

## Bilingualism in Malaysia: Language Education Policy and Local Needs

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### ABSTRACT

On 11 September 2012, the Prime Minister unveiled the National Education Blueprint that laid the foundation for transforming the Malaysian education system. Among the issues addressed was the strengthening of the teaching and learning of the English language alongside the reinforcement of the learning of the national language. Attention was given to ensuring students' English language proficiency through an emphasis on bilingualism (Bahasa Malaysia and English), which is one of the six key "attributes" addressed in the blueprint. The blueprint currently invites comments and feedback from the public in order for it to be sensitive to local needs. In this context, the concept of bilingualism must be clearly established and explained as the degree of bilingual proficiency one achieves often depends on the wider societal attitudes towards the languages concerned. This paper aims to explore the context of bilingualism in Malaysia and to describe responses from an important segment of society, the teachers who contribute to achieving bilingualism among students who ultimately will constitute the workforce of the nation. As such, the policy and current practices have significant implications for any agenda to be successfully implemented in order to contribute meaningfully to local and international economies. The study traces the development of bilingualism and bilingual education in Malaysia. It also provides information on responses of language teachers who are seen to be policy implementers and stakeholders who can provide salient information on the effects related to language education policy.

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## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of bilingualism is often founded on the language needs of a society. To understand language needs, one often would have to understand the notion of bilingualism. A narrow definition of a bilingual is that he or she is able to grasp and perfectly understand two languages. In other words, a bilingual needs to have “native-like control of two or more languages” (Bloomfield, 1933, p.55). On the other hand, a wider definition of a bilingual is one who uses two or more languages to communicate (Mackey, 1962). What then are the criteria that define a bilingual?

It would appear that the term ‘bilingual’ is applied by people in different ways. For some, it means an equal ability to communicate in two languages. For others, it simply means the ability to communicate in two languages, but with greater skills in one language. In fact, it is more common for bilinguals, even those who have been bilingual since birth, to be somewhat ‘dominant’ in the use of one language.

In the study of bilingualism, there are various angles that can be positioned. Among them are, what does it take to be bilingual? What do you have to understand about another language to be considered bilingual? What are the problems faced in the bilingual education system in a particular country? How do these problems affect students who are not fluent in either of the languages learnt? Underlying the issues raised is an understanding of language competence in the two languages. This will translate into an investigation into

the magnitude of bilingualism. Another possible focus could be on the context of bilingual language acquisition, whereby investigation on age of acquisition (related to age at which the languages are acquired and its consequence on bilingualism) would also give insight into the state of bilingualism. Other studies on bilingualism have concentrated on domain of language use (circumstances in which languages are used) and finally, social orientation (which refers to environment), which offers another dimension for investigation.

In connection with the understanding of bilingualism, bilingual education is another important aspect. Bilingual education refers to an educational programme in which both a native language and a second language are taught as subjects and both could be used as media of instruction for the academic programme. In general, a bilingual approach in education refers to the use of two distinct languages for teaching. Bilingual programmes that are well designed and well received by the people at all levels of society will ensure that students have a better chance of success. One of the foremost reasons for advocating bilingual education is to instil a sense of integration and equality among members of a society, apart from viewing bilingual education as a step towards gaining the means to communicate socially and effectively. When students gain fluency in the language that is used in mainstream society, it enables them to integrate and feel connected to their peers and society. Other influencing factors in achieving bilingual competence

are attitude and motivation and levels of language proficiency (Dornyei & Clement, 2001; Gardner, 2001; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Al Mamum *et al.*, 2012).

Both attitude and motivation are often intertwined. Attitude can be influenced by instrumental and integrative motivation. Having instrumental motivation could lead to a person's favouring the use of a particular language that is perceived to have a high status and can bring about economic advantage. On the other hand, having integrative motivation refers to a perceived desire and need of a person to gain membership into a community. Attitude is a subjective matter. Perceptions that denote attitude are brought about by a complexity of experiences. Judgments are made about entities according to beliefs and values. For example, a language can be judged as superior or inferior. However, according to Chomsky, "There is no such thing as inferior languages. No one language is more superior or inferior than the other" (cited in Parilah & Fauziah, 2007). As such, an attitude that professes one language to be superior to another language should not be adopted as a determinant of language education policy.

## THE STUDY

This study primarily focused on the development of bilingualism in Malaysia and its related language education policies. In connection with this, the study also ventured into perceptions of teachers on bilingualism, which provided baseline data on the effects of policy implementation.

The approach to gathering the data was two pronged. The first part involved document analysis and review of related literature. The second part of the study involved a questionnaire survey. Respondents were language teachers at Malaysian secondary schools who were randomly selected.

### *The History and Development of Language Learning in Malaysian Schools*

In Malaysia, the *madrasahs* and other Islamic schools were the earliest forms of schooling, and they may be traced back to pre-independence days (prior to 1957). Secular schools were introduced under British colonial rule at the initiative of the British government. It was also during the time of British colonial rule that large numbers of immigrants from China and India arrived in Malaya. These migrants eventually established vernacular schools for their respective communities. The British did not establish a single uniform system of education during its rule. Emphasis was on the promotion of English medium schools, especially through the work of English missionaries. The Chinese schools were set up as independent enterprises supported by Chinese guilds and communities, while the Tamil schools were largely established to serve the children of Indian migrant workers in the rubber estates. Malay schools, on the other hand, were instituted by the British government to cater for the Malay community's needs.

Prior to independence, the Malay language was already a vital language, as well as the language of general daily commerce,

but the language of the government was English. Nevertheless, public notices and important documents were rendered in four main ethnic languages: Malay, English, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil. This linguistic landscape set the stage for further development of bilingualism/multilingualism and the learning of languages in schools.

An impetus to Malaysian language policy development and change was the gaining of independence in 1957. This witnessed the formalisation of the Malay language as the sole national language of the country provided in Article 152 of the Malayan Constitution. However, the policy allowed the use of English for official purposes. The aim of the National Language Policy was to integrate a nation through one common language, which would enable easy communication and understanding.

Meanwhile, English-medium schools continued to thrive, and, in fact, studying in such schools had become an icon of prestige. These schools catered mainly for children of the Malay elite, Chinese businessmen and Indian merchants. The English school was seen not only as a passport to social mobility, but also as providing countless opportunities to those seeking entry into various professions, especially government jobs (Asmah, 1982).

In 1967, a decade after independence, the Malay language was given further prominence with the official declaration of using the language as the medium of instruction in schools. The 1970s saw a

gradual change of English-medium primary and secondary national-type schools into Malay-medium national schools. The change was completed by the end of 1982.

### *Bilingualism in Malaysia*

Traditionally, the Malay language has always had a symbolic function in the country. It is the mother tongue of the Malays, who are the majority race in Malaysia. They have an emotional attachment to the language because it is intrinsic to their culture and identity. As Malaysians, the other races embraced the Malay language, Bahasa Malaysia (BM), when it became the policy to use BM as the national language and the phrase *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* (Language is the Soul of the Nation) became the motto of a united nation.

The English language, on the other hand, became the language of trade, commerce and communication. It is also the language of politics, science and technology. The English language was needed to establish and maintain diplomatic relations with other countries, to further education, build the country's economy and to excel in science and achieve progress. The English language is recognised as the global lingua franca and is the most commonly used language among foreign language speakers. Throughout the world, when people with different languages come together, they commonly use English to communicate. Hence, learning the English language also became a necessity in Malaysia because knowing the language meant opening the

door to a myriad of opportunities, job prospects and employability, both within and outside of the country.

In the 1970s, Malaysia had one of the best standards of education in the region, and this was attributed to the English language. The country had very competent teachers who were equally proficient in both the English language and Malay. Many teachers were in fact “non-specialised” as they often had to teach other subjects in English as well.

However, the face of education has since changed. In fact, Malaysia today stands at a cross-roads; the country has progressed by leaps and bounds, but bilingual literacy seems not to have taken off as successfully as planned. In fact, according to some quarters, we have regressed in our efforts to learn English. In particular, school children in rural areas have minimal contact with the English language throughout their 11 years of schooling, apart from their English class lessons.

The current situation clearly illustrates a state of multiple challenges and complexities that surrounds language literacy, especially that of learning English. As a result, many studies were initiated to address problems faced by our learners in learning English. These studies highlight two important issues regarding English language learning in Malaysia. The first is that Bahasa Malaysia has a strong influence over the learning of English and could have contributed to the deterioration of English. Learners of English often tend to be influenced by their mother tongue or first language when writing or

speaking in English. Often, they use direct translation and dictionaries to comprehend English texts (Ambigapathy, 2002; Nambiar, 2007).

The second issue is the strong emphasis on teaching English as a school subject only. Students are then tested on the skills and rules in their school and national examinations (Razianna, 2005) without much relevance for real communicative use. The learning of the English language is, thus, mechanised, implying that there are only ‘fixed’ ways of using the language, isolating it to basic communicative use. The way the English language is presented (as a neutral set of language systems) to the students, influences them to view its learning specifically for classroom purposes only. Hence, it can be argued that English language literacy will continually be regarded as an alien language to the learners’ communicative discourse.

In addition, because of its strong orientation towards national-based assessments, our education system has generally produced students who are unable to operate autonomously (Koo, 2008) ‘whereby learners assume the part of empty vessels’ (Naginder, 2006) with the teacher as the main source of input. This approach discourages and inhibits independent language learning. The strong tendency to depend on teachers for the students’ own learning is further worsened by the prevalent emphasis on examinations throughout their school experience (Ambigapathy, 2002). The high importance placed on scoring good grades in the examination further establishes

the need to memorise and regurgitate even in the discourse of assessment in higher learning institutions (Koo, 2008; Lee King Siong *et al.*, 2010).

Studies have also revealed the need to reassess the methodology used to teach English literacy. One common suggestion that emerges from these studies is to incorporate out-of-classroom practices into the learning, as well as deliberation on social and cultural influences on English literacy learning (Razianna, 2005; Naginder, 2006; Maros *et al.*, 2007; Nor Hashimah *et al.*, 2008; ). In this context, Noorizah (2006) and Rosniah (2006) also called for an understanding of students' reading and learning styles in order to promote better language learning among the students.

Maros, Tan and Khazriyati (2007) explored the interference effect of Bahasa Malaysia as an important inhibiting factor on the acquisition of English literacy among Form One students (13 year olds). Using error analyses and contrastive analysis, the study examined errors made by 120 Form One students from six rural Malaysian schools in the states of Pahang, Selangor and Melaka. Based on the errors found in the students' essays, the study concluded that the learners had difficulty in using correct English grammar in their writing. The three most frequent errors were wrong use of articles, subject-verb agreement and the copula 'be.' The study claimed that, although not all errors were due to mother tongue interference, a large number of errors identified suggested interference from Malay grammar. In a related work, Nor Hashimah

*et al.* (2008) examined the morphological and syntactic differences between the Malay language and English, and concluded that linguistic differences proved to be one of the major factors influencing students' inability to successfully acquire English literacy. In yet another study conducted on 315 Form Two students, it was found that the most obvious weakness of the students' language ability was in the area of grammar, especially morphology and syntax. The study showed that students had problems with suffixes and plural inflections as these linguistic variables do not exist in the Malay language. The study also confirmed that differences in syntactic structures between the Malay and English languages contribute to the wrong use of the copula 'be,' subject-verb-agreement and relative pronouns. Further, the study maintained that, apart from the linguistic obstacles, social factors, such as unenthusiastic attitudes, lack of interest towards learning the language and an environment that does not encourage learners to use the language, have exacerbated the problem of acquiring the English language.

In their study and analysis of 72 written essays in English by Form Four students in one semi-urban Malaysian secondary school, Saadiyah and Kaladevi (2009) found that, generally, students had problems applying correct grammatical rules in their writing. This finding was consistent with two previous studies that identified common grammatical errors made by students i.e. subject-verb agreement and wrong use of singular and plural forms. In

addition to the wrong application of verb tense, inappropriate choice of words and prepositions were also common among the participants. The findings of this study implied that, despite having gone through 10 years of learning English, these students had yet to master basic grammatical structures.

These studies have been done in an attempt to find and identify the possible causes for the low English literacy levels among Malaysian learners, and also to recommend some directions for improving the learning of English, and, thus, bilingual ability. While the country continues to be plagued by such problems, limited English proficiency cannot be generalised to all as there are still some Malaysians who are proficient in the English language. However, it is conceded that the overall picture is discouraging and is indicative of the need to change the ways in which English language literacy is taught and learnt by Malaysian learners. Research has established that when learning a second language or a foreign language, it is of utmost importance that learners receive maximum support in terms of providing a supportive and conducive learning environment, as well as an adequate, meaningful language experience. Otherwise, as Koo (2008) asserted, “literacy practices … will continue to produce learners who look at knowledge as learning of a fixed body of information which can be regurgitated and applied without much comment and critique” (p.57).

While there is an official policy, what determines language choice and use in a multilingual society, such as that of Malaysia,

is also left to social forces at work. Issues of language choice and use are prevalent and constantly debated. This is not surprising as language use is coupled with sentimental attachments, particularly when the language is inextricably linked to nationalism and personal identity. These issues are evident in works by Chan and Ain (2013), Gill (2003), Nik Safiah (1987) and Ozog (1992). Ozog (1992) viewed the role of English in the Malaysian education policy and its relationship with the National Language as a problem. He discussed the relationship as a dilemma for the country’s policy planners. Nik Safiah (1987) highlighted that “Malay faces stiff competition from English. While the policy is to use the national language in all official instances, in many important domains of language, English is still the preferred language” (p.5). Gill (2003) strongly asserted that many scientific and technological terms were non-existent in the Malay language. As such, this poses a dilemma whereby teachers, especially at the tertiary level, often had to resort to the use of textbooks written in English. Chan and Ain (2013) observed that the influence of socio-cultural factors on language choice is most clearly illustrated in the widespread use of English for legal matters in Malaysia. These discussions reinforce the strong status of English. The value attached to the English language has obvious repercussions on the defining of bilingualism in the Malaysian linguistic scenario.

Thus, it could be concluded that there exists a state of “unbalanced” development in bilingual efficiency. Bahasa Malaysia is

the official language and is firmly anchored as the national language, but English continues to be taught as a subject, though it is widely spoken and used, especially in business. With regard to the Chinese medium and the Tamil medium primary schools, the government promises to maintain the status quo. There is also a strong local movement to maintain the languages and their use in national-type schools. The existence of these schools is, however, seen by some as a barrier to national unity, especially from the point of view of using the national language in all education domains.

#### *Language Education Policy in Malaysia*

The national education system is a catalyst for bilingualism (Asmah, 1982); although bilingual education itself is not openly advocated in Malaysia, nonetheless, it is often implicitly sanctioned. The rationale for bilingual education can be traced to the Malaysian Constitution, which states that Bahasa Malaysia is the national and official language and that no one is to be prevented from speaking and teaching other languages. Through the historical development of education and its policies in Malaysia, the languages that have gained significance are Bahasa Malaysia (as the national language), English (as an international language), and the vernacular languages (Mandarin Chinese and Tamil), which largely serve the needs of the local communities.

In the context of current practice, the Malaysian public school system is organised into national and national-type schools at the primary level, while, at the secondary

level, all students are placed in only national schools. In national schools, Bahasa Malaysia is the medium of instruction and English is taught as a subject. This includes the learning of Mandarin Chinese and Tamil as additional subjects if there is a demand for them. In national-type schools, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil are used as media of instruction.

In matters of promoting bilingual efficiency, language policies in Malaysia have been tempered by a number of significant changes. Among them was the introduction of the Malaysian English University Language Test (MUET) in 1999, which requires all pre-tertiary students who wish to enter Malaysian public universities to sit the test. This policy indicates a recognition of bilingual efficiency at the tertiary level and beyond. Four years later, in 2003, a policy of using English to teach mathematics and science was introduced (Chan & Tan, 2006). This policy expressed a concerted effort to develop bilingual education in schools. However, the policy was short lived, and, in 2009, the medium of instruction was reverted to that of Bahasa Malaysia. In its place, currently, another initiative has been instituted which reinforces the status and role of Bahasa Malaysia as the national and official language with a parallel emphasis on the acquisition of competence in the English language. This gives renewed emphasis and recognition to the importance of both languages in nation building. In the next section, language education policy in relation to the latest education blueprint, which has implications on bilingual development, is discussed.

*Language Education Policy and the Malaysian National Education Blueprint (2013-2025)*

In view of current educational developments and challenges, the Malaysian Ministry of Education, in October 2011, launched a comprehensive review of the education system in Malaysia in order to develop a new National Education Blueprint (NEB). This new blueprint was made in the context of impacting international standards and the government's aspirations towards providing an education system of the highest standards, so as to better prepare its generation of school-going children for the needs of the 21st century. A lot of hard work was invested into developing the NEB via a multitude of analyses, surveys, interviews and research conducted with the support of national and international education experts, officials, principals, teachers, and parents across Malaysia. It was drafted to ensure that major improvements are made to the current national education system. The final NEB report was unveiled by the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, on September 11, 2012.

The NEB outlines various strategies to provide a comprehensive plan for a rapid and sustainable transformation of the education system from 2013 through 2025. The NEB focuses on six student attributes: knowledge, thinking skills, leadership, bilingual efficiency, ethics and national identity. To achieve the desired student outcomes, the NEB outlines educational reforms through 11 'shifts' listed below:

1. Provide equal access to quality education of international standards;
2. Ensure every child is proficient in English and Bahasa Malaysia;
3. Develop values-driven Malaysians (this would be achieved by expanding the Student Integration Plan for Unity programme for students);
4. Transform teaching into a profession of choice (only the top 30% of graduates will be recruited for teaching. The lure would be a new career package and reduced administrative duties.);
5. Ensure high performing school leaders in every school;
6. Empower JPNs, PPDs and schools to customise solutions based on need (state/District education departments and schools can tailor their approach for different schools);
7. Leverage ICT to scale up quality learning across Malaysia (Ministry of Education to expand 1Bestari (wifi) to all schools);
8. Transform Ministry of Education capabilities and capacity to streamline function;
9. Partner with parents, community and private sector at scale (parents will be able to support their child's learning and monitor their progress online through a School Examination Analysis System – 500 trust schools to be set up.);
10. Maximise student outcomes for every ringgit (ensure outcome-based

- budgeting with government spending on education); and
11. Increase transparency for direct public accountability (the blueprint and progress of its goals will be made public).

Through this vision, the NEB is meant to achieve the five outcomes of access, quality, equity, unity and efficiency, which, it is hoped, will set the stage for transforming the Malaysian education system. One of its main objectives will be to ensure that every child will be proficient in both Bahasa Malaysia and English, the former being the national language and language of unity, and the other, the international language of communication. Students will also be encouraged to learn an additional language.

Thus the blueprint has laid the foundation for greater efforts in the acquisition of two or more languages. To oversee the efforts pertaining to the development of the English language, the Ministry of Education has also instituted an English Language Standards and Quality Control Council.

#### *Teaching as a Profession of Choice*

With regards to transforming teaching into a profession of choice (Shift 4), international research has shown that, in education, teacher quality is a very significant factor in determining student learning outcomes. Equally significant is a teacher whose language proficiency matches international standards, which in the Malaysian context refers to the use and teaching of the English language. As one of the measures

highlighted under Shift 4, all 70,000 English teachers, nationwide, will be required to pass the Cambridge Placement Test (CPT) within a stipulated time. Teachers who do not meet this standard will receive intensive ‘upskilling’. Training and re-training would be an ongoing process.

One of the initiatives of the NEB is to recruit teachers who graduate in the top 30%. A stringent selection process must be carried out to hire the right people. To further ensure proper recruitment, graduate teachers will be offered attractive career packages, career development and progression and other perks. In addition, schools and the Ministry of Education will work in tandem to ensure that the school curriculum is interesting and challenging: one that will strike the right balance between academic and non-academic development and bring out the best in both students and teachers, alike. A poor syllabus and poor teaching methods will definitely lead to deterioration of our standards of education, which surely includes the learning of languages.

As teachers play a significant role in education planning, their perceptions provide useful insight into the issue of bilingualism, which is a thrust in the NEB. Thus to complement the review on the state of bilingualism in Malaysia, data were collected from teachers to obtain their views.

#### **DATA ON BILINGUALISM FROM TEACHERS**

Teachers as policy implementers, are a group of professionals who definitely can

provide important perspectives on current educational issues. To complement the discussion on the bilingual initiative, data were collected from 39 Malaysian secondary school teachers. Three male and 36 female teachers participated in this study, the majority of whom (87%) were Malay.

As presented in Table 1, the internal reliability (Cronbach- $\alpha$ ) for the survey questionnaire was .996, which indicates very high reliability.

TABLE 1  
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
.996	77

The respondents were between the ages of 20 and 59 years. It was found that 38.5% of the teachers taught Bahasa Malaysia, whereas 61.5% reported teaching English as a subject. The descriptive statistics obtained showed that the majority of the teachers had more than 10 years of teaching experience.

In terms of language proficiency, 43.6% of the teachers reported themselves as being very proficient in Bahasa Malaysia, while in sharp contrast, only one teacher rated him/herself as very proficient in English. In the proficient category, 51.3% considered

themselves to be proficient in Bahasa Malaysia, and an almost equal percentage (48%) of teachers considered themselves proficient in English. Only 5.1% of them said they were fairly proficient in English. Interestingly, half of the teachers stated that they had studied other languages that they really enjoyed learning. However, most of them were not sure whether it was difficult to learn another language.

As seen in Table 2, respondents were asked to assess their perceptions of bilingual education. The participants were asked their perceptions of the usefulness of bilingual education. Their responses ranged from low to low usefulness. More than half of the respondents (53.8%) had a very positive perception of the role of bilingual education. However, a sizeable number of respondents (41%) were found to have only a moderate perception. They appeared not to believe strongly in a policy of bilingual education. However, only 5.1% of the teachers seemed to think that bilingual education was not useful. It can be concluded that adoption of bilingual education is a debatable issue. A strong force to promote bilingual education as being useful appears not to be evident.

Table 3 shows teachers' perceptions of the levels of bilingualism among students.

TABLE 2  
Perceptions Towards Bilingual Education

	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Low	2	5.1	5.1
Moderate	16	41.0	46.2
High	21	53.8	100.0
Total	39	100.0	

Many of the respondents (51.3%) believed that students fall within a moderate level of bilingualism. However, 35.9% of the respondents felt that students had a high level of bilingualism. Only a small number (12.8%) felt that students had a low level of bilingualism. In the Malaysian situation, bilingualism can be perceived as being quite firmly grounded. This seems to suggest that the colonial language legacy has affected the development of bilingualism. Currently, students could be said to enjoy a reasonable competence in the use or mastery of two or more languages. However, the policy of promoting the learning of more than one language has much ground to cover if a high level of bilingualism is to be attained for most students.

Table 4 illustrates teacher's attitudes towards bilingual students. In this question, 43.6% of the respondents indicated that the factor of knowing more than one language among students does not influence their

attitude towards the students. Only 15.4% of the respondents reported that they had a positive attitude towards bilingual students. A rather high proportion (41%) of the teachers expressed that knowing and using more than one language was of no consequence to them. In other words, bilingualism is not of much significance among teachers. This seemed to translate into the idea that teachers do not perceive being bilingual to be an advantage. If it is not seen to be an advantage, then it could also mean that teachers do not have a very firm view of the learning and use of more than one language and the emphasis on the learning of languages. They could be seen as not being strong models of a bilingual user as their attitudes did not show strong enthusiasm for bilingual ability, and, in turn, this could have an effect on instrumental or integrative motivation among students in wanting to learn languages.

TABLE 3  
Perceptions of the Level of Bilingualism Among Students

	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Low	5	12.8	12.8
Moderate	20	51.3	64.1
High	14	35.9	100.0
Total	39	100.0	

TABLE 4  
Teachers' Attitudes Towards Bilingual Students

Teachers' attitudes towards bilingual students	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Low	16	41.0	41.0
Moderate	17	43.6	84.6
High	6	15.4	100.0
Total	39	100.0	

Table 5 shows the overall teacher perception of students' abilities in English and Bahasa Malaysia. The mean indicator of 2.65 shows that teachers believed that students are able to use English to some extent. As expected, the mean score of 3.23 for Bahasa Malaysia ability was higher as Bahasa Malaysia is the medium of instruction in schools. This result clearly shows the positive effect of the use of the national language for all levels of the education system as forwarded as a central objective in the national education policy. However, the mean of 3.23 (out of a maximum score of 4) could be increased. This would mean that there is a definite motivator for policy makers to want to strengthen the role and status of Bahasa Malaysia. The mean figure of 2.65 (out of a maximum score of 4) for English indicates that student bilingualism does not support the equal competence definition for bilingualism. Instead, it supports the current state of English as a

second language subject that is given less emphasis. This unequal state of bilingual competence attests to the need to further promote the use of English together with the strengthening of the national language. Standard deviation figures for the responses of both languages were rather similar, which suggests the stability of responses of the teachers surveyed.

Tables 6 and 7 present more support for the perceptions of bilingual competence, according to low, moderate and high competence levels for each language. The figures indicate that the bulk of the students (48.7%) were at the moderate level for English ability. This was followed by 33.3% of the students who fell into the high level. In this survey, it would appear that there were a considerable number of students who seemed to be considered proficient in the use of the English language. As for Bahasa Malaysia, the high level was only 66.7%. This means that teachers have a high

TABLE 5  
Overall Perceptions About Students' Ability in English and Bahasa Malaysia

N		Mean	Std. Deviation
39	English	2.65	.72364
39	Bahasa Malaysia	3.23	.76114

TABLE 6  
Perceptions About Students' Ability in English

	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Low	7	17.9	17.9
Moderate	19	48.7	66.7
High	13	33.3	100.0
Total	39	100.0	

expectation of Bahasa Malaysia competence. About one third of the respondents (33.3%) were considered to be only moderately competent.

### **THE FUTURE OF BILINGUALISM IN MALAYSIA**

Bilingualism in Malaysia is undoubtedly well established. From the years of language development, Malaysia has formulated and revised its language education policies. Policy matters hold tremendous significance for the nation as they help to build or retard national development. Currently, criticism is abundant about an education system that has not met societal expectations. The general public, including parents, are beginning to play a proactive role in children's education. They have a reactionary voice to policies and the state of teaching and learning.

An instance of the involved public is seen in the formation of independent groups of concerned educators and citizens such as Parents Action Group for Education (PAGE), which engages in dialogue and debate on current issues of education, including language education policies. Currently, issues debated have centred on the importance of English and Bahasa Malaysia, emphasising that English language learning

requires stronger impetus and action in order to enable Malaysians to gain a competitive edge globally. In addition, there are special interest groups that advocate reverting to teaching mathematics and science in English in school. More radically, it has been reported in the media that certain quarters have recommended that the government should re-establish English medium schools as a measure to improve English language competence. These strong reactions have caused the government to seriously address the issues raised and to institute new moves to address the concerns. The NEB is clearly a new initiative launched by the Government to pave the way towards a better educated Malaysia grounded on learning at least two languages. Another new initiative announced by the Minister of Education is to mandate a pass in the English language in the 2016 form five school leaving certificate (The Star, 15 January 2015). However, aspirations to have targeted proficiency in a language require long term and sustainable planning. Ample exposure and practice are fundamental in successful language acquisition. In addition, one must also have a passion (motivation) for learning the language.

**TABLE 7**  
Perceptions About Students' Ability in Bahasa Malaysia

	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Moderate	13	33.3	33.3
High	26	66.7	100.0
Total	39	100.0	

Data suggest that being a bilingual is seen by teachers not as not being a significant factor in forging a positive attitude towards students. If this is the perception of teachers, then encouragement for bilingualism from teachers may seem not to be strongly forthcoming. Given the intertwining between learning and teaching, one would expect teachers to have a positive attitude towards the development of bilingualism. However, much more needs to be said about having motivation from teachers.

There seems to be a need for much reorientation in government efforts on providing bilingual opportunities and development. A factor that continues to plague language planners is the baffling issue of why Malaysian bilingual students who have learnt English for 11 years are still falling short of English language competence, especially at levels deemed to be adequate for employability. The panacea for this situation appears illusive. It could be said that the Malaysian education system has yet to find a solution for this – there has not yet been implemented a sound policy to establish bilingualism that will give added value to internationalism. However, the government cannot be faulted for lack of trying as it has set into motion new objectives and goals that could be considered as the way forward in getting Malaysians to be more committed bilingual operatives.

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