mixed levels of support, with some expressing worry. A common theme is that digital learning and improved STEM education have generated better levels of engagement and performance on international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). However, many students feel the curriculum is still largely based on examinations and did not find they were able to develop HOTS practically as a result. Some students have mentioned feeling under a lot of pressure while working under KPI-based systems and developing more HOTS remains a priority while other lower-level skills are being developed. Teachers display similar mixed responses. Many appreciate the policy's attention to professional learning, the tightening of performance standards, and the infusion of technology in the classroom. However, too much time doing paperwork and not enough time in classrooms has sapped the energy needed for both teachers' morale and innovation. Some teachers rejected new ways of teaching, classes, and even department curriculum documents because they didn't have adequate support, training, and agency in their decision-making.

Perspectives of Parents and Guardians - While parents and guardians are generally supportive of the overarching goals of the blueprint, particularly when it comes to equity and quality, parental concerns regarding the changing language of instruction remain high. Parents raised many concerns about changes to the language of instruction (especially in relation to English and Mathematics) and whether or not policymakers are being consistent, and whether consistency has a positive influence on student learning. Many parents also continue to advocate for more accountability and transparency, clearer communication from policymakers, and better opportunities for parent and community input in educational decision-making.

Public Perception and Broader Social Impact - On the societal level, the design has advocated for multilingual education, and reemphasized multicultural values that support greater social cohesion. However, its performance indicator approach -preoccupation with KPIs and competitive school ranking - is equally responsible

for a culture in education of overcompetition and increased stress levels for students and teachers. Public comments have been somewhat critical in terms of the over-bureaucratic, centralized stance of the MEB, and called for more flexible, local and contextualized educational policies.

Recommendations - The Malaysia Education Blueprint has made good progress in terms of access, digitalization, and restructuring. There are still a number of issues and contradictions in the education system, particularly in accessing professional development for teachers, stability in policies, and adaptation at the grassroots level. In considering further change, reforms should include greater school-level autonomy, a reformed recruitment and professional support system for teachers, incentivizing a non-stop language policy, and fostering an independent monitoring process for accountability and improvement.

2. Comparative studies

2.1 Bilingual education in Singapore

After its separation from Malaysia, Singapore claimed its independence in 1965. The country became a multilingual state with four official languages: English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. English became the common language for interethnic communication. In 1966, Singapore officially implemented a bilingual policy, requiring all students in national schools to learn English as the first language and a "mother tongue" (Malay, Mandarin, or Tamil) as a second language. This policy aimed to unify the multi-ethnic nation, preserve cultural heritage, and facilitate economic development. Singapore's language education policy evolved significantly under their Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990, Lee Kuan Yew, who believed that English proficiency was essential for accessing international trade, investment, and Western technology. Initially, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil were introduced in English-medium schools, a move welcomed by many parents. Later, English was introduced into Chinese, Malay, and Tamil schools. As policies faced mixed reactions from parents and teachers, bilingual education was implemented as a compromise, requiring students to learn English alongside one other official language. However, enrollment in mother-tongue medium schools declined sharply. By 1987, English became the main medium of instruction across all schools, with Chinese, Malay, or Tamil taught as second languages (Gopinathan, 1999). Despite initially having little cultural relevance in Singapore's diverse communities, English gained wide acceptance due to its perceived economic value and high status (Lee, 2000). The Singapore government has successfully implemented policies that transitioned English and Mandarin into their home languages, despite the languages initially only being used by a small portion of the population. Their policy also succeeded in pushing the academic excellence of bilingual students, who have shown to perform as well as or surpass monolingual students in other countries.

2.2 Bilingual education in Vietnam

In recent years, English has gained increasing importance in Vietnam's education system (Devanadera, 2018), largely driven by the National Foreign Language 2020 Project. This initiative aimed to reform foreign language education and introduce bilingual programs nationwide, with the goal that by 2020, most young Vietnamese graduates would be able to use a foreign language confidently in daily life, education, and work within a globalized environment (Ministry of Education and Training, 2008). However, the project faced several drawbacks that held it back from achieving its goals, like a shortage of qualified teachers, reliance on training courses offered by the ministry, and a funding priority on equipment rather than teacher development. English teaching remains heavily academic, with an emphasis on reading and writing for exams. These classes also lack teacher-student interactions. Despite these limitations and mainly being implemented in private and international schools, bilingual education offers more student-centered, creative, and practical learning experiences. Overall, Vietnamese remains the primary language of instruction, with the government emphasizing its use to preserve national identity.

2.3 Comparison of bilingual education in Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam

Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia all promote bilingual education, but in different ways based on their national priorities and social contexts. Singapore took an efficient approach by making English the main language of instruction to support international trade and development, while still requiring students to learn their mother tongue to keep their cultural roots. This policy led to a steady decline in non-English-medium schools. Today, English is widely accepted because of its high status and economic value. Vietnam launched the National Foreign Language 2020 Project to improve English learning nationwide, but it did not meet its goals. There were not enough qualified teachers, and many schools focused too much on exams instead of communication. Bilingual programs in Vietnam are still limited, mostly found in private or international schools, and Vietnamese remains the dominant language. In Malaysia, the situation is more mixed. Malay is the national language and the main medium in public schools, but English is still considered important, especially for science and math. Malaysia also has vernacular schools that teach in Chinese or Tamil, showing a stronger support for multilingualism. However, Malaysia also faces issues like unequal language proficiency and debates over how much English should be used in education. Compared to Vietnam and Malaysia, Singapore's bilingual policy is more centralized and has been more successful in making English a key part of its education system while still recognizing other languages.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper examined three significant policies in Malaysian language education: PPSMI, MBMMBI, and the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB). It focused on their objectives, implementation, impact, public response, and overall effectiveness. These policies showcase Malaysia's ongoing effort to balance the role of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language with the growing significance of English for global competitiveness. While PPSMI faced controversy, MBMMBI aimed to strengthen Malay alongside improving English proficiency. While it did not fix what PPSMI and MBMMBI lacked, the MEB helped balance the act with a more long-term vision for education reform. Our analysis shows that alongside their strengths, the policies faced certain challenges, such as promoting bilingual competency and responding to global demands. They also had problems regarding policy shifts, teaching resources, teachers' qualifications, and inequality in implementation. The comparative section highlights how Malaysia's approach differs from Singapore's more centralized model and Vietnam's developing system. Ultimately, the success of bilingual education in Malaysia depends heavily on consistent planning, inclusive decision-making, and addressing the diverse linguistic needs of its population.

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