

[Treatise]

## Putting CEFR into Malaysian English Language Education

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**Abstract:** The Roadmap for Malaysian English Language Reform 2015-2025 recommended the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference or CEFR to align English language education to international standards and as a framework for curriculum development. The CEFR describes what learners can do in four language skills at three bands (Basic, Independent, and Proficient) and six levels. This paper will, first, provide a brief description of languages and recent education policies in Malaysia. This will include the key recommendation emerging from the English Language Roadmap. Next, findings from several studies on the implementation of the CEFR in Malaysia will be discussed. The paper concludes by suggesting that the inherent the ideologies in the implementation of the CEFR in Malaysia needs to be addressed.

**Keywords:** CEFR, Malaysia, English language education, language policy, English Language Roadmap

### 1. Introduction

There are an estimated 137 languages in Malaysia with 80% of them being indigenous languages (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2014). These indigenous languages include Jakun, Semai, Mah Meri, Temiar and Temuan in Peninsular Malaysia, and Bidayuh, Kadazan and Iban in the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo (Austin & Pillai, 2020). Unfortunately, 70% of the living languages in Malaysia are categorized as being in danger with decreasing numbers of fluent speakers and a lack of intergenerational language transmission (Pillai, Soh, & Kajita, 2014). Amidst the tapestry of languages and culture in the country, some languages will inevitably take precedence over others because of, for example, their status as the national (Malay) and global (English) language, and because of national language and education policies.

### 2. Education in Malaysia

Despite the multitude of languages in Malaysia, at the primary level of public-school education there are only three main media of instruction: Malay, Mandarin and Tamil, while English is taught as a compulsory subject throughout primary and secondary education. There are provisions to allow other local languages to be taught if there are enough students and resources, but in practice, this is not always possible. In fact, at the moment, only three indigenous languages are taught in selected schools: Iban in Sarawak; Kadazandusun in Sabah and Semai in Peninsular Malaysia (Smith, 2010). However, the importance placed on English can be seen through the various policies that have been put in place throughout the years. The key among them was the controversial teaching of Science and Mathematics subjects in English from 2002 to 2012 in all national schools. Falling grades among students was a key factor in the demise of this policy. In 2012, the policy of ‘Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language’ was introduced as part of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013–2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Two roadmaps, one each for Malay and English language education were formulated under this policy (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2017).

As part of the MEB, the Dual Language Programme was initiated in 2016, the, where schools could

choose to teach Science and Mathematics related subjects in English provided that they fulfilled particular criteria. One state, Sarawak decided that this policy would be implemented in all public schools, except for Chinese-medium ones, throughout the state from 2020. Amidst all these policies, the government's bid to make Malaysia an education hub in the region has resulted in the mushrooming of international schools, where there are reported to be more Malaysian students than non-Malaysian ones (Nasa & Pilay, 2017). Given that the main medium of instruction in these school tends to be English, there is now a growing number of young Malaysians who are not only studying different curricula but doing so in English. This has implications for the differing levels of English proficiency in the country by different segments of the population as it can be assumed that international schools are generally attended by those from higher middle to higher income groups. At the same time, the falling levels of English language proficiency among students and graduates from the national education sector continue to be a challenge in Malaysia.

### 3. English Language Roadmap

The lack of English proficiency is constantly cited as among the top reasons for graduate unemployability in Malaysia (Pillai, Khan, Ibrahim, & Raphael, 2012; Zainuddin, Pillai, Dumanig, & Phillip, 2019). This is not a new phenomenon as a significant link between English and career advancement has been reported elsewhere (Euromonitor International, 2010; Gribble, 2014). Yet, baseline studies in Malaysia have indicated that the proficiency among students, and even teachers, is worryingly low (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). To address this decline, the key recommendation from the English Language Roadmap (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015) was the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to align English language education throughout the education system, from pre-school to teacher and tertiary education. The rationale for using CEFR is articulated as follows:

The adoption of the CEFR as the exemplar of international standards gives access to a sequence of procedures which can be guaranteed to lead to a substantial improvement in language education, and if carried out with sufficient determination and rigour, can also lead to excellence at the international level.

(Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015: 62).

While Freeman (2017: 34) states that, "(b)y describing languages in terms of how speakers could use them, in a set of can do statements, the CEFR is meant to move away from simplistic assertions of competence as native-speakerism", he also highlights the point that "the CEFR has been operationalized as a set of English language standards that are now invoked prescriptively around the world". The use of a more top-down prescriptive form of the CEFR is likely to be among the challenges faced in its implementation in the Malaysian English language education eco-system. This system comprises, among others, policy makers, school administrators, teachers, teacher educators, student teachers, in-service teachers, students, the curriculum, textbooks, teaching and learning practices, teaching materials, physical and digital resources, assessment criteria, and adequate professional training and development for teachers.

### 4. Issues and Challenges

The Roadmap contains a series of time-aligned strategies for the implementation of the CEFR in English language education with recommended CEFR levels at various checkpoints. For instance, at the tertiary level, students are expected to graduate with B2/ C1 CEFR level. Given the diverse socio-economic, linguistic and geographical

profiles of Malaysian students and teachers, as well as the varying levels English language proficiency, professional training and experience of the latter, there are bound to be issues and challenges arising from the policy to adopt the CEFR in Malaysia.

Abd Aziz and Mohamad Uri (2017) highlight several of these issues. Among them is that the level of proficiency among teachers is still an area of concern. The fact that English is not the first language of the majority of English teachers is not the core issue here. Previously lax entrance requirements, especially for English language proficiency, for teacher education is more likely to be the root cause. There have been attempts to address this by making teachers sit for proficiency tests and to undergo intervention programs. However, such attempts can lead to frustration and demotivation among teachers. Another issue pointed out by Abd Aziz and Mohamad Uri (2017) is that the majority of Malaysian students barely obtain a pass for English in public examinations. They also suggest that “Malaysia still lacks qualified local English teachers who are capable of implementing the Education Ministry’s new Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) aligned curriculum and assessment system” (ibid.: 7). Mohamad Uri and Abd Aziz (2018: 181) further point out that despite teachers’ somewhat positive views about the adoption of the CEFR, they displayed “limited knowledge, minimum exposure and low level of awareness about CEFR”. This is despite the training sessions provided by the Malaysian Ministry of Education.

Abdul Aziz, Ab Rashid and Wan Zainudin, (2018) discuss the issues related to the Malaysian CEFR Cascade Training Model which is based on the transmission of information and training from a smaller core group to increasingly larger groups. This ripple effect was meant to train as many among the estimated 60,000 English language teachers as possible on the implementation of the CEFR in the teaching and learning of English in Malaysia (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Abdul Aziz et al. (2018) found several issues with the training model. These included the logistics of planning and organizing the training sessions such as the physical setting of the training and the number of teachers involved. These in turn affected the delivery styles that tended not to be participant-centered and reflective in nature. The materials used were also not always culturally relevant. Further, Abdul Aziz et al. (2018) also report that the attempt to cover too much content over a limited number of training days affected the effectiveness of the training sessions. The training of the trainers also appeared to be inadequate, and this affected the sessions in consecutive tiers of the model, leading to a possible “watering down of content as it is passed on to participants” (ibid., 2018: 412).

At the tertiary level, there are also challenges as each public institution has its own English language curriculum (Ahmad Afip, Hamid, & Renshaw, 2019). The implementation of the CEFR at this level of education does demand reviewing and revising the various English language courses at these institutions. However, the absence of a common curriculum, a lack of training for English language educators at the tertiary level, a lack of student contact hours, large numbers of students with low levels of English language proficiency, coupled with the lack of teaching staff, are likely to affect the targeted CEFR level upon graduation. As previously mentioned, low levels of English language proficiency can affect graduate employability, which means that this issue may remain unresolved despite the adoption of CEFR. On the whole, Ahmad Afip et al. (2019: 11) highlight the fact that “although the CEFR policy in Malaysia has seen a comprehensive implementation plan, producing the outcomes of the policy may still pose enormous challenges for policymakers and stakeholders”.

## 5. Summary and Conclusion

The comprehensive top-down implementation of the CEFR across English language education in Malaysia is a bold move to address the low levels of English proficiency among students, in particular the products of the

national education system. As mentioned in the previous section, there were issues and challenges in implementation as the policy kicked off nationwide. Ideologically, the focus on English has to be seen within a global context as it is seen as an empowering tool to obtain further knowledge, for employability, career and social advancement, and for regional and international communication. However, at the same time, the underlying ideology of the variety of English to be used and the ‘power’ afforded to English as a gatekeeping tool has yet to be addressed adequately (Pillai, 2017; Pillai and Ong, 2018). Thus, apart from enhancing training modules and developing home-grown contextually relevant materials and physical and digital platforms, it may also be time to take a less prescriptive, and instead a more reflective stance on the implementation of the CEFR, with more teacher-autonomy and teacher-empowerment across various levels of education. The multilingual context, and socio-economic disparities also need to be taken into account in the entire English language education eco-system if the aspirations of the Roadmap to increase English language proficiency in the country are to be met.

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