

Malaysia's English-Medium Instruction Policy through Spolsky's Language Policy Framework: A Critical Review

Hang Nguyen Thi Diêu

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Vietnam

ABSTRACT: English-medium instruction (EMI) has been promoted in multilingual education systems as a means of improving English proficiency, expanding access to scientific knowledge, and strengthening international competitiveness. In Malaysia, the Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English (PPSMI) policy represented a major attempt to pursue these objectives while generating tensions concerning national identity, classroom feasibility, and educational equity. This critical narrative review examines the implementation of PPSMI and the relationship between formal policy intentions and their enactment in educational settings. Relevant literature on Malaysian EMI and language-in-education policy was reviewed and analysed through a deductive-inductive thematic approach. Spolsky's language policy framework guided the analysis of three interconnected dimensions: language practices, beliefs and ideologies, and language management, while policy-practice tensions, educational equity, and teacher agency were examined as cross-cutting themes. The review identifies recurring misalignment between English-oriented policy expectations and classroom language practices, competing pragmatic and nationalist orientations toward English and Bahasa Malaysia, uneven institutional and teacher capacity, and differences in learners' access to EMI. Teachers' bilingual adaptations further illustrate how formal language requirements were mediated in response to classroom conditions. The review concludes that sustainable EMI policy depends not simply on selecting English as a medium of instruction, but on aligning policy objectives with institutional readiness, stakeholder beliefs, multilingual classroom practices, and educational equity.

KEYWORDS: English-medium instruction, language policy, PPSMI, Malaysia, teacher agency, multilingual education

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multilingual and multicultural Southeast Asian country in which language policy has long been closely connected to nation-building, education, and economic development. Bahasa Malaysia is the national and official language, while English continues to have an important role in higher education, business, administration, and international communication. This linguistic configuration reflects Malaysia's colonial history and subsequent efforts to establish Bahasa Malaysia as a symbol of national unity after independence. At the same time, English has retained considerable instrumental value as a language of global communication and socioeconomic development. Consequently, educational language policy in Malaysia has repeatedly had to negotiate the tension between linguistic nationalism and pragmatic demands for English (Gill, 2014; Rahman & Singh, 2021).

This tension became particularly visible with the introduction of the Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English policy, commonly known by its Malay acronym PPSMI (Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris), in 2003. PPSMI represented a major shift from the established Bahasa Malaysia-centred educational model by requiring Science and Mathematics to be taught through English. The policy was intended to strengthen students' English proficiency and scientific literacy and to improve their access to international scientific and technological knowledge (Tan & Lan, 2011; Gill, 2005). It also reflected a broader national aspiration to enhance Malaysia's competitiveness in an increasingly English-dominant global knowledge economy (Gill, 2005; Rahman & Singh, 2021).

PPSMI was implemented nationally through the Ministry of Education and was accompanied by English-language teaching materials, teacher training, curriculum adjustments, and technological support. However, its implementation revealed substantial tensions between formal policy expectations and local educational conditions. Students with limited English proficiency often experienced difficulty learning disciplinary content through English, while some teachers lacked the linguistic confidence or pedagogical preparation required for English-medium teaching. In response, bilingual classroom practices, including alternation

between English and Bahasa Malaysia, became common strategies for maintaining student comprehension (Gill, 2012; Gill, 2014). These practices indicate that the enactment of a medium-of-instruction policy cannot be understood solely through official policy statements, because teachers and schools interpret and adapt policy in relation to classroom needs and institutional conditions.

The policy also generated ideological and political contestation. While English was promoted through a pragmatic discourse of modernization, scientific advancement, and global competitiveness, Bahasa Malaysia remained strongly associated with postcolonial identity and national unity. Malay nationalist groups expressed concern that PPSMI could weaken the status of the national language, while Chinese and Tamil educational organizations also raised concerns related to mother-tongue education and cultural continuity (Gill, 2005; Gill, 2014). Stakeholder responses were therefore shaped not only by judgments about the pedagogical effectiveness of English-medium instruction (EMI), but also by competing beliefs about the social, cultural, and economic value of different languages.

Implementation was further complicated by differences in teacher preparedness, institutional resources, and local linguistic environments. The literature reviewed in this paper describes uneven enactment across educational settings and differences in the linguistic and institutional conditions available for implementation (Gill, 2005; Gill, 2014). Broader Asian language-policy research similarly emphasizes that teacher agency is conditioned by contextual and institutional circumstances (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016). These differences raise broader questions about educational equity and about the capacity of a centrally formulated language policy to operate consistently across heterogeneous contexts. Subsequent policy adjustments included the Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language (MBMMBI) policy, which replaced PPSMI, and the later Dual Language Programme (DLP), under which eligible schools may use English for the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017, 2024).

Existing discussions of PPSMI therefore point to interconnected issues of classroom language use, stakeholder beliefs, policy management, teacher mediation, and educational inequality. Rather than treating these issues as separate implementation problems, the present review brings them together through Spolsky's (2004, 2009) language policy framework, which conceptualizes language policy through the interaction of language practices, beliefs and ideologies, and language management. Linguistic nationalism and linguistic pragmatism are used as analytical concepts within the ideological dimension, while macro-, meso-, and micro-level perspectives are used to examine how national policy is interpreted through institutions and classroom practice.

Accordingly, this critical review addresses three questions: (1) How were language practices, beliefs and ideologies, and language management manifested in the implementation of PPSMI? (2) What policy-practice tensions and unintended consequences emerged from the interaction among these dimensions? and (3) What implications does Malaysia's experience offer for context-sensitive and sustainable EMI policy? By integrating these dimensions, the review seeks to explain how the enactment of PPSMI was shaped by the relationship between national policy aspirations and the linguistic, ideological, institutional, and pedagogical conditions of Malaysian education. It also considers the broader implications of the Malaysian experience for EMI policy in multilingual educational contexts.

MATERIALS AND METHODS (OR METHODOLOGY)

Methodology

This study employed a critical narrative review to examine the development, implementation, and consequences of English-medium instruction (EMI) policy in Malaysia, with particular attention to the Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English (PPSMI) policy. The review synthesized literature addressing the relationship between formal policy expectations and their enactment in educational settings, including classroom language practices, stakeholder beliefs and ideologies, policy management, teacher responses, institutional conditions, and educational equity.

Relevant literature on Malaysian EMI and language-in-education policy was identified using combinations of the terms "English-medium instruction," "EMI," "PPSMI," "language policy," "language-in-education policy," "medium of instruction," and "Malaysia." Additional terms relating to teacher beliefs, teacher agency, language ideology, bilingual practices, MBMMBI, and the Dual Language Programme were used to identify literature relevant to specific dimensions of the review. Studies were retained when they contributed directly to understanding Malaysian EMI/PPSMI policy, its implementation, or its educational and

sociolinguistic consequences. Selected studies from other Southeast Asian contexts were used only to contextualize the regional implications of the Malaysian case.

The literature was analysed using a deductive-inductive thematic approach. Deductive analysis was guided by Spolsky's (2004, 2009) language policy framework, particularly the interconnected dimensions of language practices, beliefs and ideologies, and language management. The analysis also considered how these dimensions operated across macro-level policy, meso-level institutional conditions, and micro-level classroom practices. In the subsequent inductive stage, recurring patterns were examined across the reviewed literature, leading to three cross-cutting analytical themes: policy-practice tensions, educational equity, and teacher agency. The final synthesis examined how these themes interacted with Spolsky's three dimensions to explain the relationship between formal EMI policy and its enactment in Malaysian educational contexts.

Conceptual framework

This review adopts Spolsky's (2004, 2009) language policy framework as its primary conceptual foundation for examining the enactment of English-medium instruction (EMI) policy in Malaysia. Spolsky conceptualizes language policy through three interconnected dimensions: language practices, language beliefs and ideologies, and language management. Language practices concern the ways in which languages are actually used within a community or institutional setting; beliefs and ideologies refer to the values, assumptions, and meanings attached to particular languages and patterns of language use; and language management involves deliberate attempts by authorities or other actors to influence language practices and choices (Spolsky, 2004, 2009). Rather than treating formal policy as equivalent to enacted policy, this framework enables analysis of the relationships- and possible inconsistencies - between what policy authorities seek to regulate, what stakeholders believe about language, and what individuals actually do in educational settings.

Applied to Malaysia's Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English (PPSMI) policy, these dimensions provide a useful analytical structure for examining the relationship between national policy objectives and educational practice. Language management concerns the formal introduction and administration of PPSMI, including attempts to establish English as the medium for teaching Science and Mathematics. Language beliefs and ideologies concern the competing meanings attributed to English and Bahasa Malaysia within Malaysian society. English has been associated with modernization, access to scientific knowledge, and international competitiveness, whereas Bahasa Malaysia has remained closely connected to postcolonial identity and national unity (Gill, 2014; Rahman & Singh, 2021). Language practices, in turn, concern how these policy expectations were enacted in classrooms, including teachers' use of English, Bahasa Malaysia, and bilingual strategies in response to students' linguistic and pedagogical needs (Gill, 2012; Gill, 2014).

Within the ideological dimension, the review uses linguistic pragmatism and linguistic nationalism as analytical concepts to interpret competing orientations toward medium-of-instruction policy. Linguistic pragmatism captures the instrumental positioning of English as a resource for economic development, scientific advancement, and global participation, whereas linguistic nationalism highlights the symbolic importance of Bahasa Malaysia for national identity and postcolonial nation-building (Gill, 2014; Rahman & Singh, 2021). These orientations are not treated as separate theoretical frameworks or as necessarily mutually exclusive positions. Rather, they provide a means of examining how different understandings of the value and role of English and Bahasa Malaysia shaped responses to PPSMI.

The analysis also distinguishes among macro-, meso-, and micro-level contexts in order to locate the enactment of language policy across different sites. At the macro level, PPSMI reflects national language planning, educational priorities, and broader ideological objectives. At the meso level, policy is mediated through schools, institutional management, resources, and implementation arrangements. At the micro level, teachers and students interpret and enact policy through everyday classroom practices. This multilevel perspective is used as an analytical distinction rather than as an additional theoretical framework, allowing the review to examine how nationally formulated policy expectations may be maintained, modified, or negotiated as they move through institutional and classroom contexts.

Taken together, the framework conceptualizes EMI policy enactment as an interaction among management, beliefs and ideologies, and practices across macro-, meso-, and micro-level contexts. This analytical structure is particularly relevant to PPSMI because the original analysis indicates recurring differences between formal English-medium expectations and actual classroom practices, as well as tensions between pragmatic orientations toward English and nationalist commitments to Bahasa Malaysia. The

framework therefore provides the deductive basis for organizing the review findings, while allowing cross-cutting patterns concerning policy-practice tensions, educational equity, and teacher agency to emerge from the literature.

RESULTS

The reviewed literature identified three principal dimensions of PPSMI implementation corresponding to language practices, beliefs and ideologies, and language management, together with three recurring cross-cutting patterns concerning policy-practice tensions, educational equity, and teacher agency. Across the literature, formal expectations for English-medium teaching were implemented within educational settings characterized by different levels of English proficiency, institutional resources, and stakeholder support. The findings are presented below according to these recurring patterns.

Language Practices and Classroom Adaptation

The literature consistently reported differences between the formal language expectations of PPSMI and actual classroom language practices. PPSMI sought to shift the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics from Bahasa Malaysia to English, thereby increasing students' exposure to English and improving their access to scientific knowledge (Gill, 2005; Gill, 2012). However, English was not used uniformly across classrooms. Teachers frequently alternated between English and Bahasa Malaysia to support students' understanding of subject content (Gill, 2012; Gill, 2014).

The reviewed literature also reported variation according to educational context. Bilingual classroom practices were particularly evident where teachers and students had limited exposure to English or experienced difficulty engaging with Science and Mathematics entirely through English. Rather than assuming a uniform rural-urban divide, the evidence points more cautiously to differences in linguistic exposure, teacher preparedness, and institutional resources across educational settings (Gill, 2005; Gill, 2014). Broader Asian research further identifies teacher language capacity and contextual conditions as important influences on language-policy enactment (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016). Consequently, classroom enactment of PPSMI frequently involved a combination of English and Bahasa Malaysia rather than consistent English-only instruction.

Teachers responded to these conditions through several forms of classroom adaptation. The reviewed literature describes teachers translating instructional materials, explaining difficult concepts in Bahasa Malaysia, and alternating languages according to students' levels of comprehension (Gill, 2005; Gill, 2014). These bilingual practices were recurrent across the original analysis and constituted an important difference between prescribed language use and actual classroom practice.

Language Beliefs and Ideologies: Nationalism and Pragmatism

A second recurring finding concerned competing beliefs about the roles of English and Bahasa Malaysia. PPSMI was associated with a pragmatic orientation toward English, in which English proficiency was linked to modernization, scientific and technological knowledge, economic development, and international competitiveness (Gill, 2014; Rahman & Singh, 2021). Related Malaysian EMI research in higher education also documents the continuing ideological significance attached to English-medium education, although this evidence concerns a different educational level from PPSMI (Rahman & Singh, 2022). English therefore occupied an important instrumental position within the broader policy rationale.

At the same time, the literature documented strong nationalist orientations toward Bahasa Malaysia. Following independence, Bahasa Malaysia became closely associated with national unity and postcolonial identity, while the expanded use of English in education generated concerns about the position of the national language (Gill, 2005; Gill, 2014). Opposition to PPSMI also involved concerns about the roles of Bahasa Malaysia and mother-tongue education within Malaysia's multilingual system (Gill, 2005; Gill, 2014).

The reviewed studies further indicated variation among stakeholder groups. Teachers expressed differing views about EMI: some regarded English-medium teaching as professionally or educationally valuable, whereas others reported difficulties associated with their English proficiency and classroom implementation (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016). The original analysis also reports differences among students and parents, with English valued for its perceived educational and employment opportunities but concerns remaining about learners' ability to understand disciplinary content through a second language (Gill, 2012). These findings show that stakeholder responses to PPSMI were heterogeneous rather than uniformly supportive or resistant.

Language Management and Uneven Implementation

The third group of findings concerned the management and institutional implementation of PPSMI. The policy was introduced nationally by the Malaysian Ministry of Education as a top-down initiative. Implementation included teacher training, curriculum changes, English-language materials for Science and Mathematics, and investment in technological and ICT support (Gill, 2012; Gill, 2014). Monitoring arrangements were also established as part of the implementation process (Gill, 2014).

Despite these national-level measures, the literature reported uneven implementation across educational settings. Differences in teacher preparedness, English proficiency, school resources, and local linguistic environments affected schools' capacity to enact the policy consistently (Gill, 2014; Hamid & Nguyen, 2016). Teachers' continued use of bilingual instruction represented one recurring departure from the English-medium expectations established at the policy level.

The Malaysian medium-of-instruction policy subsequently underwent a series of adjustments. Following the decision to phase out PPSMI, the Ministry of Education introduced the Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language (MBMMBI) policy. The later Dual Language Programme (DLP) provided eligible schools with the option of using English for the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics, subject to Ministry criteria and implementation guidelines (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017, 2024). These developments reflect continuing changes in the management of language-in-education policy in Malaysia.

Cross-Cutting Findings: Policy-Practice Tensions, Educational Equity, and Teacher Agency

Across the three dimensions, the reviewed literature revealed a recurring policy-practice gap. Formal policy promoted English as the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics, whereas classroom enactment frequently involved bilingual language use. The literature associated this difference with recurring conditions including teacher English proficiency, pedagogical preparedness, student comprehension, institutional resources, and implementation arrangements (Gill, 2005; Gill, 2012; Gill, 2014). Broader Asian research on language-policy implementation further highlights the role of contextual constraints and teacher agency (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016).

A second cross-cutting pattern concerned educational equity. The reviewed literature described differences between educational settings in their capacity to respond to EMI requirements. Urban and better-resourced schools were reported as having stronger English-language environments and greater access to educational resources, whereas rural and disadvantaged contexts faced greater linguistic and institutional constraints (Gill, 2005). The original analysis also identified differences in access to teacher development and English-language resources across settings. These findings indicate that opportunities to participate effectively in English-medium education were unevenly distributed across the contexts represented in the reviewed literature.

A third recurring pattern involved teacher agency and mediation. Teachers did not enact PPSMI exclusively through either full compliance with or rejection of the prescribed medium of instruction. Instead, the literature reported classroom-level adjustments, particularly translation and bilingual language use, in response to students' comprehension and linguistic needs (Gill, 2005; Gill, 2014; Hamid & Nguyen, 2016). The original analysis characterizes these adaptations as teacher agency because teachers modified classroom language practices while continuing to teach the required disciplinary content.

Taken together, the findings show recurring differences between formal language management, stakeholder beliefs and ideologies, and actual classroom practices. The literature documents a national policy promoting English for Science and Mathematics alongside heterogeneous stakeholder orientations, uneven institutional conditions, and recurrent bilingual classroom practices. These patterns provide the empirical and analytical basis for the following Discussion, which examines their interaction and implications for EMI policy enactment.

DISCUSSION

Misalignment among Language Practices, Beliefs, and Management

The findings indicate that the challenges associated with PPSMI cannot be attributed to a single implementation factor. Rather, they emerged from the interaction among language management, stakeholder beliefs and ideologies, institutional conditions, and actual classroom language practices. At the management level, PPSMI established English as the prescribed medium for teaching Science and Mathematics and was supported through teacher training, curriculum materials, and technological resources (Gill, 2012; Gill, 2014). At the classroom level, however, teachers frequently alternated between English and Bahasa Malaysia in response to students' comprehension and their own linguistic and pedagogical circumstances (Gill, 2005; Gill, 2014). The

resulting policy–practice gap therefore reflects not simply whether the policy was implemented, but how a nationally prescribed medium of instruction was negotiated under heterogeneous local conditions.

Viewed through Spolsky's (2004, 2009) framework, this pattern demonstrates the interdependence of language management, beliefs and ideologies, and practices. Formal language management attempted to modify established classroom practices by increasing the instructional role of English. Yet the enactment of this requirement was mediated by existing linguistic practices and by stakeholders' beliefs about the educational and social functions of English and Bahasa Malaysia. The Malaysian case thus illustrates why language policy cannot be understood exclusively through official directives: the enacted policy also takes shape through the practices and beliefs of those who interpret and implement it.

The ideological dimension further complicated this relationship. The pragmatic rationale underlying PPSMI positioned English as a means of accessing scientific knowledge, strengthening English proficiency, and enhancing Malaysia's international competitiveness. At the same time, Bahasa Malaysia retained considerable symbolic significance as the national language and as an important component of postcolonial national identity (Gill, 2005; Gill, 2014; Rahman & Singh, 2021). Opposition to PPSMI therefore involved not only pedagogical concerns but also competing understandings of the appropriate roles of English, Bahasa Malaysia, and other community languages in Malaysian education. From this perspective, the difficulties surrounding PPSMI reflected a broader tension between globalizing educational aspirations and national sociolinguistic priorities.

Teacher Agency as Policy Mediation

One of the most important patterns emerging from the review concerns the role of teachers in mediating the relationship between formal policy and classroom practice. The Results showed that teachers frequently translated explanations, alternated between English and Bahasa Malaysia, or temporarily reverted to Bahasa Malaysia when students experienced difficulty understanding Science and Mathematics through English (Gill, 2005; Gill, 2014). These practices can be interpreted as situated forms of teacher agency, because teachers exercised professional judgment in determining how the formal medium-of-instruction requirement could be enacted within particular classroom conditions.

This interpretation extends beyond a compliance-based understanding of policy implementation. From a narrow implementation perspective, the use of Bahasa Malaysia in an English-medium lesson could be classified as a departure from PPSMI requirements. From a pedagogical perspective, however, bilingual adaptation could function as a means of maintaining access to disciplinary content when English proficiency was insufficient for effective comprehension. Teachers were therefore positioned between two simultaneous demands: implementing the prescribed language policy and ensuring that students could understand the curriculum.

This finding is consistent with the original analysis, which emphasizes that teachers were not passive recipients of policy but actors who interpreted policy according to classroom circumstances. It also corresponds with the broader discussion of teacher agency represented by Hamid and Nguyen (2016), in which language policy implementation is shaped by the capacity of educational actors to respond to contextual conditions. In the context of PPSMI, agency was therefore visible not primarily through explicit resistance to policy, but through everyday pedagogical decisions concerning language choice, explanation, and adaptation.

At the same time, teacher agency should not be treated as a substitute for institutional capacity. Teachers' ability to adapt policy remained conditioned by their English proficiency, pedagogical preparation, available resources, student proficiency, and institutional environments (Gill, 2014; Hamid & Nguyen, 2016). Agency was consequently situated within, rather than independent of, the structural conditions of implementation. This distinction is important because excessive reliance on individual teacher adaptation may transfer responsibility for resolving policy-level problems to classroom practitioners.

Educational Equity and Unintended Consequences

The findings also raise important questions concerning educational equity. PPSMI established a common national language requirement, but the conditions required to benefit from English-medium education were not distributed uniformly. Schools and learners differed in English exposure, teacher preparedness, instructional resources, and broader linguistic environments. The original analysis particularly identifies differences between urban or better-resourced settings and rural or less advantaged educational contexts (Gill, 2005).

These differences suggest that a formally uniform EMI policy may produce uneven educational experiences when implemented across contexts with unequal linguistic and institutional resources. Students with greater prior exposure to English may be better positioned to engage simultaneously with disciplinary content and the language through which that content is taught, whereas learners with more limited English exposure may face an additional linguistic burden. These propositions should be interpreted as analytically plausible consequences of unequal implementation conditions rather than as causal effects established by the reviewed PPSMI literature. Comparable equity concerns have also been raised in other Asian bilingual and EMI policy contexts, including Taiwan, where unequal access to linguistic and educational resources has been examined explicitly (Huang, 2024).

This point requires cautious interpretation. The reviewed evidence does not justify a simple causal conclusion that PPSMI itself produced or widened educational inequality. Rather, PPSMI operated within pre-existing differences in linguistic resources, teacher capacity, and school conditions, creating a risk that such inequalities could be reproduced or reinforced through EMI implementation. This formulation is consistent with the interpretive nature of a narrative review and avoids attributing causal effects that the evidence cannot establish. Comparative research from other Asian bilingual-education contexts likewise shows why equity claims should be tied carefully to the distribution of linguistic and institutional resources rather than assumed from policy design alone (Huang, 2024).

The social status attached to English further complicates this issue. Malaysian language-policy scholarship associates English with socioeconomic mobility, global participation, and access to wider domains of knowledge, while Bahasa Malaysia and other local languages perform important national, cultural, and identity functions (Gill, 2014; Rahman & Singh, 2021). Consequently, EMI policy involves not only the selection of an instructional language but also questions concerning the distribution of linguistic resources and the social value attached to different languages.

Regional Implications for EMI Policy

Malaysia's experience with PPSMI also provides a useful point of reflection for EMI policy in other multilingual Southeast Asian contexts. The original review compares Malaysia with Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, while recognizing substantial differences in their linguistic histories, educational systems, and approaches to English-medium education. These comparisons should therefore be understood as contextual reflections rather than as evidence of equivalent policy trajectories.

Malaysia and Vietnam, for example, both illustrate the use of English as part of broader strategies for internationalization and participation in the global knowledge economy. However, Malaysia's PPSMI represented a centrally initiated national policy for Science and Mathematics, whereas contemporary EMI research in Vietnam documents more institutionally differentiated arrangements, particularly within higher education (Dang, Bohlinger, & Ngo, 2024). The two cases therefore differ in policy scope and educational level, limiting direct comparison. Nevertheless, both draw attention to the importance of teacher language proficiency, pedagogical capacity, institutional support, and the relationship between English and national-language priorities.

The regional literature similarly points to contextual variation in Indonesia and Thailand. Indonesian higher-education research connects EMI with internationalization while also identifying implementation challenges (Simbolon, 2021), whereas a Thai primary-school case study documents teachers' perception of opportunities and challenges in EMI implementation (Penthisarn & Phusawisot, 2021). The Philippines represents a different instructional context; Melegrito (2022), for example, examines the use of Filipino and English as media of instruction in tertiary engineering courses. These studies should not be treated as nationally representative evidence, but they illustrate the importance of interpreting EMI within specific institutional, historical, and sociolinguistic contexts. More broadly, Southeast Asian English-language ecologies vary considerably across national settings (Hashim & Leitner, 2021).

Across these contexts, three broader implications emerge from the Malaysian experience. First, contextual flexibility is important because linguistic environments and institutional capacity vary substantially across and within education systems. Second, teacher capacity is central because teachers mediate language policy through everyday pedagogical decisions. Third, educational equity needs to be considered at the policy-design stage rather than treated only as an implementation problem. These implications do not imply that a single Malaysian model can be transferred directly to neighbouring countries; instead, they identify recurring considerations that can inform the analysis of EMI policy across multilingual educational systems.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Several implications follow from the interaction among management, beliefs and ideologies, and classroom practices identified in this review. At the policy level, the experience of PPSMI suggests limitations to a uniform approach in which medium-of-instruction requirements are standardized while the conditions required for implementation remain uneven. Greater attention to local readiness, student language profiles, teacher capacity, and institutional resources may enable policy objectives to be aligned more closely with educational conditions.

At the institutional level, teacher development needs to extend beyond general English proficiency. Teachers working through English require support in explaining disciplinary concepts, managing linguistically heterogeneous classrooms, assessing students through an additional language, and making pedagogically appropriate decisions about language use. The training and technological support associated with PPSMI represented important management mechanisms, but the uneven implementation documented in the literature indicates the need for sustained rather than one-off professional support (Gill, 2012; Gill, 2014). This emphasis is also consistent with broader review evidence showing that EMI implementation is shaped by teacher preparation, language proficiency, institutional support, and contextual conditions (Nyoni et al., 2023).

At the classroom level, the findings suggest that bilingual language use should not automatically be interpreted as policy failure. Where teachers strategically use Bahasa Malaysia alongside English to facilitate disciplinary understanding, such practices may represent pedagogical responses to learners' linguistic needs. This does not imply abandoning English-medium objectives; rather, it highlights the need to distinguish between English exposure as a policy goal and English-only instruction as the sole indicator of successful implementation.

More broadly, the Malaysian experience supports an approach in which English and national or local languages are not necessarily treated as mutually exclusive educational resources. The original paper proposes an additive bilingual orientation in which English development occurs without displacing Bahasa Malaysia or other languages. Within the present analysis, this recommendation follows particularly from the documented interaction among ideological tensions, bilingual classroom practices, and differences in institutional capacity.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study is a critical narrative review rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. Its purpose is interpretive synthesis; consequently, the analysis does not provide exhaustive coverage of all PPSMI-related research or quantitative estimates of policy effects. Conclusions concerning relationships among policy, classroom practice, and educational equity should therefore not be interpreted as causal estimates.

Second, although Malaysia constitutes the principal analytical case, selected studies from Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines were used to contextualize the regional discussion. These studies do not constitute a systematically constructed comparative corpus, and differences in educational level, policy history, sociolinguistic context, and research design limit direct cross-national comparison.

Third, the reviewed literature spans different periods in the development of Malaysian language-in-education policy. Findings associated with the historical implementation of PPSMI should therefore not automatically be interpreted as representing current EMI practices in Malaysia. This temporal distinction is particularly important given subsequent policy developments, including MBMMBI and the DLP (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017, 2024). In addition, because this is a critical narrative review rather than a systematic review, the synthesis remains dependent on the scope and selection of the literature examined; methodological discussions of EMI reviews have highlighted the importance of transparency regarding review procedures and potential selection bias (Hampson & McKinley, 2026).

Future research could examine contemporary policy enactment through longitudinal and multi-stakeholder studies involving teachers, students, school leaders, policymakers, and families. Comparative research across urban, rural, and differently resourced educational settings would also help clarify how institutional conditions influence opportunities to participate in EMI. Finally, carefully designed comparative studies across Southeast Asia could investigate how different combinations of language management, stakeholder ideologies, institutional capacity, and teacher agency shape EMI enactment across multilingual education systems.

CONCLUSION

This critical review examined Malaysia's English-medium instruction policy through the case of PPSMI, focusing on the interaction among language practices, beliefs and ideologies, and language management. The analysis indicates that the enactment of PPSMI cannot be understood solely in terms of formal policy requirements. Rather, it was shaped by the relationship between national language objectives, competing ideological orientations toward English and Bahasa Malaysia, uneven institutional and linguistic conditions, and the ways in which teachers responded to classroom realities.

A central finding of the review is the recurring misalignment between standardized English-medium expectations and the heterogeneous conditions under which the policy was enacted. Teachers' bilingual adaptations illustrate how language policy was mediated through professional judgment and students' linguistic and pedagogical needs. At the same time, differences in institutional resources, teacher preparedness, and learners' access to English highlight the importance of educational equity in the design and implementation of EMI policy.

Conceptually, the review demonstrates the value of examining practices, beliefs and ideologies, and management as interconnected dimensions of language policy rather than as separate implementation issues. Malaysia's experience further suggests that sustainable EMI requires more than formally selecting English as a medium of instruction. It requires alignment between policy objectives and local implementation conditions, sustained teacher and institutional support, and sufficient flexibility to recognize multilingual classroom practices as potential resources for disciplinary learning. These considerations are particularly important for multilingual education systems seeking to expand English-medium education while maintaining national-language priorities and equitable access to learning.

REFERENCES

1. Gill, S.K. Language policy in Malaysia: Reversing direction. *Language Policy*, 4(3), 2005, pp. 241–260. DOI: 10.1007/s10993-005-7859-9.
2. Tan, M. and Lan, O.S. Teaching mathematics and science in English in Malaysian classrooms: The impact of teacher beliefs on classroom practices and student learning. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 10(1), 2011, pp. 5–18. DOI: 10.1016/j.jeap.2010.11.001.
3. Gill, S.K. The complexities of re-reversal of language-in-education policy in Malaysia. In: Kirkpatrick, A. and Sussex, R. (Eds.), *English as an International Language in Asia: Implications for Language Education*. Springer, 2012, pp. 45–61. DOI: 10.1007/978-94-007-4578-0_4.
4. Gill, S.K. *Language Policy Challenges in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia*. Multilingual Education, Vol. 8. Springer, Dordrecht, 2014. DOI: 10.1007/978-94-007-7966-2.
5. Spolsky, B. *Language Policy*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.
6. Spolsky, B. *Language Management*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511626470.
7. Hamid, M.O. and Nguyen, H.T.M. Globalization, English language policy, and teacher agency: Focus on Asia. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 15(1), 2016, pp. 26–43.
8. Rahman, M.M. and Singh, M.K.M. English and Malay language policy and planning in Malaysia. *Training, Language and Culture*, 5(4), 2021, pp. 36–46. DOI: 10.22363/2521-442X-2021-5-4-36-46.
9. Rahman, M.M. and Singh, M.K.M. The ideology towards English as a medium of instruction (EMI) adoption in higher education in Malaysia: A case study. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 28(2), 2022, pp. 109–121. DOI: 10.17576/3L-2022-2802-08.
10. Simbolon, N.E. English Medium Instruction (EMI) practice: Higher education internationalization in Indonesia. *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 8(2), 2021, pp. 72–83. DOI: 10.22373/ej.v8i2.8961.
11. Penthisarn, T. and Phusawisot, P. Perceptions of Thai teachers of English towards English Medium Instruction: A case study of a local primary school. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 3(9), 2021, pp. 13–21. DOI: 10.32996/jeltal.2021.3.9.2.
12. Melegrito, M.C.P. The use of Filipino and English as mediums of instruction in the teaching of engineering courses at the tertiary level. *European Online Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*, 11(3), 2022, pp. 668–678.

13. Dang, T.K.A., Bohlinger, S. and Ngo, C.L. Teachers' transformative agency in English-medium instruction in higher education in Vietnam: A cultural-historical theory perspective. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 2024. DOI: 10.1080/01434632.2024.2349803.
14. Hashim, A. and Leitner, G. *English in Southeast Asia and ASEAN: Transformation of Language Habitats*. Routledge, 2021.
15. Nyoni, P., Ahmed, M.R., Philogene, M. and Khaing, T. Implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction Policy in Schools: A systematic review. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 11, 2023, pp. 413–430. DOI: 10.4236/jss.2023.1112030.
16. Huang, Y.H.I. "The majority are left behind": The promotion of Bilingual Education 2030 policy in Taiwan and its potential to widen horizontal inequalities. *Higher Education*, 88(1), 2024, pp. 85–100. DOI: 10.1007/s10734-023-01106-9.
17. Hampson, T. and McKinley, J. Systematic review, systematic bias? An example from EMI research. *Language Teaching*, 59(3), 2026, pp. 384–392. DOI: 10.1017/S0261444824000338.
18. Ministry of Education Malaysia. *Dasar Pendidikan Kebangsaan (Edisi Keempat)*. Ministry of Education Malaysia, Putrajaya, 2017. ISBN: 978-983-3444-98-4.
19. Ministry of Education Malaysia. *SPI KPM Bil. 5 Tahun 2024: Garis Panduan Pelaksanaan Dual Language Programme Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia Tahun 2024*. Ministry of Education Malaysia, Putrajaya, 2024.

Cite this Article: Thi Diê, H.N. (2026). Malaysia's English-Medium Instruction Policy through Spolsky's Language Policy Framework: A Critical Review. International Journal of Current Science Research and Review, 9(9), pp. 5088-5097. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijcsrr/V9-i9-24>