Reimagining Language Education: The Disconnect Between Policy and Malaysia's Multilingual Reality

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When did we lose sight of the diverse linguistic needs of Malaysian students? From the moment they enter school, our children come equipped with varying degrees of multiple languages. Yet, for so long, our education system has chosen to ignore the multilingual reality of so many students.

Language education is not just about mastering grammar and vocabulary; it's about understanding how language is acquired, how it functions in society, and how it shapes the learner's identity. In the case of the multilingual language learner, there is evidence to support how Multilinguals differ fundamentally from their monolingual counterparts. Multilingual language acquisition is far from uniform, occurring across natural interactions and formal instruction, creating a more fragmented learning experience.

Malaysia must come to terms with the fact that multilingual students often draw on all the languages they know, seamlessly switching between them to communicate more effectively. Most children, before even setting foot in a classroom, are already juggling more than one language at home.

Numerous studies have shown the crucial role that language learner motivation plays in acquiring a new language. But what is even more glaring is the government's approach to teaching English as a foreign language rather than acknowledging it as a native or dominant language for many. This begs the question: why has the government created a flawed system where English is essential for university success, but can't even provide adequate English language teachers?

Initiatives under the MBMMBI (Upholding Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthening English) policy seem reasonable at first glance, balancing cultural pride with practical needs. But a closer look reveals a different story. The English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC), is the agency under the Ministry of Education, tasked with enhancing the teaching and learning competencies of English. It sets the standards and provides certification for English language teaching professionals, especially for teacher education.

ELTC has contributed to two key documents, "English Language Education Reform in Malaysia (The Roadmap 2015-2025)" and "English Language Education Reform 2015-2025," which lay out the government's strategies for curriculum development. However, these plans fail to take into account the actual linguistic demographic of Malaysian students. The people these documents are supposed to serve—students—seem to have been forgotten. Nowhere is there a discussion of home languages, nor any consideration for students who may speak English as their first language.

The vast majority of Malaysian students are already equipped with multiple languages by the time they enter school. It isn't uncommon for students to enter a school where the medium of instruction is different from which they speak at home. Despite this, curriculum developers continue to treat all students the same, ignoring the opportunity to cultivate their language learning abilities. This results in a situation where students gravitate towards peers with similar linguistic backgrounds, losing out on valuable opportunities for encouraging multilingual competence.

For years, the Malaysian education system has faced the challenge of improving English proficiency while upholding Bahasa Malaysia (BM) as the national language. To address this, the Dual Language Programme (DLP) was introduced, offering students and parents the option to study subjects like Mathematics and Science in either BM or English. However, despite its intentions, recent changes to the DLP have sparked mixed reactions. Some view these changes as a step forward, while others perceive them as a step back. This ambivalence suggests that although the DLP, alongside initiatives like the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) and Professional Upskilling for English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT), aims to enhance English proficiency, there is a sense of complacency in the system. As a result, there has been no significant drive to improve or evolve these existing policies.

One of the most critical, yet often overlooked, points in the language debate within Malaysia is the fact that tertiary education in Malaysia is conducted predominantly in English. While this reality underscores the importance of English proficiency, it does not diminish the valid concerns raised by parents.

The DLP remains as one of the government's most visible efforts in promoting English proficiency in schools. However, from its inception, the program has faced persistent criticism. Whilst proponents argue that the DLP improves English skills and enhances students' future employability, critics contend that it risks marginalising Bahasa Malaysia (BM) as the national language. Compounding this issue, many schools lack the resources needed to fully implement the program, leaving students struggling to meet its demands.

What is often overlooked, however, are the program's deeper shortcomings. A significant flaw lies in its narrow focus on English instruction within STEM subjects, which fails to create a comprehensive framework for nurturing student motivation and language development across a broader academic spectrum. By limiting the use of English to select subjects, the DLP risks reducing language engagement to a superficial level, where students might only acquire functional knowledge without achieving meaningful proficiency. As a result, the program could become a missed opportunity, falling short of its potential to foster well-rounded English fluency and critical language skills needed beyond the classroom.

The government asserts that the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) can effectively supplement or even replace the DLP. However, a closer examination of the HIP implementation guidelines reveals a problematic reliance on parents to cultivate an English-rich environment at home.

Language education starts as early as preschool, and the goal is for students to be fluent in a minimum of two languages by the time they reach university. The majority of Malaysian universities conduct their courses in English. While the government claims to have set proficiency goals for students, one glaring issue remains. In-service teachers, expected to guide students toward English fluency, are often not fluent themselves.

Teachers, in many cases, are left without the necessary support. The roadmap admits that pre-service teachers' English proficiency is not up to par, yet fails to mention how these teachers are being admitted into English teaching programs without meeting the basic fluency standards. One would expect English proficiency to be a prerequisite for a Bachelor's in English Teaching. Yet, the government allows under qualified individuals into the system, only to deal with the consequences later.

Roadmaps and policies will do little good if they don't tackle the fundamental issues. For the sake of this argument, let's assume the education ministry genuinely wants to develop a curriculum where students can succeed in English at the university level. But the question remains: why is there such a disconnect between this goal and the reality on the ground?

The government, despite being aware of Malaysia's linguistic diversity, often disregards how rarely students begin their language journeys at the same point. This is just one of the many challenges in developing a curriculum that caters to all. Teachers must be equipped to foster confidence in using English in diverse contexts, a need exacerbated by inadequate application of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) principles.

To create a more inclusive and effective educational environment, Malaysia should adopt a policy that leverages its linguistic diversity. Rather than enforcing an all-English approach, the proposed policy would advocate for the strategic use of multiple languages within the classroom. This policy would empower students who are more comfortable in their home languages while promoting an inclusive atmosphere that views linguistic diversity as an asset. By embracing translanguaging—where students can fluidly switch between languages to aid their learning—educators can create a more adaptive, student-centred environment that respects each learner's unique language background.

Understanding the challenges of the current curriculum, which treats all students the same, and disregards the diverse linguistic backgrounds of Malaysian learners. If SLA principles were embraced, curriculum developers would acknowledge that many students don't start from scratch—they already come equipped with multiple languages, and these languages can serve as bridges rather than barriers to learning English.

The blueprint's failure to account for the multilingual realities of Malaysian classrooms has resulted in language policies that often alienate students from their home languages. Research in SLA theory shows that allowing students to use their home languages can enhance their understanding of English and help them internalise complex concepts more effectively.

SLA theory underscores the importance of motivation in language acquisition, yet our current policies seem indifferent to it. SLA highlights that motivation, rather than age, plays a crucial role in determining how well students acquire a language.

By ignoring this, the system fails to recognize how crucial it is to engage students in ways that align with their unique linguistic backgrounds.

Current teacher training frameworks fall short of equipping English language teachers with the skills necessary to manage multilingual classrooms effectively. All pre-service and in-service teachers should be required to undergo mandatory training in SLA principles. This training would deepen teachers' understanding of the various stages of language acquisition, enabling them to tailor their teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of students at different levels of language proficiency.

In addition, English language teachers must meet higher proficiency thresholds before they are allowed to teach. While current blueprints mention teacher training, they do not sufficiently address the need for ongoing language development. This proposal would mandate continuous professional development for all English teachers, including regular assessments of their proficiency and teaching practices. By setting higher standards, Malaysia can ensure that the quality of English language instruction is consistent across all schools.

However, the measures discussed thus far remain insufficient. Preschool education, for instance, is not yet mandatory in Malaysia, and teachers with a Diploma in Early Childhood Education are often unequipped to support multilingual children effectively in the classroom. The government must take proactive steps to create an environment that encourages children to embrace language learning from an early age.

The government needs to take more decisive action to foster an environment where language learning begins at an early age. Introducing language role models and emphasising the equal importance of both English and Bahasa Malaysia (BM) for students' futures would be a step in the right direction. However, simply teaching the importance of these languages is insufficient. More comprehensive effort is needed to make language learning both engaging and practical, integrating it into daily activities in ways that resonate with children and ignite a genuine interest in mastering multiple languages.

Countries like Germany, Spain, Japan, and Korea predominantly conduct their university courses in their national languages, but Malaysia's linguistic landscape demands a more nuanced approach. With both Bahasa Malaysia (BM) and English playing significant roles, a full overhaul of the university system to accommodate BM would not only be impractical but also potentially regressive. Instead, the focus should be on addressing the systemic gaps in English language education, particularly for students from rural areas who are disproportionately disadvantaged.

The current approach to preparing students for university, which largely relies on English, fails to account for the inequalities that exist between rural and urban students. Enhancing English language education is not just a matter of curriculum improvement; it is a matter of educational equity. Without targeted reforms, the gap between rural and urban students will continue to widen, leaving many ill-prepared for the demands of higher education. If Malaysia is serious about bridging this divide, it must confront the structural weaknesses in its language education policies, ensuring that all students—regardless of geographic or socioeconomic background—are adequately prepared for university-level instruction in English.

Whilst reimagining Malaysia's language education policies, it becomes clear that the disconnect between policy and the country's rich multilingual reality is more than a mere oversight—it is a fundamental flaw that limits the potential of students. Malaysia's strength lies in its linguistic diversity, yet the education system continues to enforce monolithic approaches that stifle this asset. Ultimately, true educational reform will only occur when Malaysia recognizes that its students' multilingualism is not a hindrance but a gateway to deeper learning, greater global competitiveness, and stronger national unity. By aligning policy with the realities of its classrooms, Malaysia can forge a path that celebrates its rich linguistic diversity whilst equipping its students with the skills they need to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

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