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### Rethinking English Language Education in Malaysia

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#### The Malaysian Context

The Malaysian education system has always been mobilized by politics and national aspirations (Ali, Hamid, & Moni, 2011; Brown, 2007). Due to the nature and history of the country, the role of English has shifted frequently over time – in parallel with the focus of the education system (Rashid, Abdul Rahman, & Yunus, 2017). In fact, tensions between nationalistic sentiments and internationalisation demands continuously permeate policymakers' decisions about language policies in the nation even till this day (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016).

Since Malaysia has a complex linguistic situation due to its post-colonial history, the position of English language use is contentious. The constant policy changes faced by the learners (and teachers) are not easy to adapt to, and challenges are to be expected. In fact, Mohamed (2008) maintains that:

The greatest dilemma of Malaysian education system has been its inability to understand the ethno linguistic complexity of bilingual education and its impact on student, classroom and society in such a way as to enable teacher and instructor to make informed decisions or [sic] about practice in classroom setting [sic]. (p. 89).

In light of the declining standard of English, in 2003, the Malaysian government decided to introduce a policy in which the teaching of Science and Mathematics was done in English, '*Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris*' (PPSMI) across all state schools in Malaysia (Hanewald, 2016). This policy was met with contempt by nationalists who perceived English (as a medium of instruction) to be disadvantageous for rural students (Ismail et al., 2010).

However, in 2009, with a change of leadership it was announced that:

... the teaching of science and mathematics in English at the primary and secondary educational levels will be phased out by 2012. The government plan is to improve the teaching of English at the primary and secondary levels to ensure that the implementation of teaching science and technology in English at the higher education institutions will become more effective (Zaaba, Ramadan, Anning, Gunggut, & Umemoto, 2011, p. 162).

This latest policy '*Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris (MBMMBI)*' introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2009 aims to raise the status of the Malay language and

strengthen the English language (Gill, 2014). The MBMMBI policy also acts as a transitional phase in which the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English will cease in 2015 when the last batch of students completes their secondary studies. After 2015, Science and Mathematics will be taught entirely using the national language (Hammim & Othman, , 2011). As the Malay language gained prominence, English began to be perceived as a foreign language due to little or no exposure to the language (Hassan & Selamat, 2017).

Such drastic changes over the years within the Malaysian education system (see Table 1) has had considerable impact on learners' English proficiency (Ali, 2013).

TABLE 1

*A Summary of Malaysia's Language Policy over the Years*

Year	Policy	Language
Prior independence (before 1957)	Colonial Malaya	English - the language of government, education and business.
1961	1961 Education Act	Malay language as the medium of instruction across whole education system.
1963	National Language Act 1963	Malay language as the medium of instruction and administration.
1970	National Language Policy	Malay language was enforced by law in 1971 as the medium of instruction across all national schools and universities.
2003	<i>Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris</i> (PPSMI)	English language as medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics
2010	<i>Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Memperkukuh Bahasa Inggeris</i> (MBMMBI)	Malay language as medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics
2013-2025	The National Education Blueprint	Malay language as medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics *Dual Language programs (DLP) in selected schools

In fact, the most recent change in medium of instruction from English to Malay have been argued to have led to the deterioration in the English language competency amongst Malaysian learners (i.e., M. Abdullah & Wong, 2017; Gill, 2014). To illustrate, there was a widening gap of academic performance between the rural and urban areas students during the implementation of English as the medium of instruction for the teaching of Science and Mathematics (Isa et al., 2010). Lacklustre academic outcomes were reflected in Malaysia's performance in Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). These outcomes were below the international average (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). What can be surmised here is the complexities of a multilingual and multicultural context have yet to be sufficiently understood in developing effective English language education in Malaysia.

With the formation of the new government on the 21<sup>st</sup> May 2018, the newly minted Education Minister Maszlee Malik announced reforms to revamp the current Malaysian education system. He announced that Malaysia will focus on a learning system that is technology-centric in classroom-learning (Tan, 2018) with an emphasis on the English language (Ibrahim, 2018). Malik also reported that the current education system needed to be injected with new methods, and should not be too focused on ranking and examinations. Although the announcement is certainly a step in the right direction, as an English teacher educator, who has seen many educational reforms over the years, I remain cautiously optimistic as Malaysia has gone through many erratic educational policies, with little success.

Therefore, this paper attempts to present personal views of some changes that are needed within the English language education system in Malaysia. It uses reviews from literature on the issues and challenges faced in regard to English proficiency in secondary and higher education (HE) as a point of reference to forward concerns. The article starts by drawing together a set of issues that face the field; the schism between curriculum planning and enactment, arguing that three changes are needed to improve the

teaching of English in schools, namely reforming teacher education, the English curricula, and delinking the examination culture through emphasis on assessment, not examinations.

### **English in Malaysia: A Case of Schism between Planning and Implementation**

The Malaysian education system provides eleven years of basic education; that is “6 years of primary education, 3 years of lower secondary education, and 2 years of upper secondary education” (Lee, 1999, p. 88). Nonetheless, reports have consistently revealed that despite having formal English instruction for eleven years, many Malaysian students still have low English proficiency levels (Ahmad, 2016; Stapa & Majid, 2017). Many factors contributed to this phenomenon. This section will examine specific dissonance between policies and implementation that has led to the decline of English proficiency amongst Malaysian students.

The English Language Secondary (KBSM) and Primary School Syllabus (KBSR) which can be referred to as a notional-functional syllabus, has its theoretical base in the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach (Foo & Richards, 2004). Its intent is to equip students with communicative ability and a competency to perform language functions, using correct language forms and structures. Nonetheless, several studies on the effectiveness and implementation of KBSM in secondary schools across Malaysia have revealed that despite the aim of developing communicational ability in the learner, the examinations still primarily tests students on grammatical proficiency (Asraf, 1996; Hassan & Selamat, 2017). Furthermore, factors which inhibited teachers’ implementation of the KBSM English language curriculum in Malaysian classrooms were predominantly linked to their unfamiliarity and lack of understanding of the new syllabus (Karim & Bee, 2006). Other factors cited as impeding the implementation of CLT were the English teachers’ lack of in-service training, time constraints and inadequate teaching materials (Goh & Blake, 2015). Pandian (2002) summed this schism between theory and practice aptly, “the situation in the classroom is far from what is envisioned by the Ministry...classroom teaching seems to have returned to the chalk and talk drill method” (p. 42).

Another example of schism between planning and implementation was the PPSMI policy in 2003 (see Table 1). This policy of using English as a medium of instruction to teach Science and Mathematics intended to improve the mastery of English language among students at primary and secondary schools in Malaysia and was based on the governments’ concern on the human capital development towards achieving the standard of a developed country (Ali, Hamid, & Moni, 2013). In the PPSMI exercise, the Ministry of Education Malaysia and the States’ Education Departments has distributed a large sum of allocations from their annual spending towards training of teachers nationwide (A. Abdullah, Alzaidiyeen, & Seedee, 2010). Furthermore, expensive state-of-the-art CDs were produced alongside printed materials, requiring the use of laptops, LCDs and installation of special screens in the classrooms, most of which was foreign to the teachers. Nonetheless, this initiative failed mainly because it was not well planned and its implementation was made in haste (Rashid et al., 2017). Research conducted post PPSMI implementation revealed that only 4% of Mathematics and Science teachers used 90% or more of English in the teaching and learning of the two subjects, and that students who had poor command of English could not acquire the knowledge of Mathematics and Science as they were not proficient (Yang & Ishak, 2012).

The assumption that once the hardware is introduced in schools, ICT integration will automatically follow is inaccurate. Addressing extrinsic factors such as providing infrastructure and kit alone is insufficient to change teachers’ teaching and learning practices (Ming, Hall, Azman, & Joyes, 2010). Furthermore, English used as a medium of instruction (EMI) for Science and Mathematics presented incongruities not only with the multilingual reality of the country, but also with the current English proficiency levels of the majority of Malaysian students. In fact, research on efficacy of EMI in Asia and Africa brings sobering and disappointing results for most students in post-colonial contexts, with the exception of those who come from socio-economically advantaged families or who come from families

where English is a primary language (Heugh, Li, & Song, 2017, p. 261). In fact, successful EMI models, revealed that students and staff perhaps should be allowed to use their multilingual resources in English medium education as it helps with language acquisition especially for those with lower English proficiency and come from a language background different from the mainstream (Heugh et al., 2017). This bilingual approach of code-switching and code-mixing certainly could be a way forward for Malaysian students who have yet to reach the proficiency threshold required.

Another example of schism between planning and implementation was the 1BestariNet program, an initiative derived from the National Education Blueprint (2013-2025) as a way to provide internet connectivity and create a virtual learning environment (VLE) for 10,000 schools nationwide. The 1BestariNet program; worth RM4 billion, was introduced in 2011 by the Education Ministry to provide an online learning platform with the Frog VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) and to allow teaching, learning, collaboration and administrative functions to take place through the internet. Nonetheless, two years after its implementation, the Auditor-General's Report 2013 stated that the project had not achieved its objectives of providing high-speed 4G broadband and the VLE platform to schools nationwide. Consequently, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) contended the ministry's request to push forward the second phase claiming that the first phase had failed (Aziz, 2016, November 9).

What these selected issues have highlighted is the critical need to understand the Malaysian education context and the need to be better informed when implementing reforms and policies in the education system. Although the appeal of incorporating a technology-centric learning system is considerable, we must proceed with caution and identify the genuine needs of both teachers and students, to ensure that costly mistakes can be avoided. For this reason, there needs to be more research conducted before any policies are implemented. In this manner, issues or challenges could be avoided or at least predicated through research. Since change is inevitable in the Malaysian context, any implementation of policy changes should be founded on evidence-based research that recognises the complexity of its socio-cultural context. The following section discusses some changes that are needed within the English language education in Malaysia.

### **The 21st Century English Teacher: The Need to Reform Teacher Education**

Literature has consistently shown schisms between what happens in teacher training (teacher education) and classrooms (Edwards & Nuttall, 2015; Loughran & Hamilton, 2016). This is known to be true of the Malaysian context too. Teacher education has been reported to be "ineffective in preparing teachers to impart quality education in schools" (Goh & Blake, 2015, p. 471). It has also been heavily criticised for its inability to prepare teachers and therefore their students, to be ready for the demands and challenges of the evolving global landscape (Zachariah, 2013, December 11). In fact, pre-service teachers in Malaysian schools have reported that they lack the skills needed to work effectively with their students and were somewhat unprepared to help students to learn (Kabilan & Veratharaju, 2013). Because "the strength of a high-quality education system rests with high-quality teachers" (Jefferson, 2009), it is imperative that teacher education in Malaysia be reformed.

The schism between what happens in training (theory) with practice needs to be reduced. For this to happen, more opportunities to engage in practice should take place. Recent scholarships in teacher education assert the importance of providing novice teachers with "experiences of teaching," (Berry & Loughran, 2000, p. 15). This focus on practice was seen as a step away from focusing on theoretical knowledge to providing meaningful preparation for new teachers (Peercy & Troyan, 2017), in which gaps between theory and practice are minimised. This shift to more extended and embedded opportunities to engage in practice addresses the limitations of traditional teacher education program designs that comprise of "coursework in isolation from practice and then adding a short dollop of student teaching to the end of the program"(Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 307). In the same vein, Hardman and Abdul Rahman (2014) argued for strengthening initial teacher education through school-based training and partnerships with higher education. Such collaborations in the Malaysian setting would certainly bring

together theory and practice as it provides a greater understanding of the issues and expectations in schools. This socio-professional context would enable teacher interactions with practitioners and peers, and give them access to the practical knowledge possessed by these practitioners in the teaching community. Such bridging of theoretical and practical forms of knowledge contributes to a more effective teacher preparation program and personal growth.

Effective professional development (PD) programs have been argued to be key to teachers learning and refining their pedagogies (Altan, 2016; Deaker, Stein, & Spiller, 2016). Darling-Hammond et al., (2017) defined effective professional development as structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes. Based on their meta-analysis, effective professional development incorporates the following elements:

TABLE 2

*Elements of an Effective Professional Development*

Is content focused	PD that focuses on teaching strategies associated with specific curriculum content supports teacher learning within teachers' classroom contexts.
Incorporates active learning	Active learning engages teachers directly in designing and trying out teaching strategies, providing them an opportunity to engage in the same style of learning they are designing for their students.
Supports collaboration	High-quality PD creates space for teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning, often in job-embedded contexts. By working collaboratively, teachers can create communities that positively change the culture and instruction of their entire grade level, department, school and/or district.
Uses models of effective practice	Curricular models and modeling of instruction provide teachers with a clear vision of what best practices look like. Teachers may view models that include lesson plans, unit plans, sample student work, observations of peer teachers, and video or written cases of teaching
Provides coaching and expert support	Coaching and expert support involve the sharing of expertise about content and evidence-based practices, focused directly on teachers' individual needs.
Offers feedback and reflection	High-quality professional learning frequently provides built-in time for teachers to think about, receive input on, and make changes to their practice by facilitating reflection and soliciting feedback. Feedback and reflection both help teachers to thoughtfully move toward the expert visions of practice.
Is of sustained duration	Effective PD provides teachers with adequate time to learn, practice, implement, and reflect upon new strategies that facilitate changes in their practice.

*Notes.* Adapted from Darling-Hammond et al., (2017). Effective teacher professional development. Palo Alto CA: Learning Policy Institute.

In Malaysia, professional development for in-service teachers is certainly an area that has been overlooked. Existing PDs have been described as “very centralised, dominated by cascade-type programs, that neglect teachers’ interest and needs” (Kabilan & Veratharaju, 2013, p. 332), and that teachers “have little opportunity to tailor the instructional approach to meet the needs of their students” and are “sent to learn *‘the right way to teach’* regardless of different school background” (Rashid et al., 2017, p. 108). This situation is exacerbated by the constant change in teaching and learning policies resulting in existing PD programs which focus heavily on the implementation of such policies (i.e. teaching of science and maths in English) in schools (Goh & Blake, 2015). Taking into consideration how diverse the changing landscape of education is and the demographic of Malaysian students, it is evident that teachers must employ more sophisticated forms of teaching in order to teach students for further education and work in the 21st century. PD programs would certainly be more effective if the English teachers can also be taught skills such as developing a mastery of challenging content, problem-solving, effective communication and collaboration, and self-direction. More collaboration with university led- PD programs would also be beneficial to create future-ready learners.

Overall, teacher education in Malaysia needs to reflect the reality of the educational context and respond to the needs of learners. English teachers have to acquire new knowledge and develop new skills and competencies to handle a more diverse student demographic, to manage technology and to make

courses linked to real-life practices. In Malaysia, Sultan Idris Education University was one of the first to reform its teacher-training curriculum. In this ongoing initiative, the revised curriculum includes elements such as contemporary active teaching and learning activities, leadership skills, e-learning skills, standards, creative thinking and time and stress management to better prepare the 21st century English teachers for the changing student demographic (Ratnavadivel et al., 2014). More reforms such as this are needed in teacher preparation programs.

## Reforming the English Curricula

With a new government in place, this presents an ideal opportunity to reform the English curricula and focus on what is necessary – preparing students for the 21st century. The challenge facing the teaching of English in Malaysia lies in making our classrooms relevant to the 21st century needs. In the National Education Blueprint (2013-2025), the Ministry of Education highlighted the need to develop 21st century skills such as critical and creative thinking, as well as encourage holistic, well-rounded personal growth. Clearly, it will not be sufficient to expect improvement in English language proficiency if there is no change in the English curricula.

If we are truly to practice student centred-learning, it is important to accommodate Malaysian students' various educational backgrounds. For example, the diversity of the student population should be considered when selecting texts and creating activities. Authentic activities and active thinking where students inquire and solve authentic problems utilising primary sources should be incorporated to facilitate meaningful learning for the students. It is important to acknowledge the different learning styles and the different interests. This should be consolidated into the various approaches of teaching-learning (case method, PBL, observation, reflection). It is also important to incorporate 21st century tools where students learn to read and create digital text and social media is leveraged.

The teaching of English in classrooms needs to evolve and be consistently adjusted to support learning within a more complex student demographic and challenging teaching environment. The engagement in the English language seems impossible when learners get limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. In the same way, reliance on textbooks or rote learning for English reduces meaningful learning opportunities. Instead, what literature has shown is that student-centred approaches in teaching language, in which pedagogies such as task-based language teaching (Van den Branden, 2016) and language integrated learning (CILL) (Oattes, Oostdam, de Graaff, & Wilschut, 2018) where students use language in real-life situations, are more effective for acquisition. This is because learners are able to make the connection between the language and everyday use, value its relevance and thus in turn, sustain their motivation and increase investment in the target language (Norton, 2008; Petrides & Frederickson, 2011).

## Delinking from Examination Culture

We also need to do away with the strong examination culture that tends to emphasise the replication of facts and ideational content. The National Education Blueprint in 2013 addressed this and the country's examination system went through a radical transformation. As a means of moving away from centralised exams, school-based assessments (SBA) were implemented. The first step in reforming our exam-oriented education system began in 2014 when the Education Ministry replaced the assessment in *Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah* (UPSR) with a Primary School Assessment Report (PSSR); and the *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* (PMR) with PT3 (see Table 3).

TABLE 3  
*Malaysia's National Exams at Primary and Secondary School Level*

Level		National Exams
Primary	Year 6	<i>Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah</i> (UPSR) Primary School Assessment report (PSSR)
Lower Secondary	Form 1 (1 year)	-
	Form 2 (1 year)	-
	Form 3 (1 year)	<i>Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3</i> (PT3) Lower Secondary Evaluation
Upper Secondary	Form 4 (1 year)	-
	Form 5 (1 year)	<i>Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia</i> (SPM) Malaysian Certificate of Education
	Form 6 (2 years)	<i>Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia</i> (STPM) Malaysian Higher School Certificate

The PSSR is a holistic education method that incorporates other competencies besides students' academic performance in UPSR. Students were also evaluated based on classroom evaluation and psychometric reports, their involvement in sport, physical and co-curricular activities. The results for both UPSR and PT3 now encourage students to celebrate achievement outside as well as within the academic realms. At the same time, SBA results provide information on students' progress and proficiency to parents and teachers, as feedback to improve teaching and learning and provide a clearer picture of the students' overall potential.

While the new form of assessments have drawn criticisms (see Omar & Sinnasamy, 2017; Raman & Yamat, 2014), the move aims to gauge students more holistically and equip them with critical thinking skills. It is imperative that such policies are not reverted, which has tended to happen in the past; but instead, SBAs should be further monitored, evaluated and developed in order to improve how students are assessed with regards to English language acquisition.

In line with the prior discussion on contextualising learning to suit the student demographic, an initiative that should also be maintained is the alignment of Malaysia's English language education system with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), an international standard that focuses on producing learners who can communicate and interact in any language in this instance (Read, 2014), English. This alignment initiative is in line with one of the goals listed in the Education Blueprint: "to ensure every child is proficient in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language) and English language and is encouraged to learn an additional language" (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025). A key element of this initiative is to adopt the CEFR levels as the governing framework for curriculum development, selection of learning materials and measuring learning outcomes. The CEFR also provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks and describes in a comprehensive way that enables language learners to use a language for communication effectively. More importantly, this means that the CEFR framework can be adapted to suit the Malaysian context such as what was done in Vietnam, where the alignment plan includes developing their own CEFR based textbooks (Uri & Aziz, 2018). This way learning not only becomes more meaningful, but also addresses what is needed in the current job market. Note that the youth unemployment rate in Malaysia is at 10.8% in 2017 (Dass, 2018, August 6) and low English proficiency and lack of soft skills (i.e., communication and critical thinking) were cited as reasons for unemployed graduates (Aziz, 2018, October 3).

Decades of studies on human learning and performance have documented that conventional assessments (i.e., standardized assessments) struggle to establish student's higher order cognitive abilities or to support their capacities to perform real-world tasks (Koh & Luke, 2009). Therefore, it is important that we change how we view assessments – as more than just getting A's in exams, but instead viewing assessments as part of learning, whereby assessment information is used by teachers to adjust their teaching strategies, and by students to adjust their learning strategies (Black & Wiliam, 2006).

As argued earlier on in the paper, it is important to be reminded of the principles of English Language teaching – learner-centeredness (Nunan, 1988) is to acknowledge individual differences and thus strive to

provide a supportive educational environment as this has great potential to empower students towards academic development and achievement. It is important to remember that in interpreting the curricula that learners are at the centre of the teaching-learning process. This will be used to determine effective pedagogies to engage the students and strengthen their language development and subsequently move away from exam-focused learning. Therefore, teachers need to be given training, support and more autonomy in assessing the students, especially with regards to English (Ghazali & Malim, 2016). Thus, extensive and comprehensive training for school based assessments for teachers; especially for English, must be continuously provided.

## Conclusion

Clearly, there is stakeholder interest in English as there is an expectation that that proficiency in English will lead to economic benefits at the individual and industry level, especially in HE. MoHE has expressed aspirations to be an educational hub in the Asian region, to develop a 'world-class' higher education sector by 2020, and to achieve 'developed nation status' (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007). If this is to actualise, there are undoubtedly needed changes to English language education in Malaysia in that the focus should be on providing quality education and preparing students to be future-ready learners.

In this paper, three changes are first proposed to reset English education in Malaysia; (i) reforming teacher education, (ii) reforming the English curricula and (iii) emphasis on assessment, not examinations. The author acknowledges and understands that the philosophy of education and the logic of economy do not always go hand in hand. However, the author argues that any form of improvement with regards to English language education cannot be successfully pursued at the level of the individual teacher. It is important to be cognizant that any form of improvement in regard to English language education must be pursued holistically (i.e. individual teacher, school, institution and community). Furthermore, there is a need for research that evaluates the impact and/or implementation of language policies to help with making informed decisions. Although change is inevitable in the Malaysian context, any implementation of policy changes should be founded on evidence-based research that recognises the complexity of Malaysia's socio-cultural context and executed within a timeframe that is practical and feasible.

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