



English Language Policy and Planning in Malaysia: Issues and Outcomes

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Introduction

Malaysian language policy and planning have undergone several changes since the independence of the nation. Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-25 is an attempt to address past issues in education. Specifically, to language education, multiple historical shifts in language policies have been observed. The most recent English-related policy adoption in education is popularly known in Malay as MBMMBI (*Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Mengukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris*) (Rahman & Singh, 2019). In English, it means for upholding the Malay language and strengthening the English language. Malaysia went through these changes in language policies for its multilingual-cultural-ethnic society and education, which minimizes English teaching and learning (Azman, 2016). Although the Malaysian English access policy ensures that every Malaysian child is exposed to English in schools from the age of six, it does not guarantee language learning. To address these issues of English proficiency, the Ministry of Education (MoE) implemented several curriculum modifications in English language teaching (ELT). However, these reforms were implemented limitedly due to several issues, including teacher competency and teacher development facilities (Badiozaman, 2019). This article discusses the current issues pertinent to English language access, curriculum, methods and materials, evaluation and personnel policy adoption, implementation, and outcomes, implying Kaplan and Baldauf's (2003) analytical framework of language-in-education planning (LEP). In their overarching framework for language-in-education planning, Kaplan and Baldauf (2003) include seven implementation goals. The areas of the framework are as follows.

- Access policy: The access policy identifies when and who will learn which languages.
- Curriculum, methods, and materials policy: Because they have clearly defined teaching objectives, these policies are commonly referred to as "micro-teaching policies." Micro-teaching objectives and goals are established by the curriculum. The methodology and materials policy refers to the instructional methods and materials used during a specific time. The objectives of the curriculum are met using methods and instructional materials.



- Personnel policy: Personnel policy is concerned with the in-service and pre-service teachers and their professional development.
- Evaluation policy: Evaluation policy includes curriculum evaluation, student success evaluation, and teaching evaluation.
- Resourcing policy: Resourcing policy plan and execute the financing of language policy.
- Community policy: Community policy includes guidance on parental attitudes toward language teaching and learning, funding sources, and hiring teachers and students.

This article has focused on access, curriculum, method and materials, personnel, and evaluation policy and excluded resourcing and community policy

English Access Policy

English access policy as Kaplan and Baldauf (2003) explained when to and who will learn what language. Even though English is no longer an official language, it is still taught as an important second language in Malaysia (Azman, 2016), and Malaysian children as young as 6 are taught and learn English. Besides, at present, a significant portion of the students in international schools in Malaysia are Malaysians, where English is the main medium of instruction. Furthermore, several programs entail EMI to teach local and international students in the universities (Ali & Hamid, 2018; Karim et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2022; Rahman & Singh, 2022;). Thus, a parallel medium of instruction is in practice, which was not planned in the macro-level policy making, however, driven by the meso-level actors (Rahman & Singh, 2021). The prevalence of such instances, e.g., distinctive language policy, in non-native English spoken countries is a common phenomenon in the postcolonial era (Karim et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2020). However, Azman (2016) states that enabling English is accessible to all Malaysian children does not guarantee competent language acquisition. In Malaysia's current English language teaching and learning context, the proficiency level of English among students and teachers remains low, and teaching English in the schools is a key concern (Ismail et al., 2018; Rashid et al., 2017). Additionally, the growth of parallel English medium schools only produced more differences between different streams of schooling. Therefore, access to English is not equal for every citizen in urban and rural areas, and they would not be able to access the wealth of knowledge and information that takes place in English equally.

Curriculum, Method, and Textbook Policy

Kaplan and Baldauf (2003) identified several curricular considerations that must be addressed while deciding what and how to teach the language(s) (in this case, English). These are teaching and learning objectives, space and duration allocated to English language pedagogy in the curriculum, and class contact time. Curriculum policy seeks two major questions: What should be the content of language teaching and the methodology used for language instruction? In other words, the curriculum's goals are implemented through methods and materials. In this section, the curriculum policy, and the methodology and materials policy has been discussed.

Following the national language and education policy, the latest MBMMBI policy mandates English as a compulsory pass subject in Malaysia's national curriculum. The mismatch between curriculum reform and classroom realities, coupled with the lack of teacher development facilities, is the cause of the failure of English language teaching in Malaysia and other Asian contexts (Nunan, 2003; Rahman & Pandian, 2018). Despite several educational reforms in the last forty years of English language education in Malaysia, English proficiency is still a challenge in the context of Malaysian teaching and learning (Musa

et al., 2012). Therefore, these reforms should be revisited, and the issues involved with these reforms should be identified (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Curriculum, Method, and Textbook Reforms

Event/reform	Remark
Pre-independence era	A content-based approach to language learning as English as the medium of instruction at that time.
Post-independence English language curriculum- until 1979	English curriculum, method and textbooks are primarily based on grammar-translation method (GTM), direct method and situational language teaching (SLT). Two major classroom activities were grammar teaching and choral repetition or drills, and little attention was given to speaking and listening skills
<i>The Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah (KBSR) in 1982, and Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM) in 1988</i>	KBSR English Language Syllabus and the KBSM English Language Syllabus were introduced Skills-based syllabuses advocating the communicative approach to ELT
Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 and Standards-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC)	New primary (KSSR) and secondary (KSSM) education curricula were introduced in 2013, replacing the 20-year curriculum to address the challenges of the 21 st century. SBELC stresses English communicative skills equally with English literacy skills as key elements of the language teaching and learning curriculum.
English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025	Adopted the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in the curriculum to provide a common basis for curriculum guidelines, elaboration of language syllabuses, examinations, and textbooks in a comprehensive way that enables language learners to use the language for communicating effectively.

(Abdul Karim, 2006; Azman, 2016; Rahman & Singh, 2021; Rashid, Rahman, & Yunus, 2017).

Several instructional approaches were introduced in the post-independent era’s curriculum and instructional materials. Nevertheless, the level of language teaching and learning has declined, particularly in rural areas during this shuffling. This situation spurred the MOE to review the curriculum. The review resulted in the implementation of the standardized curriculum in 1980 in primary (KBSR) and secondary (KBSM) schools (Azman, 2016). For the implementation of the Education policy designed in 1970, the reform came into prominence following the Cabinet Committee Report in 1979. Malaysian think tanks emphasized communicative language teaching (CLT), a contemporary notion of the best language teaching approach in the 1980s (Nunan, 2003). Given attempts to make learners communicate in English, Malaysia’s curriculum could not see the light of progress even after 30 years, and the CLT curriculum and teaching approach could not be implemented (Abdul Karim, 2006). Several studies documented several reasons regarding the use of CLT approaches in the syllabus and instructional material. Table 2 summarizes these issues.

TABLE 2
CLT Curriculum Implementation and ELT in Malaysia

Description of the issues	Citations of the studies
Teachers’ adequate understanding of the CLT principles that underpin the new curriculum, as well as new pedagogical approaches, were required for the successful implementation of the curriculum in the classrooms.	Hardman and Rahman (2014); Idrus et al. (2019)
Too many new items to teach in the new English curriculum and very little preparation time for lesson plans and actual teaching time. Besides, too many other roles and duties to perform other than teaching. The incongruency is a result of the lack of early involvement of the teachers in the reform process.	Abdul Karim (2006); Idrus et al. (2019)
Learners depend on their teachers heavily in highly teacher centered classrooms. Other than answering the teacher’s questions, minimal communication held in English	Musa, Koo, and Azman (2012).
Little exposure to English in conjunction with its limited use in real life not only belittles its status of it in society but also dismantles the motivation of the pupils to learn it.	Musa, Koo and Azman (2012); Gill (2007).

Two years after the introduction of the KSSR, as commissioned by the MOE, Cambridge English conducted a baseline study on the concurrent state of English language learners' proficiency in schools in 2013. The study found disappointing results where 32% of students dropped below the CEFR A1 level. Likewise, in KBSM, a large number of applicants struggled in the lower secondary stage of English education, with 21 percent and 23.4 percent, respectively, at the lower secondary level in 2011 and 2013. An integrated solution to English language education was an urgent necessity to meet the global standard. In accordance with MEB and MBMMBI, the MoE launched its blueprint, "English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025". This is a significant decision made in MEB 2013-2025 as seven (7) of the eleven (11) vital MEB shifts are pertinent to English language education in Malaysia. The roadmap sheds light on the national agenda that emphasizes producing graduates with communicative competence in English so that they can participate in the global economy. Driven by the result of the Cambridge baseline research done in 2013, the initiatives including the formulation of CEFR descriptors, determination of the target for each educational level, and growth of capacity were undertaken. As a result of the Cambridge baseline research done in 2013, various preparations, including the formulation of CEFR descriptors, setting the goals for each of the educational level, as well as the teachers' capacity building was made possible.

The CEFR implementation consisted of three phases. Phase 1 and 2 of the CEFR roadmap were completed. Phase 1 of the project, which ran from 2013 to 2015, focused on improving the English competence of schoolteachers. Many professional education programmes were carried out during the program's first two years. The first part of the roadmap continued until the beginning of phase 2 in 2016. The council spent an entire year identifying CEFR levels appropriate for all age groups, and the SBA curricula were tailored with instructional materials used globally to align with the CEFR (Uri & Aziz, 2018). At the beginning of the second part of phase 2, the validation of CEFR levels assigned to each educational stage was accomplished and the implementation of a new CEFR-aligned curriculum began in 2017 and continued until 2020 (Uri & Aziz, 2018).

In these three years, several difficulties were reported implementing CEFR. Lo (2018) examined two hundred Malaysian teachers at the secondary level who thought they understood CEFR and the underlying ideas of assessment and textbooks. These teachers demonstrated concern and uneasiness towards using CEFR since they were unsure about their roles in the classroom and lacked familiarization with the transition. Furthermore, as Idrus et al. (2019) argued, teachers feel inferior to local Malaysian English (and other ASEAN countries) that do not meet the indicated CEFR standards. Furthermore, CEFR-aligned textbooks are mostly British novels that are not representative of Malaysian culture, and the majority of the content in these books is also based on British culture. As the study by Nambiar, Hashim and Yasin's (2018) highlighted the insertion of local culture into instructional materials has proved promising and can help motivate Malaysian students to learn English confidently and improve their communication ability. Similarly, Rahim and Daghigh (2019) noticed that intercultural material in the local textbook was wider than the imported ones. They have explained that the decision to replace the textbook may not be in the best interests of English language education.

Often, educational reforms go in vain only because of a lack of understanding and communication between policymakers and implementers. Reviewing such literature reveals how pendulum shifts in policy and education can influence ELT in any top-down system like Malaysia. Therefore, it is essential to learn the extent to which these reforms have been implemented in practice by giving voice to the voiceless.

Personnel Policy

Kaplan and Baldauf (2003) suggested that the authorities should address the issues of teacher selection, supply and training, and the incentives for teachers when implementing a new language policy. In Malaysia, several personnel policy issues could be identified, including the quality and competency of

recruited teachers and the availability of effective professional development (PD) opportunities to teachers.

English language teachers' English proficiency is widely identified as the barrier to implementing the English curriculum in Malaysia. A total of 61,000 language teachers of English participated in the 2012 Cambridge Placement Test to measure their language skills. It was reported that 40,666 teachers failed this test (Macalister, 2017). Based on the test findings, the British Council conducted an intensive capacity development programme targeting over 14,000 teachers two years before the end of 2014, intending to provide CEFR level C1 and B2 for secondary and primary teachers, respectively (Macalister, 2017). Recent education policies and curriculum reforms such as the Malaysian education blueprint (it emphasises 21st-century skills) or CEFR (focusing on intercultural competence of English and Malay) in the schools will require effective teacher education on a wide scale. Furthermore, the aim is to get all primary teachers at level B2 and all secondary teachers at C1 on the CEFR level (Macalister, 2017), which also includes developing the knowledge base and competencies of Malaysian language teachers.

Although several measures have been taken to implement new policies and curricula, professional development for in-service teachers is mostly overlooked (Badiozaman, 2019). Teachers will not have gained all the knowledge and skills required in their future years of teaching (Kabilan & Veratharaju, 2013). English teachers in Malaysia need more effective PD programs/activities customised according to their needs (Kabilan, 2019). They need time to organise and enable themselves with the English-language knowledge and skills required to create an ideal classroom atmosphere. The PD programs/activities should therefore be appropriate, meaningful, and receptive to the professional needs of teachers. Teachers' dissatisfaction pertaining to the PD is evident (see Kabilan, 2019), and their demand was to move away from a centralised teacher education program to school-based training through workshops to gain more knowledge is voiced (Hardman & Rahman, 2014). Effective pre- or in-service teacher education can shape teacher cognition, which plays an important role in teachers' instructional practices (Borg, 2015). Nonetheless, Shah et al.'s research (2017) outlined Malaysian teachers' ambiguous and conflicting views and these convictions are focused on their past language learning as well as other contextual considerations such as test demands and time constraints. Jerome and Samuel (2017) argue that the cognition and practices of English language teachers should be consistent with the curriculum, teaching approach, textbook, and assessment in Malaysia. Thus, Othman and Kiely (2016) suggest the reformation in language teacher education that would be informed by language teacher cognition in pursuit of addressing factors that hinder pre-service teachers from implementing instructions that align with their beliefs, knowledge, identity, and attitude.

Evaluation Policy

Evaluation policy discusses the connection between assessment on the one hand and methods and materials identifying educational objectives on the other (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003). During the CLT-based curriculum and assessment, there was a significant discrepancy between curriculum goals and assessment scope (Abdul Karim, 2006). There was a mismatch between material and assessment format under the curriculum where less emphasis was placed on speaking whilst listening skills remained untested (Hardman & Rahman, 2014). Consequently, the washback effect of exams adversely affects teachers' practice in the classroom. This was also defined exams in conjunction with teaching materials as either not up to the level of students' proficiency and inadequate for teacher use in classrooms (Abdul Karim, 2006; Hardman & Rahman, 2014).

The Board of Evaluation Syndicate in Malaysia introduced a further assessment system for rigorous examination in 2011 and coordinated with the current standards-referenced curriculum program: The School-Based Assessment System (SBA). Within the current transition process of assessment system, there has been a shift from the nation-wide centralized assessment to a combination of a national test and a school-based test. SBA was a relatively new approach to transforming Malaysia's educational system.

The aims and instructional approach established in the CEFR for Languages are entirely consistent with implementing SBA in 2012 and eventually migrating away from reliance on summative analysis (see Don et al., 2015).

However, many Malaysians were apathetic concerning SBA. Policymakers must recognize that they are enacting an assessment reform that is in direct opposition to the country's current wave of English-language instruction. In the study of Khan et al. (2019), the following macro-level challenges were reported in SBA implementation such as inadequate coursebooks and other available instructional resources, substantial workload, insufficient facilities for teaching and learning, inadequate time for school assessment. They have also identified several micro-level issues, such as students' current English proficiency level, large number of students in a classroom, and mixed-ability students who do not want to be assessed by their own teachers. As such, there is a mismatch between curriculum and assessment is created and the Ministry of Education should develop an assessment framework that is in line with the curriculum framework that aims to promote teaching and learning.

Conclusion and Implications

To provide English language education with a systematic guide, the English Language Education Roadmap is timely and long-awaited. It has attempted to strike a balance between the Malay and the English languages. The MEB and English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) were recently formed to plan for the adoption of the CEFR and to compare Malaysian students' English language learning to the worldwide standard. Therefore:

- a) The roadmap must safeguard any potential shifts against English in Malaysia, which the status of English has previously influenced. However, the latest reform of CEFR has been a positive move to uplift the teaching and learning standard of the language.
- b) Continuous measures should be taken to execute the plan such as textbook and assessment should be congruent to the local teaching and learning culture and provide adequate support to the teachers to implement CEFR effectively.
- c) Consider introducing CEFR based textbooks based on Malaysian context that would allow learning to take place in a more meaningful manner and address the current job market's need.

Although some stakeholders have expressed reservations, they should be aware that CEFR was only recently implemented at the school and will be completed in three parts by 2025. As a result, it is still too early to speculate on the implications of the CEFR in Malaysian English. Eventually, in Malaysia, the person who will be responsible for overall English teaching and learning are teachers. Although teachers do have limitations in knowledge and competencies, it would be unfair to blame them entirely. To tackle the situation-

- 1) Teachers' needs from rural areas are often not similar to teachers from urban areas; therefore, the generalized approaches to teacher education programmers are less meaningful for both parties, and they need special training.
- 2) Furthermore, teachers should be a part of policy adoption and reform. It is currently missing in the current practices of Malaysia.
- 3) Policy reform, for example, Sultan Idris Education University, a specialized university for education, was one of the first to reform its teacher-training curriculum and includes elements such as new knowledge-base for the teachers to better prepare them for the 21st century. More reforms of such kinds are recommended in teacher preparation programs in Malaysia

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