

MANAGING ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM REFORM IN MALAYSIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: This paper examines the scenery of English language curriculum reform in the Malaysian primary education system. It starts by unveiling the status of English language since Malaysia achieved its independence from the British colony. It provides an overall representation of the alternate government decision positioning English language in the Malaysian education system. It then reviews the initiatives and realities of each English language curriculum reform. In particular, the Integrated Curriculum for Primary School (ICPS) which was launched in 1982, the New Primary School Standards-Based Curriculum for English language education (SBELC), introduced in 2011, and the recent amalgamation of Common European Framework of Languages (CEFR) in Malaysia Education Roadmap (2015-2025) were duly discussed. This paper highlights the impeding factors which led to the inconsistency between the intended national curriculum and actual classroom realities such as language proficiency of teachers, insufficient support and guidance for the teachers to cope with the reforms and centralised education structure. The emerging paradoxical challenges that teachers experienced throughout both language policy and curriculum reforms have aggravated the implementation of the curriculum, which consequently is deemed for immediate attention and to the extent for an additional transformation.

Keywords: Curriculum reform, English proficiency, English teaching, language policy, primary education

1. Introduction

Malaysia has experienced, on multiple occasions, education transformation in its language policy as well as the English language curriculum. It is believed that these transformations were strongly influenced by the development of the country and economic growth. In this modern technological era, education development needs to be improved continuously to meet the existing world demand. Innovation in the teaching of English language is a perpetual effort to meet the diverse needs of students, teachers, stakeholders and society, which are varying all the time. In order to strengthen English proficiency among Malaysian students, the English language in the national educational curriculum was introduced as a compulsory subject at school which was administered under the language education policy.

English language was introduced to the children in Malaysia formally at the age of seven years old at primary school level. They learn the language as a compulsory subject until they reach seventeen years old at secondary level, and it can be prolonged up to tertiary level. In addition, Malay language remained as the national language and a medium of instruction at national public schools until the present day. Since the country has multiracial ethnics, it is permissible for national-type schools to use other languages, such as Mandarin and Tamil, as a medium of instruction. However, English language was officially acknowledged as a second language and used as a medium of instruction. Malaysians have expressed numerous responses in relation to government's decision on language policy and English language curriculum as there were issues and challenges arising from the implementation effort.

In order to understand the language education scene in Malaysia, this paper traces the development of the interchanging decision of language policy since its early independence, an overview of the selected English language curriculum change and highlights on the issues and challenges of

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education reforms on the teaching and learning at primary school level which requires the call for a structured and well-monitored transformation.

2. Language Policy Reform in a Multilingual Context

During the British colonisation in the 1800s, the invasion of the English language has expanded in numerous spheres of Malaysian life which could be described as phenomenal. Despite the intense rule by the British government, as a colonised country, Malaysia gained the benefits of the English language and its worldwide force. However, after independence, the nationalisation of the education system has experienced a series of revolutions and ultimate stabilisation of its role and status in the system (Gill, 2005). In 1951, before Malaysia achieved independence, the British formed the Barnes Committee to study and obtain an in-depth understanding of the Malaysian education system. The committee suggested that the Chinese and Indian, who are the minority, can attend a school where the Malay language is a medium of instruction as opposed to the vernacular school. The primary objective was "that the ethnic minority groups gave up their mother tongue education in favour of the study of the Malay language in the primary school level, but eventually in favour of the English language at the secondary and tertiary levels" (Yang, 1998, p.31).

After Malaysia achieved independence in 1957, the government transformed the education system by applying the Education Ordinance of 1957, which was designed mainly for an independent Malaysia (Asmah, 1979). The aim was to foster an education system that best fits all ethnic groups in Malaysia who are prepared to thrive and succeed in the country. A council made the decision of the new formation in 1955 which was chaired by the Minister of Education, Abdul Razak Bin Hussain, and it was later named as the Razak Report. Nonetheless, the Razak Report advocated the establishment of mother-tongue education and vernacular schools, as opposed to the Barnes Report (Gill, 2005). The council also laid the groundwork for a system of intercultural competence and welcoming of other languages, along with the English language, at the same time promoting the Malay language as a national language (Pandian, 2002). After all, as a multiracial country, operating on a unified national language is crucial for the community. Hence, as proposed by both the Razak Report and the Education Ordinance 1957, the Malay language became the medium of instruction that implies the existence of a single national education system (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2010a).

Despite the stimulus to use the Malay language as a language of instruction, English also plays a dominant role as a medium of instruction in schools. After 12 years of independence, however, the racial riots of 1969 pressured policymakers to adopt the Malay language as the preferred medium of instruction at school level (Abdullah, 2005; Asmah, 1992). Consequently, in 1970, the Malay language gradually substituted English as the medium of instruction at primary education and hence English persisted in all national schools as a subject (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2010b). All English primary schools were converted into national primary schools by 1975, which legally obliterated the English-medium school education.

The education system in Malaysia has gone through battles of centralising language policy between Malay and English language. After the post-independence era, the Malay language was extensively used in the domain of economic, social and education. Still, after 40 years, the English language has become the official medium of instruction in Malaysia. Former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohammad undertook the dramatic turnaround in response to globalisation, science, technology, and knowledge economy. The use of Malay language claimed to procrastinate the initiatives of governments to become an industrialized nation and Malaysians are unable to keep pace with the proliferation of information, especially in science and innovation (Gill, 2005). It has implied various sectors, especially the education industry, as the adjustments obliged Malaysians to be competent users of English.

However, the multiracial society in the country and the worries among the multilinguals of vernacular language threats (Azman, 2016) are the key factors that hinder the attempt to uphold English language standards and making it intricated. Some articles in postmodern newspapers lifted the fears of a particular ethnic group, especially Chinese Malaysians, who worry that their native language will perish due to the exceptional value placed on English in the schooling system (Jessy, 2014). The ideology amongst Chinese Malaysians has circulated, and they have persisted on retaining the use of their mother tongue language in education and reducing the need for English at school. As a result,

English language teachers assigned to each of these schools encountered time restrictions as they have to teach the language with shorter contact hours compared to the hours in national and Tamil vernacular schools (Rashid et al., 2016).

3. The Backdrop of English Language Reform at Primary School Level

In national public schools, Malay language being the national language was stipulated as the medium of instruction. Ethnic languages such as Mandarin and Tamil are permissible for use as a medium of instruction in vernacular public schools in Malaysia, throughout the sense of personifying the value of multiculturalism. Generally, children in Malaysia learn English language at the early age of 7 years old. Although they have spent approximately 11 years throughout their schooling life (six years at primary school and five years at secondary school), Malaysian students, in general, have been incapable to attain a reasonable level of proficiency.

The Malaysian Employers Federation recorded that 200,000 graduates were unemployed in 2016 (Rajaendram, 2016). The soaring numbers of unemployment rate among students are often due to their low English proficiency and communication skills (MoE, 2013; Ting et al., 2017; Selvaratnam, 2018). Additionally, the incompetent use of English (64%), lack of communication abilities (60%) and poor behaviour and personalities (59%) are the constant factors Malaysian employers have to deal with (Lee et al., 2008). Mosha (2014) revealed that the scarce use of English at school and home, oversized classroom, teachers' abilities, unpleasant environment for the teaching and learning session, insufficient residential care and deprivation are among the essential aspects influencing the success of students in English. This scenario portrays a significant challenge for Malaysia's growth and for the nation to be sufficiently developed and economically efficient.

Consequently, Malaysia experienced reform in its English language education to improvise the abilities of language learners so that they could be competitive in the globalised world. The mastery of English is crucial for the learners to empower themselves with the skills needed to stay competitive in a fast-changing global economy (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018). The Government of Malaysia and the Ministry of Education (MoE) have invested progressively in transforming the country's English language curriculum starting from the Integrated English Language Syllabus for Primary schools, or KBSR introduced in 1982, followed by the Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (SCPS) or KSSR in 2013 and most recently the launch of the English Language Education Roadmap for Malaysia 2015-2025 (Don, Abdullah, Abdullah, Lee, Kaur, Pillai & Hooi, 2015). Figure 1 below demonstrates English language curriculum at Malaysia primary school.

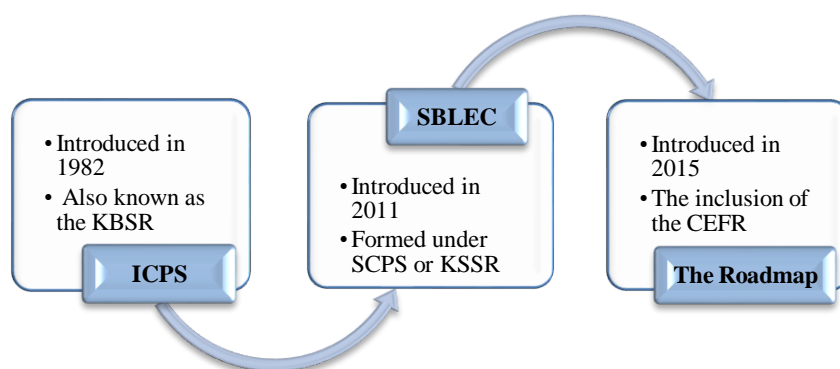


Figure 1: English Language Curriculum in Malaysia Primary Education

4. The Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools or ICPS

In 1982, the launch and adoption of an overhauled national primary school curriculum, best described as the Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools (ICPS) or Kemahiran Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah (KBSR), was perceived as a significant breakthrough in the country's primary education sector. After the Cabinet Committee Report on the analysis of the enactment of the 1970 Education Policy, this amendment came into force in 1979. The attempt for a drastic move to incorporate the new primary

school curriculum (ICPS) was primarily because of the dissatisfaction during the 1960s and 1970s. The subject syllabus taught in schools was introduced after the inauguration of the Razak Report in 1956. Moreover, it was reported that the old curriculum was too subject-biased, focused more on didactic-learning, excessively exam-oriented, which gauged more on the examination result and was heavily reliant on textbooks (Lee, 1993). As a result, it was found that after completing six years of primary education, some students were unable to learn the requisite basic skills, such as reading, writing and arithmetic, which are deemed necessary for secondary education (Pandian, 2002).

The formation of the ICPS curriculum seeks to promote a new focus on the curriculum goals and content, novel teaching approaches and updated educational resources, with the aim to enhance the standard of primary education. It was designed to carry out communicative activities in the classroom. As such, learners are expected to have a dominant participatory role in the learning process. Since the curriculum was informed by the communicative approach, students are allowed to determine classroom activities, choose topics to discuss, and they have the freedom to select or bring text for reading activities. The ultimate goal is to make the activities meaningful and valuable for the learners to be able to use the English language in their daily lives. The role of the learners is congruent with the underlying principles of ICPS which is a 'child-centred curriculum' that emphasizes on the power of individual variation, personal achievement, and reinforces the child's overall growth (Azizah, 1987). Most importantly, it also acknowledges the need for learners to adhere to various levels of skill through remedial and enrichment programmes as well as to conduct a continuous evaluation of the development of the child (Lee, 1999).

Darmi and Albion (2013) noted that the learning outcomes highlighted in the curriculum extended to the four basic language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, represent the demands of Malaysian society in its everyday life. Specifically, the aim of the ICPS concerning the teaching of English language is:

"to equip learners with basic skills and knowledge of the English language so as to enable them to communicate both orally and in writing, in and out of school." (Ministry of Education, 1983, p.1; 2001, p. 2).

Hence, it recommends the teaching of English as a second language at the primary education as a reasonable basis in communication skills to use the language aptly in both discourses, "with international intelligibility" and in writing (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.2). The focus shifted from conventional rote teaching and learning skills to a communicative method which stirred the need to use English efficiently. The English syllabus centred on situated task-based approaches was included in the national objectives, educational principles and cultural contexts. The ICPS was gradually introduced, which took a period of seven years from 1982 to 1988. Nevertheless, the manifestation of this curriculum is not without undisputable problems and controversies.

4.1 Issues in ICPS implementation

Throughout the implementation of the ICPS between 1983 to 2003, it was discovered that the significant problems relating to the deficient performance of primary school students were due to socio-economic challenges (Azman, 2016). There is a massive gap in the students' performance between rural and urban schools because a large number of students were living in rural areas. The problems are due to insufficient teaching hours, teachers' productivity, teaching methods, language evaluation, educational technology and facilities, domestic environment as well as students' enthusiasm (Darmi & Albion, 2013). Moreover, since curriculum development in Malaysia has been highly centralised, with a top-down approach, the implementation of the ICPS has been distorted with its hierarchical structure. While teachers, school leaders, and administrators granted a lot of leeway to enforce the new curricula, nevertheless, they restricted on the conventional practice of waiting for upper instructions instead of taking independent choices (Azizah, 1987). They chose to adhere to the rigorous commands from the top administration to steer clear of being convicted from making any mistakes. Therefore, the centralised education structure has led to 'dysfunctional consequences' in which teachers have become unresourceful who rely excessively on the guidelines and handouts from the Ministry (Noor, 1988).

In the case of teaching and learning activities, Pandian (2002) stated that the ICPS omitted references on the need for technological advancement, which integrated the use of computer software and audio-video records. Although the curriculum has emphasised on the usage of Information and

Communication Technology (ICT) in its instructional phase (BPK 2003 and 2012), nevertheless, this element seems to be neglected resulting to harmful outcome to the efficacy of the curriculum. Moreover, the framework of the curriculum had withheld imperative features such as autonomous learning, study skills and analytical skills, which are crucial in learners' educational growth. The absence of such skills and limitation of the curriculum has awakened the government for other proposals to reinvent the school system to equip the nation for the information age and hence develop the quality of human capital in the country.

In 2003, the government made a bold move to shift the medium of instruction to teach Mathematics and Sciences in English. This "most controversial policy reform" according to Rashid, Rahman and Yunus (2016, p.3) was referred to as English for teaching Science and Mathematics (PPSMI). This policy is ascribed to the fact that a strong mastery of English should inspire learners to find information on the internet, read articles and research papers as well as other resources (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2004). It was envisaged that the learners could grasp excellent understanding in Sciences and Mathematics throughout the introduction of the policy since a large number of sources are available in English language (Mohd Nor et al., 2017). Nevertheless, children in rural areas had difficulty in learning Sciences and Mathematics in English. In 2008, the government was determined to revert the policy to the Malay language as a medium of instruction. The withdrawal of PPSMI made many parents discontented since the transformation is deemed to make the students' language proficiency remain low particularly those who did not have a strong background of the English language and who were living in the rural area (Ali et al., 2011). Since there is increasing resistance to the change of the policy, the government introduced a new English language curriculum to strengthen the teaching of English.

5. Standard Curriculum for Primary School (SCPS)

In 2010, the MoE released a guideline on the new Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (SCPS) to substitute the Integrated Primary Schools Curriculum (ICPS). After the MoE had successfully launched the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 in 2012, the SCPS was fully implemented in 2013 which replaced the ICPS after almost 20 years of lengthy execution. It was designed with the incorporation of the then curriculum (ICPS), the National Education Philosophy and National Education Policy. It also reinforces the knowledge of basic reading, writing and arithmetic, reasoning skills, basic ICT, the growth of emotional, spiritual, physical, cognitive, attitudes and values (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2010). Most importantly, the SCPS was structured according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) education principles of learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. Therefore, this new curriculum emphasises not only on learners' academic development, but it also goes beyond the focus of holistic learning so that Malaysian pupils are well equipped for the 21st century fast-paced world. The inclusion of the afore-mentioned integrated approaches gives learners a fair opportunity to acquire the wide-ranging and constructive knowledge and skills.

This reform is much demanded by Malaysia's education system, especially for English subject mainly due to poor communication skills and low language proficiency among learners at schools and tertiary level. Furthermore, the former education system (ICPS) excluded the process of critical thinking among students as it only emphasised on rote-learning and exam-orientation, which is impractical to prepare the students to be competitive in a globalised world. Thus, the SCPS provides a platform for structuring the learners' Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in their learning process. The capability to think at a higher level is to think, instead of simply remembering the truth and informing others the knowledge exactly the way it is said, and this is what Malaysian students need the most (Singh & Marappan, 2020).

6. Standards-Based English Language Curriculum (SBLEC)

The education policy reform document, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 outlined realistic and practical goals of the country to develop a sturdy and efficient education system by 2025 that strives to ensure that every child is competent in both Malay and English language. With the preamble of SCPS, the standards-based English language curriculum (SBLEC) was introduced and

executed in 2011, starting with Year 1 cohort. The SBLEC which was prepared across themes in a modular structure to permit students to resolve problems, became a decision-maker which articulated themselves in a unique way (Curriculum Development Division, 2011). In this modular approach, English language was included in the Core Module as a subject. There are six crucial skills inserted in the new modules, namely speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar and language arts. Nevertheless, all modules are introduced starting from Year 1, whereas the grammar module will commence later, once the students are in Year 3. Moreover, language input is framed under themes and topics to make learning more relevant and deliberate. There are three broad themes can be found throughout the curriculum: (1) World of Self, Family and Friends; (2) World of Stories and (3) World of Knowledge.

Concerning learners' language development, the SCPS was prepared "to equip pupils with basic language skills to enable them to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts that are appropriate to the pupils' level of development" (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2010a, p.3). The curriculum adopted the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach to develop the language skills of learners pertaining to the national curriculum initiatives. This approach was also employed by other Asian countries such as Japan, Singapore and China. The agenda for strengthening the communication skills and abilities of pupils is a crucial component which was stressed in the curriculum. In line with the Malaysian government's policy in nurturing English, learners have broad opportunities to use the target language for discussions, group works, presentations as well as other engaging activities. They were given opportunities to communicate using the target language, utilising authentic classroom materials, incorporating their personal experience into classroom learning as part of the lesson and applying the language beyond a classroom setting.

Accordingly, the SCPS concerns the roles of students and teachers, who occupied the learner-centred approach foreground in second language classrooms. Throughout this approach, teachers are no longer dominating the teaching and learning process. Teachers should encourage students to engage in numerous classroom strategies and activities such as engaging in speaking activities, listening attentively, articulating their ideas and emotions, reading with proper understanding and less grammatical errors throughout these activities. With support from the teachers, students are expected to enhance their communicative skills in English with active involvement in the learning process since teachers act as a facilitator rather than a knowledge provider (Rahman, 2014). Hence, the curriculum promotes learner-centred teaching approaches and active learning approach that boosts not only learners' English language proficiency but also their self-confidence. In addition, children will be introduced to the English language at the earliest possible age by using 'active interactive learner-centred approaches' to enhance their fundamental linguistic competence and to establish a strong basis for the higher levels of proficiency expected at secondary and higher education levels and in job opportunities (Hardman & Rahman, 2014).

Sulaiman, Sulaiman and Abdul Rahim (2017) researched ESL teachers' perceptions on the implementation of SBLEC at primary school in Malaysia. They discovered that the participants are optimistic about the new curriculum, as they opined that it provides them with more apparent learning outcomes. The learning outcomes revealed the mixture of considerable language skills and aspects of the English language usage in everyday life. As mentioned earlier, SBLEC emphasised on the teachers' role as facilitators who assist learners in gaining knowledge and abilities via multiple learning prospects. Generally, the participants' perceptions about the curriculum as a progressive, pragmatic and outcome-based curriculum suggested that all participants had a positive outlook of the new language curriculum (Sulaiman et al., 2017).

6.1 Teachers' obscurity in SBLEC curriculum implementation

The SCPS strengthens the importance that students should have a strong foundation for basic literacy so that they will have confidence in using the language in everyday life (Curriculum Development Division, 2011). The MoE targeted that when the pupils have completed Year 6, they should not only be able to acquire excellent language proficiency to read, converse, understand and write but also use the English language in every aspect of their lives according to the accurate grammar rules. Hence, the MoE has decided to implement a LINUS assessment which acts as a screening tool for literacy problems at primary level. The assessment was carried out twice a year in which the National

Exam Unit prepares the screening instruments under MoE's surveillance. From the screening activities, teachers could identify students who need literacy and numeracy remediation in the early phase. Assuming the results show that the student achieves below 90% of the written and oral LINUS English screening test, they are required to enrol in 7 to 10 intervention programmes a week (Ministry of Education, 2013). However, the operation of LINUS at schools has encountered several problems. Despite focusing on students' language development, teachers have to manage the intervention programmes for English literacy that doubles up their task as remedial teachers. From these twofold tasks, teachers are known to lack remedial content in which they urge for expert support to assist them and also for additional time in preparing the teaching materials (Ahmad & Mutalib, 2015; Bokhari et al., 2015). Some English teachers also demand to attend training and opportunities to improve their language skills.

Hardman and Rahman (2014) conducted a study on the implementation of SBLEC by eight Year 1 primary English teachers. They recorded 32 lessons to examine the extent to which the new curriculum promotes communicative language approach during the class. It was discovered that there were little classroom interaction and discourse practice taking place between teachers and students. Overall, there is no group work since the lessons were largely orchestrated by teachers' fronted interaction and students who worked from the textbook individually, thus limiting the possibility for exploratory talk among the students. Additionally, teachers observed the practices used closed questions, cued elicitation and repetition of oral practice which are subjected to the vast numbers of pupils with varied learning abilities in the classroom, low language proficiency, and the demand to organise assessments for the pupils. Hence, there was a disparity between the stated curriculum objectives and pedagogical practices which affect the curriculum initiatives. Similar to the implementation of LINUS, teachers need to go for training so that they could have adequate knowledge, reliable information and actual methods on the teaching of English via communicative language approach.

7. CEFR in English Language Curriculum in Malaysia

The most recent development in the Malaysian English language education reform is the English Language Education Roadmap 2015-2025 initiated as part of Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. The launching of this new reform is much anticipated as it "finally provides a systematic guide for the development of trained English language teachers, benchmarked syllabus items and teaching materials, internationally standardised assessments, and clearly defined language competency expectations and outcomes for all education levels" (Azman, 2016, p.74). English language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) was formed by the MoE in 2013 to fabricate The Roadmap with a scheduled plan which will be executed by 2025 at every school level (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The ELSQC members consist of ten English language experts selected from universities and professional organisations who are specialists in the field of English language teaching (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). One of the objectives of the establishment is to assist the government on the country's language policy and to raise the standard of English among Malaysian students and teachers. The Council was accountable for introducing the CEFR framework to the Malaysian education system and provides a comprehensive direction for systemic reform of the English education system.

In 2001, the Council of Europe introduced the CEFR framework primarily to offer "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe" (Council of Europe, 2001, p.1). The framework provides six-levels of foreign language proficiency, ranging from the lowest to the highest: A1&A2 as Basic, B1&B2 as Intermediate, and C1&C2 as Advanced Proficiency. It also contains global scale descriptors which allow users to carry out self-assessment using the provided scheme as it explains the appropriate language requirements for each level of speaking, reading, listening and writing (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020). Additionally, the CEFR promotes learner-centeredness in line with its action-oriented approach emphasizing learners' communicative capacity.

After twenty years since its launch, the CEFR framework has been adopted in various countries around the world such as Japan, China, Columbia, Thailand, France, Germany, Bulgaria and others. Vietnam is the first country in Asia that adopted the framework in its education system. As a global language policy tool, CEFR has been recently applied to the local context of Malaysia with a structured and careful preparation by the MoE. Through CEFR, it is believed that Malaysia

could benefit from the standardisation of the global reference tool in its English education system for Malaysians to obtain mutual recognition at international level. For instance, the quality of learners in Malaysia who attain B1 in the English language is comparable to the learners who acquire the same level in other parts of the world based on the international standard level. There is no such claim that B1 learners in Malaysia are better than B1 learners in Turkey because CEFR will ensure equivalence from the reference set worldwide.

The CEFR-aligned curriculum reform in Malaysia includes notable features of language assessment, pedagogy, teaching and learning resources, syllabus, time allocation, content and curriculum administration. However, the critical feature in the Malaysia Education Blueprint is the synchronisation of the education system with the CEFR in order to raise the quality of education to global standards. The incorporation between the global ideologies and local agendas is prominent to prepare Malaysians to compete at an international stage by elevating their language proficiency. Although the current state of English proficiency among Malaysian students are claimed to be ample, it is reasonably inadequate for them to be globally competitive (Don et al., 2015). Students should be prepared with exceptional competency so that they are ready to experience the complexity of global society and progressive world. Indeed, their future prosperity and security will be empowered by being globally competent individuals. Accordingly, the MoE has set targets for Malaysian students to achieve by the year 2025 as they progress through the English language programme. Table 1 shows the CEFR targets in Malaysia.

Table 1: CEFR Targets for Each Stage of Education

Stage/Level	Target
Teacher Education	C1
University	B2/C1
Post-secondary School	B2
Secondary School	B1/B2
Primary School	A2
Pre-school	A1

Source: Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2015

Azman (2016) affirmed that the execution of these reforms in the Malaysian education scene would bring outstanding results in the teaching and learning of English as a second language in Malaysia if it is successfully executed as planned. She clarified that the Roadmap has the potential to bridge any gap that emerged in the socio-political decision of English, which formerly affected decisions of English language roles in education policy. As outlined in The Roadmap and Malaysian Education Plan 2013-2015, the reform is scheduled to be implemented in three waves: the first wave starts in 2013 – 2015, the second wave begins in 2016 – 2020, and the third wave commences from 2021 – 2025.

7.1 Issues with the CEFR reform initiatives

Several studies have been carried out to discover the perceptions of English language teachers on the implementation of the curriculum, imported textbooks, literacy skills and assessment of the CEFR in Malaysia (e.g. Aziz et al., 2018; Aziz & Uri, 2017; Johar & Aziz, 2019; Kok & Aziz, 2019; Uri & Aziz, 2017). The soaring numbers of studies on the teachers' perceptions are due to the fact that teachers' thoughts and opinions are useful to improve their teaching practices as well as Malaysian classroom environment (Johar & Aziz, 2019). As a frontline in any education reform, the feedback provided by teachers may highlight the weaknesses and strengths of the intended curriculum, which is vital for other educational stakeholders to take necessary action. In 2017, at the inception of the CEFR implementation in Malaysia, Uri and Aziz (2017) conducted a research on teachers' perceptions on the enactment of CEFR-aligned curriculum in Malaysia. They unveiled that teachers in Malaysia have little

understanding and low awareness of the framework. Subsequently, after two years, Kok and Aziz (2019) found in their study that the teachers claimed to be more familiar with the CEFR and that the launch of the CEFR-aligned curriculum is relevant to their daily work. Nevertheless, teachers in both studies agreed that they are not adequately trained and are deemed for guidance and support from the top level. The teacher training programme utilized the cascade model or the top-down approach to disseminate the CEFR-aligned reform. It was diffused to 5 to 7 Cambridge English experts at the first-tier, 200 National Master Trainers at the second-tier, 6000 District Trainers at the third-tier, and finally to the English language teachers at the fourth-tier (Aziz et al., 2018). The execution of this training is challenging at the second-tier due to a large size hall, massive numbers of participants, and too much content to be delivered within five days of training. Consequently, the third and fourth-tier course suffered significantly as teachers not getting much from the course. Due to this fact, teachers need continuous training and support to get the appropriate set of CEFR knowledge and information for effective implementation.

Since the introduction of the CEFR, the MoE has decided to use the imported textbooks for the teachers and students by purchasing from Cambridge University Press called *Super Minds* for Year 1 and Year 2 of primary education, and from Macmillan Press called *Pulse 2* for Form 1 and Form 2 at secondary education. The use of foreign resources in the local education scene has attracted alarming feedbacks from the parents, teachers and other educational stakeholders (Sani, 2018). This is because the imported textbooks carry foreign cultural elements in its content (Monihuldin, 2018) that may be peculiar to the teachers as well as students. It has to be emphasised that using a textbook that contains unfamiliar content from the socio-cultural experience of learners will, no doubt, challenge their readiness to learn because they have to concurrently combat between understanding the content and acquiring the target language (Kok & Aziz, 2019). This scenario is worrying because it could be an obstacle to effective language learning. However, early exposure to these elements can be a positive globalization effort since students can observe different perspectives from the international contexts in this imported textbook apart from their common everyday lives. It relies heavily on the initiatives and incisive guidance of the teachers to make the lesson more efficient. In addition, some other issues on the use of textbooks are the high cost, teachers' dilemma, and it challenges the credibility of local textbook writers (Aziz et al., 2018). The textbook also creates confusion for both students and teachers because of the usage of a single textbook. For example, Year 1 and Year 2 are sharing a similar textbook in English language classroom whereby Year 1 learners begin to utilise the book starting from Unit 0 until Unit 4. Next, Year 2 learners will continue to use the book, starting from Unit 5 until Unit 9. This greater perplexity, especially to Year 2 learners who are required to commence the lesson from the middle part of the book, thereby forcing them to omit many important topics. Nevertheless, despite these problems, the MoE decided to use the imported textbook in the curriculum continuously.

The CEFR promoted students-centredness with the adoption of the action-oriented approach in the teaching and learning method. Nevertheless, it is worth to note that the autonomy promoted in the West might be challenging to be adapted to the Malaysian context (Afip et al., 2019). Students in Malaysia are conventionally nurtured to rely upon teachers in acquiring information and knowledge, which in reality creates an edge to their capability to work on their own. The implementation of a learner-centred approach might expose students to various opportunities to expand their language skills, but they should have developed adequate awareness to make the initiatives feasible. Despite the challenges Malaysian students encounter, it is believed that the approach offers enormous potential to develop learners' language learning skills over time.

Another point worth reflecting on is, teachers should receive sufficient training to get them to familiarise with the CEFR content, teaching methodology, and features as well as to be informed of the intended national agenda. Since teachers in the previous curriculum have frequently reported insufficient training as one of the primary reasons why educational reform is ineffective, it is presumed that the stakeholders have appropriately addressed the shortage of teacher training on the current transformation. In this scenario, the MoE Malaysia have provided CEFR familiarisation training to English teachers and made it compulsory for them to attend. They appointed CEFR Master Trainers and Observers to conduct a cascade workshop all over the country. Nevertheless, the cascade training model used during the dissemination process has proven to be problematic and needs urgent attention. Some of the problems are student-centred and lecture-style training, watering down of information as it passed through the layers, and

trainers are not well trained (Aziz et al., 2018). In order to achieve an effective educational transformation, educational authorities should overcome the perceived barriers, and teachers should be given continuous support to improve the quality of English language teaching and learning in Malaysia.

8. The Top-Down Approach of Malaysia Education System

In Malaysia, the decisions made on education policies such as language and the nation are 'top-down' since they are "policies that come from people of power and authority to make decisions for a certain group, without consulting the end-users of the language" (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997, p.196). The policies are managed and controlled at the top level, which is under the responsibility of the Federal Government, the Ministry of Education (MoE). The MoE administered all issues and has the power to control every decision of education policy throughout the country such as structuring policy guidelines, transitioning policy into plans and activities, handling policy enactments and preparing the curricula and assessments for all schools (Ministry of Education, 2004). MoE received help from the bottom level, such as the State Education Department and the District Education Office before reaching the school level. This 'top-down' approach in the Malaysian education system was established with every decision which is made by policymakers. As such, it is managed at four distinct levels, federal, state, district and schools. Figure 2 below illustrates the Malaysian education administrative structure.

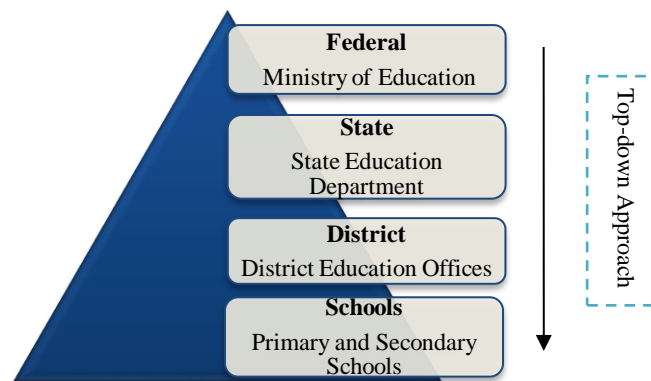


Figure 2: Structure of the education management system in Malaysia

In addition, the process of educational reform has also undergone this hierarchical structure for changes to occur. However, the 'top-down', centralised approach has become one of the factors that hinder effective education reform in Malaysia. It promotes a complexity of educational policy reform implementation, and there is considerable potential for an 'implementation gap' (Becher, 1989, p.54) between policy planning and practice at school and classroom level. This has resulted in the Malaysian education system to witness a further series of significant changes to improve the quality of education of the nation.

9. Conclusion

This paper has examined the issues on the implementation of English language curriculum in Malaysia. While the reform discussed in this review shows that it was carefully structured and planned at the top level, nevertheless, the enactment of the intended curriculum is problematic. Overall, the Malaysian education system has gone through several constant reforms that started with the decision of language policy roles since the colonial era in this country. There was a dispute on the equitable position of the Malay and English language which was influenced by the presence of various ethnicities who tried to preserve their language resulting to their reluctance in affirming the status of the languages.

Malaysia has undergone several English language education reforms which have been introduced ideally by the government starting with ICPS in 1982, SBLEC in 2011 and the recent CEFR-aligned curriculum, the MEB 2013-2025 and the English Language Education Reform Roadmap 2015-2025,

launched in 2013 and 2015. There are some implications drawn from the review of the curriculums, which are pertinent to the effectiveness of curriculum initiatives. Firstly, as a frontline in any education reform, there is a need for teachers to participate in the reform decision. Although the substance of education reform is well-planned, comprehensive and structured, it will not achieve what was intended if teachers face multiple challenges in enacting the curriculum. Teachers' feedback is essential to make the necessary amendments to improvise the curriculum. However, their voices were ignored throughout the reform process, which resembles the top-down approach in the education system in Malaysia. Secondly, teachers also need strong support and guidance for them to manage with the reforms. For instance, in this review, teachers claimed to have received inadequate training throughout all the curriculum effort (ICPS, SBLEC and CEFR), which hinders the effectiveness in curriculum execution at the classroom level. Unfortunately, this issue has frequently been reported until these days. It is hoped that educational stakeholders will take constructive and systematic steps to resolve the issue towards high-quality teaching and learning.

However, with the incorporation of the CEFR and English Language Education Roadmap, English language teaching and learning in Malaysia will be systematically guided. In addition, the existing curriculum prepared well-trained English language teachers, international benchmark syllabus and teaching materials, standardised assessment and set of apparent language competency outcomes at all education levels which will ultimately benefit every educational stakeholder in the country. With a greater emphasis on uplifting language competencies to international standards, there is potential that it will raise English language proficiency among students and teachers, increase the quality of education, knowledge economy and improve the betterment of society. Situated within the enhanced environment, despite all the challenges, Malaysians will feel encouraged to learn English language as it becomes purposeful and relevant to them. Finally, a survey can be done among teachers, learners and the community to identify the use of CEFR in language education. The results of the survey may help to inform policymakers, curriculum designers, CEFR-related project developers and teachers about the actual use of the framework.

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