

Chapter 2.3

Developing Teachers in Meeting Students' Needs: Malaysia's Current English Language Policy

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Introduction

Malaysia is a country made up of different ethnic compositions frequently identified by the different languages they speak. Since independence, Bahasa Malaysia has been the official national language, and is generally spoken by all Malaysians. English on the other hand, is the second language, used in many parts of the national, professional, commercial, and social interactions. Chinese, Tamil, and other ethnic languages are used daily by the different ethnic groups as their mother tongue. This linguistic and cultural richness lies at the heart of Malaysia's unique social, political, and religious identity and nowhere is this diversity more evident than in the field of education. It is against the background of this rich tapestry that my paper will look at the Malaysian Ministry of Education's (MOE) vision for the teaching and learning of the English language as English continues to be the world's lingua franca and young Malaysians seek to compete in the global arena.

Strengthening English Language Policy Implementation

In his introduction to the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Preschool to Post-Secondary Education) our Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin bin Haji Mohd Yassin stated that: "Our goal, and the purpose of the education system, is to equip our students holistically to allow them to succeed in the twenty-first century, with all the opportunities and challenges that this new era presents." The roadmap towards achieving this includes the effort to "ensure every child is proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English language and is encouraged to learn an additional language" (MOE Malaysia 2013).

This roadmap, which is Shift 2 of the Blueprint, is built on the current policy to uphold Bahasa Malaysia to strengthen the English language or Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris (MBMMBI) introduced in 2011 (Yassin 2013). Bahasa Malaysia will remain as the medium of instruction in all national schools and as a compulsory subject in National-type primary schools where Chinese and Tamil are the main languages of instruction. The standard of Bahasa Malaysia is to be raised to better support learning and ensure all students possess the operational proficiency in the national language, which is the language of unity. English will continue to be taught as a subject in all

schools and efforts will be made to raise students' proficiency levels closer to international standards. Efforts taken will focus not only on addressing the quality of teaching, but also in the importance of professional development and lifelong learning for both students and teachers.

The Ministry believes that quality teaching is the most effective lever available to transform English language education in the country and improve students' proficiency. Before turning to the question of English subject teacher continuing professional development, I would like to place it in context via a brief overview of the varied initiatives that have been drawn up to ensure students both at primary and secondary levels, of different ethnic and social backgrounds and from different locations in the country have equal access to quality education and a meaningful English learning experience.

The MBI Policy (Ministry of Education Malaysia n.d.) and the Blueprint which envisages its strengthening highlight a number of areas of particular importance for education transformation as follows:

Delivery of English Lessons

The most notable changes within the English classroom are those associated with identifying students with challenges in learning English and creating a classroom environment where these issues can be dealt with and students allowed the space and time to participate fully in their learning. For the primary school, this takes the form of LINUS, a literacy and numeracy program, which in year one helps identify and support children with English language learning difficulties through remedial instruction. In secondary schools, there has been a recognition that students of different abilities should be grouped in a "set system," where their learning challenges can best be overcome through teaching approaches that are tailored to the students' needs and skill levels. With the realization that students' need to be better at listening and speaking, instruction at the lower secondary levels is now focusing on improving these skills through the OPS English teaching and learning materials. Acknowledging that students have particular individual and learning styles, the use of ICT integrating a face-to-face model and technology-mediated instructional approaches will be widened for personalized learning customized to individual needs through the establishment of the virtual learning environment.

New Elements in the Curriculum

With reference to the existing curriculum, new elements are added to strengthen the learning of the language taking into consideration that students enter primary schools with different educational backgrounds in English. A "back to basics" concept is adopted through introducing the *phonics approach to teaching reading* to support students' who lack basic English language skills upon joining primary schools and *language arts* to enrich the learning of the different language skills.

Contact Time for English

Acting on the findings of “international research that shows Malaysia’s 15-20 percent of instructional time in English language is insufficient for students to build operational proficiency in the language” (MOE 2013, 4-11), additional time has been allocated to the English subject in primary schools (see Table 2.3-1). The additional time is to enable enrichment activities as well as more opportunities for interactions in English available for individual students.

School Type	Time Allocation for English
Level 1	
National Schools	300 minutes (an addition of 90 minutes)
National-type Schools	150 minutes (an addition of 90 minutes)
Level 2	
National Schools	300 minutes (an addition of 90 minutes)
National-type Schools	150 minutes (an addition of 90 minutes)

Table 2.3-1: The New Time Allocation for English Subject (The Ministry of Education Malaysia n.d.).

A Compulsory Pass for English Subject at SPM from 2016

The ongoing initiatives to improve students’ proficiency level in English are meant to move into the direction where students will be able to obtain a minimum pass in the examination they take at the end of their secondary education. To this end, another important change is in the decision for English language to be a compulsory subject to pass for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) Certification from 2016. This could be viewed as an impetus for both students and teachers in achieving higher standards in the teaching and learning of English.

Establishment of the Standards and Quality Council for English

To ensure that the teaching and learning of English is of a certain standard and quality, the Standards and Quality Council for English encompassing panel experts from various universities have been given the advisory role as well as the responsibility to study, advise, and recommend strategies to improve the teaching and learning of the English language in all educational institutions (MOE Malaysia 2012).

In spite of these important changes and interventions at different levels in the English language education, teachers matter, as they are the ones who can deliver effective instruction in the classroom, thus directly impacting student

learning and outcomes. On this point, I will now focus on the English subject teachers' professional development.

English Subject Teacher Professional Development

Aligned with the Ministry's aspiration to provide quality teaching, English subject teachers at all levels of education need to be appropriately trained and qualified. Teachers should continue their professional development upon recruitment and should have access to high quality continuous professional development throughout their career. As stated in Shift 4 of the Blueprint, "Ongoing professional development allows teachers to maintain and enhance their skill set, including staying up-to-date with the latest development in pedagogy."

Professional User	C2 Mastery	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1 Effective Operational Efficiency	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious search for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic, and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors, and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2 Vantage	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explains a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1 Threshold	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics, which are familiar, or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

Basic User	A2 Waystage	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment, and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1 Breakthrough	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows, and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Table 2.3-2. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages (Council of Europe 2001).

With reference to the English language subject, the key to quality teaching rests on teachers’ proficiency level in English measured against international standards. Under this current policy, teachers now need to have a minimum level of proficiency benchmarked against the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages (Table 2.3-2) to qualify them to teach English. In order to support students’ achievement, and make a difference to students’ learning of the language, the Ministry believes there is a need for a high standard for teacher proficiency in English. A nation-wide up-skilling program for serving English language teachers has been rolled out to assist teachers who have not reached the stipulated standard. While at pre-service level, intervention measures are under discussion to ensure teacher trainees’ level of proficiency is at the set standard upon entering the profession. The Ministry aspires that by 2016 all teachers achieve a minimum level of C1, which is equivalent to a capable/expert user of the English Language according to the CEFR to enable them to continue to teach the subject.

In 2012, a total of 61,008 ELT practitioners encompassing English subject teachers, Institute of Teacher Education English language lecturers, and English language education officers at different levels of the Ministry sat for the Cambridge Placement Test (CPT), which is calibrated against the CEFR. A total of 66.7 percent of both option and non-option teachers, were identified as needing up-skilling to enhance their English language proficiency and pedagogical skills. The first cohort of 5,010 teachers started a one year up-skilling training program in 2012. This will be followed by the second cohort of 9,000 and a third cohort of 9,658 teachers. The Ministry hopes by the end of 2015, a total of 15,000 option English teachers would have been up-skilled (MOE Malaysia 2013).

With the implementation of this policy, redeployment exercises will be inevitable for teachers who are unable to meet the stipulated standard after undergoing the up-skilling training. Their vacancies will be filled by existing English subject teachers with required level of proficiency who are not teaching the

subject due to some unforeseen circumstances and graduates from Teacher Education Institutes and Institutions of Higher Education (MOE Malaysia 2013).

In the meantime, in addition to this up-skilling program, which in principle focuses on improving teachers' proficiency in English with a strong emphasis on their use of instructional language, other related ELT training courses are also provided for English subject teachers. The Ministry recognizes that teachers need to consistently develop their repertoire of techniques, skills, and strategies through ongoing professional development. This is to ensure that teachers are able to impart the twenty-first century skills that students will require to compete in a globalized world.

This provision for teachers to undergo training courses is made based on the premise that teachers need to enhance teachers' knowledge and pedagogy skills, among others to enable them to:

- Teach new elements in the curriculum such as the *Teaching of Phonics and Language Arts*;
- Conduct literacy classes and remedial instructions for the LINUS Program and the set system;
- Refocus lessons on listening and speaking under the OPS English program; and
- Utilize ICT-based teaching and learning in classroom instructions.

When a pass in English is made compulsory from 2016 for students to obtain the SPM certification (MOE Malaysia 2013) at the end of their secondary education, there will be a greater demand for professional accountability among teachers.

Considerations in Teacher Professional Development Under the Current Policy

I started this chapter by highlighting the different initiatives under the policy to Strengthen the English language and Shift 2 of the Blueprint, which aspires that students should be proficient in at least two languages, Bahasa Malaysia and English, for different purposes but ultimately to enable them to acquire the twenty-first century skills to compete in a globalized world.

I also stated that in the center of all these English initiatives is the teacher. Providing up-skilling and professional training courses for them is viewed as instrumental to equip the teachers with proficiency in English, knowledge, and skills to help students achieve in the language. Enhancing proficiency, knowledge, and skills related exclusively to the teaching of English will not be effective in providing learning opportunities for Malaysian students without explicitly developing the skills and competencies English language subject teachers require as twenty-first century educators.

It may be necessary to consider if the current central control professional development practices for English subject teachers support teachers' professional and personal growth as learners who are proactive in identifying and meeting their

own development needs as well as the needs of the students, and as risk takers who are willing to go beyond the conventional way of teaching to help students achieve. There is also a need to review whether the training opportunities provided are relevant. While there is a need for central control training courses like the up-skilling program to raise the English proficiency standard of subject teachers, individual and professional-wide autonomy are equally necessary so that our teachers are able to articulate their own conceptions of teaching and select and justify appropriate modes of practice (Kennedy 2005). Though not directly addressed under the current policy to strengthen the English language, this aspect of teacher professional development is covered under Shift 4 of the Blueprint related to the Continuous Professional Development Master Plan, which is being developed for Malaysian teachers.

One challenge, however, remains: that in a centralized education system like Malaysia, teachers, education officers, and leadership at all levels need to have a better understanding of the rationale as to why there is a need to move in this new direction in teacher professional development. Teachers especially need to have a professional understanding of the importance to raise the standard of teaching, through being the learner themselves and examining how they can make a difference to students' learning. Education officers and leadership at all levels need to have the same realization that students need to be placed at the center of the education system. This is because no matter how comprehensive the policy to Strengthen the English Language is, it is the implementers at the different levels, in particular the teacher, who play a crucial and pivotal role. Holistic professional understanding as well as a shared vision and mindset is the way forward to help students achieve and compete in a global arena.

Conclusion

The policy to Strengthen the English Language was drawn up to address the teaching and learning of the language taking into consideration of the different aspects including the support systems to ensure quality education is provided to all students across the country. In implementing the policy, what is important is to address the “how” and the “what” in professional teacher development as within the education system since teachers are the key to elevating students' achievement in English.

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