



## Malaysia's English Language Education Policy: Comparative Lessons for Vietnam's Transition Toward English as a Second Language

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Received: September 2, 2025

Revised: May 12, 2026

Accepted: June 16, 2026

Online: September 30, 2026

### Abstract

In the context of rapid globalization, multilingual developing nations constantly struggle to strengthen English language education while simultaneously safeguarding national linguistic identity. Malaysia and Vietnam represent two structurally comparable cases in Southeast Asia, where English has been strategically promoted alongside Malay and Vietnamese, respectively. This study examines Malaysia's English language education policies, trajectories, and pedagogical practices to draw context-sensitive lessons for Vietnam's ongoing structural educational reforms. Using an exploratory, descriptive qualitative comparative policy analysis grounded in Spolsky's Language Policy Model and Bourdieu's Theory of Linguistic Capital, the study analyzes national blueprints, curriculum frameworks, and empirical scholarly literature. The findings indicate that Malaysia's functional bilingual approach—orchestrated through the MBMMBI policy and the Dual Language Programme (DLP)—has noticeably enhanced national English proficiency while firmly preserving the primacy of the national language. However, persistent urban-rural socio-economic disparities remain a structural barrier. The study argues that Malaysia's multi-phase experience offers crucial strategic insights for Vietnam as it navigates its national roadmap to position English as a systemic second language (ESL) by 2035. Key implications highlight the need for clear institutional policy, continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers, equitable localized resourcing, and balanced competency-based assessments. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader literature on educational "Englishization" by offering a comparative structural design framework for language planning in non-postcolonial developing contexts.

**Keywords:** *English Language Education, Language Policy, Bilingual Education, Spolsky Model, Linguistic Capital, Comparative Policy Analysis, Malaysia, Vietnam*

### INTRODUCTION

The growing importance of English in international trade, science, technology, and higher education has encouraged many countries to reconsider the place of foreign languages in their education systems. Across Southeast Asia, governments have sought to improve English proficiency in order to strengthen economic competitiveness and expand opportunities for international cooperation. At the same time, they have remained concerned with protecting national languages, which continue to play a fundamental role in cultural transmission, social cohesion, and state-building.

Malaysia illustrates this balancing process in a particularly visible way. Since independence, the country has consistently maintained Malay as the national language while introducing successive reforms to strengthen English education in response to changing economic and educational demands. Policies such as *Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia, Memperkukuh Bahasa Inggeris* (MBMMBI) and the Dual Language Programme (DLP) reflect attempts to expand students' access to English without diminishing the status of Malay. These policies have generated considerable discussion about educational quality, regional inequality, and the relationship between language policy and national identity.

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Vietnam is facing similar policy challenges. English has become the dominant foreign language in schools and universities and is increasingly regarded as an important instrument for international integration and workforce development. Recent policy discussions on expanding English in general education indicate a gradual shift toward a stronger role for the language while maintaining Vietnamese as the principal medium of instruction. The experience of neighboring countries therefore offers a useful source of comparison for policymakers and education planners.

Previous research has examined Malaysia's bilingual reforms, teacher preparation, and curriculum development, while studies on Vietnam have largely focused on implementing foreign language projects and classroom practice. Nevertheless, direct comparative analyses of the two countries remain limited. In particular, research has paid insufficient attention to how Malaysia's policy choices, implementation strategies, and practical challenges may inform Vietnam's current reform agenda. Addressing this gap is important because both countries operate within comparable regional conditions but have adopted different approaches to integrating English into national education systems.

This study therefore investigates the development of English language education in Malaysia and considers its relevance for Vietnam. It seeks to answer three questions: (1) How has Malaysia balanced the promotion of English with the preservation of Malay as the national language? (2) What policy instruments and implementation strategies have shaped this process? (3) Which aspects of the Malaysian experience may provide useful guidance for Vietnam's future reforms? By approaching these questions through comparative policy analysis, the article contributes to discussions on language planning in Southeast Asia. It offers practical considerations for designing and implementing English language education policies in Vietnam.

Rather than examining Malaysia's language policy in isolation, this article places it within a comparative perspective that considers its relevance to Vietnam's ongoing educational reforms. By analyzing policy objectives, implementation strategies, and practical challenges through the lenses of language planning and linguistic capital, the study offers a more integrated understanding of how English can expand without weakening the national language's role.

In doing so, it adds comparative evidence to discussions on language policy in Southeast Asia and highlights the relationship between policy design, institutional capacity, and educational outcomes. The findings also offer practical reference points for policymakers and education administrators in Vietnam, particularly in areas such as bilingual program development, teacher preparation, assessment reform, and the gradual introduction of English within the national education system while preserving Vietnamese as the principal language of instruction and cultural identity.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Language Policy and Linguistic Capital**

Language policy is a multidimensional domain encompassing ideological orientations, institutional practices, and regulatory mechanisms. Spolsky's model, which distinguishes between language beliefs, language practices, and language management, has been widely applied to analyze how states negotiate linguistic diversity while pursuing social cohesion and economic development.

Complementing this policy-oriented perspective, Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital conceptualizes language as a socially stratified resource that provides differential access to power, prestige, and economic opportunity. Within bilingual and multilingual education systems, national languages typically function as repositories of cultural and symbolic capital, reinforcing collective identity and political legitimacy. English, by contrast, is often framed as economic capital linked to global mobility, employability, and participation in transnational networks.

Critical scholarship cautions that the expansion of English may exacerbate social inequality

if access to high-quality English education is uneven. Conversely, instrumental approaches emphasize the necessity of English proficiency for national competitiveness in a globalized economy. Recent studies therefore advocate balanced language policy models that integrate English without undermining the vitality of national languages, particularly in postcolonial and multi-ethnic societies.

### **English Language Education in Malaysia and Vietnam: A Review of Existing Studies**

Existing scholarship on English language education in Malaysia has largely examined the country's ongoing efforts to reconcile promoting English with preserving Malay as the national language. Studies of Malaysia's post-independence language policy trajectory highlight a shift from English-dominant education to Malay-centered schooling, followed by renewed bilingual initiatives in response to globalization. Recent research on the *Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia, Memperkukuh Bahasa Inggeris* (MBMMBI) policy and the Dual Language Programme (DLP) suggests that Malaysia has adopted a pragmatic model of functional bilingualism rather than full-scale English-medium instruction.

Empirical studies indicate that the DLP has increased students' exposure to English and may build linguistic capital over time, particularly in urban and better-resourced schools. However, scholars consistently identify structural constraints, including uneven regional implementation, disparities between urban and rural schools, and shortages of teachers with adequate English proficiency. Recent analyses further argue that Malaysia's bilingual reforms should be understood as a negotiated response to globalization pressures rather than a linear transition toward English dominance, reflecting persistent concerns over national identity and social cohesion.

In contrast, research on English language education in Vietnam has largely conceptualized English as a foreign language embedded within a highly centralized education system. Studies of the National Foreign Languages Project 2020 and subsequent reforms emphasize Vietnam's ambitious policy targets, particularly its alignment of English proficiency benchmarks with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Scholars acknowledge significant progress in expanding access to English education and raising societal awareness of English as valuable human capital.

Nevertheless, the literature also highlights a persistent gap between policy objectives and actual learning outcomes. Commonly cited challenges include uneven teacher proficiency, limited communicative use of English in classrooms, and an examination-oriented culture that prioritizes test performance over functional language use. Recent studies further note that while English has gained symbolic prominence in Vietnamese society—evident in the widespread adoption of international certificates such as IELTS—its integration into everyday educational practice remains uneven, particularly outside major urban centers.

Comparative studies directly juxtaposing Malaysia and Vietnam remain relatively limited. Existing research tends to focus on single-country analyses, leaving a gap in systematic comparative policy scholarship that examines how Southeast Asian states with different historical and sociolinguistic conditions respond to similar globalization pressures. This study addresses that gap by adopting a comparative policy lens to examine Malaysia's experience and derive context-sensitive lessons for Vietnam's evolving English language education reforms.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study uses qualitative comparative policy analysis to examine English language education policies and practices in Malaysia and derive policy-relevant lessons for Vietnam. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study does not aim to measure causal effects or

learner outcomes statistically, but rather to analyze policy orientations, governance mechanisms, and implementation logics embedded in national education systems. Comparative policy analysis enables systematic examination of how different states respond to similar globalization pressures while operating under distinct historical, sociolinguistic, and political conditions.

Malaysia and Vietnam are selected as comparative cases because both countries are situated in Southeast Asia, share postcolonial legacies, and face comparable demands to enhance English proficiency while maintaining national language integrity. At the same time, their language policy trajectories differ significantly, allowing for meaningful analytical contrast.

### **Data Sources**

The research relies primarily on documentary evidence and published secondary materials concerning language policy and English language education in Malaysia and Vietnam. Rather than drawing on survey or interview data, the study examines official documents alongside academic and institutional publications in order to understand how language policies have been formulated, implemented, and evaluated over time.

The documentary materials include national education strategies, legal instruments, curriculum frameworks, and government policy papers. Particular attention is paid to major policy texts such as the *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025*, constitutional provisions governing language use, Vietnam's *General Education Curriculum (2018)*, documents related to the *National Foreign Languages Project*, and recent policy orientations on expanding English in the education system.

To complement these official sources, the analysis also considers scholarly literature on language planning, bilingual education, English as a second or foreign language, and comparative education in Southeast Asia. Preference is given to peer-reviewed publications issued by reputable academic presses and journals because these studies provide critical perspectives on policy implementation and educational outcomes. Reports from organizations involved in educational development, including the British Council and similar institutions, are used when they offer relevant information on teacher training, curriculum reform, and language-learning initiatives.

The selection of materials followed several guiding principles. Documents were included only when they were directly related to the research questions, originated from identifiable and reliable institutions or publishers, and contained substantive information on policy design, implementation, or evaluation.

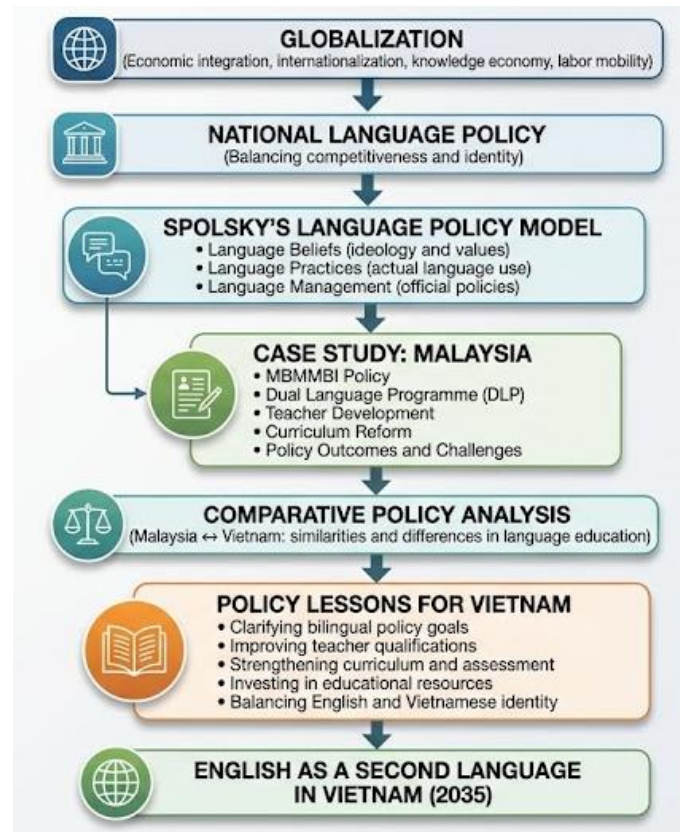
The review consulted both recent publications and a limited number of foundational works so contemporary developments could be interpreted within their broader historical and theoretical context. Restricting the analysis to publicly available and verifiable sources enhances the transparency of the research process and enables other scholars to examine the evidence on which the discussion is based.

### **Analytical Framework**

The study is guided by an integrated analytical framework combining Spolsky's model of language policy and Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital. Spolsky's framework allows analysis of language policy across three dimensions: language beliefs (ideological orientations toward languages), language practices (actual patterns of language use in education), and language management (explicit policy interventions and regulations).

Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital helps explain how education systems and labor markets value English and national languages differently. Within this framework, English is analyzed primarily as economic and symbolic capital linked to global mobility. At the same time, Malay and Vietnamese are examined as cultural and social capital central to national identity and

social cohesion.



**Figure 1.** Analytical framework used in this study

The framework illustrates how globalization influences national language policy through Spolsky's dimensions of language beliefs, language practices, and language management. Malaysia serves as the principal case study for examining policy implementation. At the same time, the study uses comparative analysis to derive evidence-based lessons that may inform Vietnam's planned transition toward English as a second language by 2035.

### Comparative Analytical Dimensions

Malaysia and Vietnam are compared across four analytical dimensions:

1. National language policy orientation, including constitutional recognition and ideological positioning of the national language and English.
2. English language education policy instruments, such as bilingual education models, curriculum mandates, and teacher proficiency standards.
3. Implementation mechanisms, focusing on curriculum delivery, teacher preparation, and institutional capacity within formal education systems.
4. Policy outcomes and challenges, particularly in terms of equity, regional disparities, and tensions between globalization and national identity.
5. This multidimensional comparison allows identification of both transferable policy lessons and context-specific constraints.

### Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the study systematically reviews key policy documents to identify stated objectives, policy rationales, and implementation strategies. Second,

the study compares findings from policy texts with existing scholarly evaluations to assess coherence between policy intentions and reported outcomes. Third, the study conducts cross-case comparisons to synthesize lessons relevant to Vietnam's ongoing and future English language education reforms.

### **Research Validity and Limitations**

To strengthen analytical rigor, the study triangulates data by cross-referencing official policy documents with peer-reviewed studies and independent evaluations. The study does not seek statistical generalization; instead, it emphasizes analytical generalization, whereby theoretically grounded insights may inform similar policy contexts.

Nevertheless, the study is limited by its reliance on document-based analysis and secondary sources. It does not incorporate primary empirical data from classrooms, teachers, or learners. The concluding section further addresses these limitations and outlines future research.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Analysis of the Malaysian Case (English Language Education in Malaysia)**

After independence, Malay (Bahasa Malaysia) became Malaysia's national and official language, while English continued to play a significant role. English is a compulsory subject from Grade 1 to Grade 11 and remains widely used in urban areas. Constitutionally, Malaysia recognizes English as a second language under Article 152 and has devoted sustained attention to its development.

Despite relatively high literacy rates, empirical observations suggest that a strong reading culture—particularly reading in English—has not been firmly established. In response, Malaysia has introduced a series of targeted policies to promote reading and language proficiency. The Education Act of 1961 mandated Malay as the sole medium of instruction at the secondary level.

Subsequently, the National Language Act of 1967, enacted after a ten-year transitional period during which English coexisted with Malay, reaffirmed Malay as the only official language. English, however, was designated as the “second most important language” and retained for use in Parliament and the courts.

Complementary initiatives included the National Book Policy (1985), which encouraged the production and consumption of quality reading materials, and the National Reading Promotion Policy (1987), which aimed to foster reading habits across society. In 2003, under mounting pressure from globalization and concerns over declining English proficiency, the government reintroduced English as the medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science. This policy remained in effect until 2009, when the cabinet decided to revert instruction to Malay and mother tongues. The long-term educational outcomes of this policy reversal remain debated.

Further reforms included introducing a modular reading program in 2009, inspired by Australian models and implemented in approximately 1,000 primary schools, featuring leveled reading systems. Overall, Malaysia's language policy has consistently emphasized Malay as the national language. Nevertheless, recent developments in the education sector have led to a broader institutional and social acceptance of English, including among students, reflecting its perceived importance in an increasingly globalized environment.

### *Language Policy Framework*

Malaysia's Constitution designates Malay (Bahasa Malaysia) as the national and official language following independence. At the same time, English is constitutionally recognized as a second language under Article 152 and is taught as a compulsory subject from primary through secondary education ([Azmi, 2013](#)).

The national education system explicitly promotes bilingualism, with the stated objective that every student should achieve functional proficiency in both Malay and English in order to enhance global competitiveness ([Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013](#)).

This bilingual orientation reflects Malaysia's broader nation-building strategy in a multi-ethnic context, where language policy functions as both a mechanism for fostering national identity and a means of facilitating participation in the global economy.

#### *English Language Policy Initiatives*

Since the early 2010s, Malaysia has pursued the policy of *Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia, Memperkukuh Bahasa Inggeris* (MBMMBI), translated as "Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language" ([Awang, n.d.](#)). Under this policy framework, Malay remains the primary medium of instruction, while English is systematically strengthened through curricular reforms and expanded instructional use.

A central component of MBMMBI is the Dual Language Programme (DLP), introduced nationwide in 2016. The DLP allows selected subjects—most notably Mathematics and Science—to be taught bilingually in Malay and English, with the explicit aim of enhancing students' exposure to and proficiency in English without fully displacing the national language ([Suliman et al., 2019](#)). Importantly, the program is designed as an option rather than a universal replacement of Malay-medium instruction, reflecting policy sensitivity to issues of identity and equity.

#### *Implementation in Practice*

In practice, English is a compulsory subject for eleven consecutive years (Grades 1–11) across all national schools in Malaysia ([Azmi, 2013](#)). Following earlier experiments teaching Mathematics and Science entirely in English under the PPSMI policy, the DLP offers a more flexible, context-sensitive approach to bilingual instruction.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 further emphasizes the goal of ensuring all students graduate with at least *operational proficiency* in both Malay and English ([Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013](#)). To support this objective, the government has directed substantial investment toward teacher professional development. Notably, national plans project that approximately 61,000 English language teachers must meet internationally benchmarked proficiency standards to ensure the effective implementation of bilingual and English-enhanced programs.

#### *Outcomes and Ongoing Challenges*

Overall, Malaysia's language and education reforms have contributed to measurable improvements in students' English proficiency, thereby increasing individuals' and the nation's stock of linguistic and economic capital ([Suliman et al., 2019](#)). However, significant disparities persist across ethnic groups and geographic regions. According to national assessments aligned with Cambridge benchmarks, only approximately 28–42% of students achieve average or above-average performance in English ([Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013](#)).

Moreover, English reading proficiency remains relatively low, limiting the broader social and cognitive benefits associated with second-language literacy ([Azmi, 2013](#)). These uneven outcomes highlight structural challenges, including unequal access to resources, shortages of highly proficient English teachers, and variations in school-level implementation capacity.

Malaysia's central policy dilemma lies in balancing Malay's symbolic and integrative role as a marker of national identity with English's instrumental value as a gateway to global knowledge and economic opportunity. Ensuring that students can effectively engage with scientific and technical content in a bilingual learning environment remains a persistent challenge, particularly

for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Azman et al., 2024).

#### *Comparative Analysis of Malaysia and Vietnam*

A comparative examination reveals that both Malaysia and Vietnam recognize English as an important resource for economic modernization and international integration. However, the two countries differ substantially in policy orientation, implementation mechanisms, and institutional capacity.

Malaysia has developed a more explicit bilingual framework that promotes the national language while strategically using English in education and public life. By contrast, Vietnam has historically treated English as a foreign language. However, recent policy discussions indicate a gradual shift toward positioning English as a second language within the national education system.

The comparison also highlights differences in teacher preparation, curriculum design, and educational equity. Malaysia's experience with initiatives such as the Dual Language Programme demonstrates the importance of sustained teacher training and institutional support in implementing bilingual education. Vietnam, meanwhile, continues to face challenges related to uneven teacher proficiency, disparities in educational resources, and unequal learning opportunities across regions.

To summarize these similarities and differences, Table 1 presents the principal analytical dimensions and their corresponding policy implications for Vietnam.

**Table 1.** Comparative Analysis of Malaysia's English Language Education Policy and Lessons for Vietnam

| Analytical Dimension                          | Malaysia                                                                                                                                                                  | Vietnam                                                                                                                                          | Policy Implications for Vietnam                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Language ideology                             | Adopts a functional bilingualism approach, recognizing English as an important language for global competitiveness while maintaining Malay as the national language.      | Traditionally treats English as a foreign language, although current reforms indicate a gradual transition toward a second-language orientation. | Establish a coherent national language policy that clearly defines English's role while safeguarding Vietnamese linguistic and cultural identity. |
| Teacher capacity and professional development | Relatively well-developed teacher certification systems, continuous professional development (CPD), and structured language proficiency standards support implementation. | Teacher qualifications and English proficiency remain uneven across regions, particularly between urban and rural areas.                         | Strengthen teacher education, expand CPD programs, and adopt nationally consistent English proficiency benchmarks for educators.                  |
| Curriculum and instructional model            | Implements initiatives such as the Dual Language Programme (DLP), allowing selected subjects to be taught in English to enhance bilingual competence.                     | English remains primarily a separate subject within the national curriculum, with limited bilingual instruction in mainstream schools.           | Gradually expand bilingual education models and pilot content-based English instruction where institutional conditions permit.                    |
| Educational                                   | Despite national initiatives,                                                                                                                                             | Similar inequalities                                                                                                                             | Prioritize targeted                                                                                                                               |

|                                 |                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| equity and regional disparities | disparities persist between urban and rural schools in terms of resources, teacher quality, and learning opportunities. | exist, especially in remote, mountainous, and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas where English learning conditions remain limited. | investment and differentiated support for disadvantaged regions to ensure equitable implementation of future language reforms. |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

As shown in Table 1, Malaysia's most valuable lesson is not simply expanding English-language instruction but developing a coherent policy ecosystem in which language ideology, teacher capacity, curriculum reform, and equity considerations reinforce one another. For Vietnam, the proposed transition toward English as a second language by 2035 will require long-term investment in teacher professional development, gradual expansion of bilingual instructional models, and targeted support for disadvantaged regions to avoid widening educational inequalities.

### Comparison And Lessons for Vietnam

#### *English Language Education in Vietnam*

In Vietnam, English has become a key subject within the national education system and has been increasingly prioritized in response to the demands of international integration. Over the past several decades, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has implemented a range of policies and national projects to improve foreign language proficiency among pupils and students. English was officially introduced as a compulsory subject in general education in 1982 and has gradually been extended to lower grade levels.

Overall, Vietnam's national English curriculum aligns with the Vietnamese Six-Level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework, which is compatible with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The revised curriculum, promulgated in 2018, is vertically articulated from Grade 1 to Grade 12 and has been implemented through a phased rollout.

Full nationwide implementation across all grades began in the 2024–2025 academic year. The overarching objective is for students to attain Level 3/6 (equivalent to B1 CEFR) upon completing upper secondary education, enabling them to use English independently for everyday communication and lifelong learning. In addition to linguistic competence, the curriculum aims to foster positive learning attitudes, intercultural awareness, and global citizenship through English language education.

#### 1. Objectives

The English curriculum is intended to equip students with a new communicative tool by developing the four core language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. By the end of upper secondary education, students are expected to communicate at Level 3/6 of the Vietnamese framework (equivalent to B1 CEFR), thereby establishing a foundation for using English in further study and employment.

Beyond language proficiency, English as a subject also develops core values (such as patriotism, empathy, diligence, integrity, and responsibility) and key transversal competencies (including autonomy, communication, collaboration, and creative problem-solving). The curriculum helps learners understand the cultures of English-speaking countries while appreciating their own national culture and developing global citizenship attributes.

## 2. Curriculum Structure

According to the 2018 General Education Curriculum issued by MOET, English is a compulsory subject from Grade 3 to Grade 12 in formal general education. In selected localities with favorable conditions, English is also offered to Grades 1 and 2 on an optional or enhanced basis. The curriculum follows a spiral design, in which themes and learning content are organized from simple to complex and are revisited and expanded across educational levels to ensure continuity and progression.

Instruction emphasizes all four language skills, with a stronger focus on listening and speaking in the early grades, gradually moving toward a balanced development of all skills in higher grades. From primary to upper secondary education, students progressively acquire age-appropriate phonology, vocabulary, and grammar, integrated with basic socio-cultural knowledge conveyed through the target language.

## 3. Teaching Approaches

MOET encourages communicative, interactive, and learner-centered approaches to English language teaching. Teachers are trained to use listening–speaking activities, group work, role-play, and presentations to create authentic contexts for language use. In addition, many schools have increased the integration of information and communication technologies in English teaching, including digital lessons, language-learning software, and online or blended classrooms.

Educational experts note that the revised English curriculum has enhanced students' motivation and engagement, particularly at the primary level. The overarching pedagogical orientation is to position English not merely as a subject of grammatical study, but as a practical tool through which students learn the language while exploring the world around them.

## 4. Assessment

Assessment in English combines formative (process-based) and summative (periodic) evaluation. At the primary and lower secondary levels, students are primarily assessed through school-based skill tests. At the upper secondary level, in addition to regular classroom assessments, students must take the National Upper Secondary Graduation Examination, in which English is a core subject. The national English examination focuses on reading comprehension, writing-related competencies (mainly grammar and vocabulary in multiple-choice formats), and selected socio-cultural knowledge.

Recent examination data indicate that the national average English score has remained around 6 out of 10. In contrast, the proportion of candidates scoring below average remains relatively high (approximately 42–50%, depending on the year). A positive trend, however, is the rapid increase in students exempted from the English examination for holding international certificates such as IELTS or TOEFL. By 2024, the number of exempted candidates was three times higher than in 2021, although they still accounted for only about 4–5% of total candidates.

## 5. Instructional Time

Under the revised curriculum, instructional time for English has increased compared to earlier programs. At the primary level (Grades 3–5), students receive four periods per week (approximately 2.3 hours), while at lower and upper secondary levels, English is taught for three periods per week (approximately 2.25 hours). In total, from Grade 3 to Grade 12, students complete approximately 1,155 periods, equivalent to nearly 870 classroom hours of English instruction.

The target outcome is for students to reach Level 3 (B1 CEFR) by the end of this period of study. However, estimates by international testing organizations suggest that an average learner typically requires only 350–400 guided learning hours to achieve B1. This discrepancy highlights a

persistent efficiency gap: despite substantial instructional time, many Vietnamese students fail to reach the expected proficiency level, as reflected in examination results and independent assessments.

#### 6. English in Higher Education

At the tertiary level, English is no longer a universally compulsory subject across all disciplines under MOET regulations; nevertheless, most universities and colleges include English (or a first foreign language) as a credit-bearing component of their curricula. English instruction at the higher education level generally follows two main tracks: non-major English for students in non-language disciplines, and specialized English for students majoring in English language studies or English teacher education.

For non-language majors in fields such as engineering, economics, and social sciences, English is typically taught during the first one to two years of university as a supporting subject. Many institutions impose foreign language graduation requirements. Under the former National Foreign Languages Project 2020, non-language majors were expected to achieve at least Level 3 (B1). In practice, however, by 2020 very few institutions had met this target, largely due to low student entry proficiency and limited instructional time at the tertiary level. Incoming university students in non-language majors typically demonstrate proficiency ranging from A2 to B1.

For English majors, including programs in English language studies, English pedagogy, translation, and interpretation, training programs usually last four to five years and aim for advanced proficiency. Graduation benchmarks for these students are typically set at Level 5/6 (C1 CEFR) or the equivalent of IELTS 7.0. Leading institutions such as Hanoi University and the University of Languages and International Studies (Vietnam National University) require graduates to meet these standards.

The curriculum includes advanced skills training, linguistics, English and Anglophone literature and culture, teaching methodology (for education majors), and translation and interpreting theory. Most specialized courses are delivered entirely in English. As a result, many graduates achieve C1-level proficiency, with many holding international certificates at IELTS 7.0 or higher, and some even reaching C2 level.

#### 7. Teacher Requirements and Professional Development

Under the National Foreign Languages Project 2020, English teachers were required to meet CEFR-aligned proficiency standards: B2 for primary and lower secondary education, and C1 for upper secondary education, continuing education, colleges, and professional secondary institutions. To achieve these targets, the Ministry implemented extensive in-service training programs to enhance teachers' English proficiency and their pedagogical competence in communicative, learner-centered teaching.

A typical training program consists of approximately 240 hours, delivered through face-to-face, online, or blended formats. In pilot projects, the proportion of face-to-face to online instruction was approximately 70% to 30%. Course materials include trainer manuals with detailed training plans, learner textbooks focused on practical teaching methods, audio recordings, progress-monitoring tools, pedagogical terminology, and assessment instruments. Evaluation results have been encouraging: more than 50% of participating teachers improved their English proficiency by at least one CEFR level after approximately 200 hours of instruction ([British Council, n.d.](#)).

#### 8. Implementation Issues and Policy Implications

For students, English remains a compulsory subject from Grade 3 to Grade 12 and serves as a key instrumental subject in general education. The revised curriculum addresses several

longstanding challenges, including large class sizes, limited instructional time under the previous curriculum, and an overemphasis on grammar that constrained classroom interaction and led many students to seek private tutoring.

The new curriculum introduces content that is more closely aligned with real-life contexts, emphasizes “learning through use,” strengthens teacher professional development, integrates cross-curricular content, and encourages guided self-directed learning. The expected outcome is that upper secondary graduates reach Level 3 proficiency, enabling them to handle most common communicative situations, read and write short texts on familiar topics, and express experiences and opinions clearly and concisely.

Key policy implications include the need for effective quality management of the teaching workforce through clear language and pedagogical standards, continuous professional development, improved digital infrastructure and learning resources to enhance interaction, and a shift toward competency-based assessment with stronger emphasis on formative evaluation.

### *Comparative Analysis with Vietnam*

A comparison between Malaysia and Vietnam reveals both notable similarities and important differences in their approaches to English language education and language policy. In both countries, the national language remains central to state-building, cultural identity, and public administration. At the same time, English is increasingly regarded as an essential instrument for economic development and international integration. However, the institutional status assigned to English and the strategies adopted to promote its use differ considerably.

In Malaysia, Malay is the national language and the primary medium of instruction. At the same time, English is constitutionally recognized as a second language and taught as a compulsory subject throughout the school system ([Azmi, 2013](#)). English is particularly prominent in urban areas and plays an important role in higher education, business, and international communication.

In contrast, Vietnamese remains the sole national language in Vietnam, and English has traditionally been treated as the principal foreign language within the education system. Although English has been widely introduced from the primary level onward, its formal status has until recently remained distinct from that of a second language.

The two countries also differ in how they design and implement language policy. Malaysia’s MBMMBI policy (*Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia, Memperkukuh Bahasa Inggeris*) explicitly seeks to strengthen English proficiency while preserving Malay’s primacy. A major feature of this strategy is the Dual Language Programme (DLP), introduced in 2016, which permits participating schools to teach subjects such as Mathematics and Science in both Malay and English ([Awang, n.d.](#); [Suliman et al., 2019](#)).

By comparison, Vietnam has pursued the objectives of the National Foreign Languages Project and subsequent reforms to improve English proficiency across the education system. More recently, the Ministry of Education and Training announced a long-term roadmap to establish English as a second language in general education during 2025–2035, reflecting an increasingly ambitious policy orientation ([Souvannasane, 2025](#)).

Implementation mechanisms further illustrate contrasting policy trajectories. Malaysia has incorporated English into compulsory schooling, expanded bilingual instructional opportunities through the DLP, and invested substantially in teacher certification and professional development ([Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013](#)).

Vietnam has similarly expanded English education and established CEFR-aligned proficiency standards for teachers, while implementing large-scale training programs. Nevertheless, English instruction remains primarily subject-based, although gradual experimentation with bilingual education and English-medium instruction is emerging in higher education and vocational

institutions.

Regarding educational outcomes, both countries have achieved measurable progress but continue to face persistent challenges. In Malaysia, bilingual initiatives have improved English proficiency and strengthened students' linguistic capital and employment prospects. However, disparities remain evident between urban and rural areas, as well as among different socioeconomic and ethnic groups, with average proficiency levels remaining below policy aspirations in many regions (Azman et al., 2024; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

In Vietnam, public demand for English has increased significantly, reflected in the growing popularity of international qualifications such as IELTS and their expanding role in university admissions and graduation policies. At the same time, evaluations indicate that many teachers have yet to achieve the required language proficiency standards, suggesting the need for continued investment in professional development (Vu, 2025).

Despite their differing institutional contexts, both countries face several common challenges. Malaysia continues to balance expanding English with preserving Malay as the national language while addressing shortages of qualified teachers and educational resources, particularly in remote regions.

Vietnam faces comparable difficulties, including uneven teacher quality, disparities in educational infrastructure, and substantial urban–rural differences in learning opportunities. In addition, an examination-oriented culture and increasing reliance on international certification may encourage credential acquisition rather than the practical communicative use of English.

Overall, the comparison suggests that Malaysia's experience provides valuable policy lessons for Vietnam. Rather than promoting English at the expense of the national language, Malaysia has pursued a model of functional bilingualism supported by institutional planning, teacher development, and phased implementation. For Vietnam, achieving its long-term objective of strengthening English education while preserving Vietnamese linguistic and cultural identity will require a similarly balanced approach, accompanied by sustained investment in human resources, curriculum reform, and equitable educational opportunities across regions.

### *Lessons for Vietnam*

Malaysia's experience shows that strengthening English language education requires a clearly defined, phased policy framework implemented alongside the protection of the national language. Vietnam can draw several practical lessons.

#### 1. Policy clarity and coherence.

Malaysia's bilingual policy framework, particularly MBMMBI, clearly articulates the balance between the national language and English, enabling teachers and learners to understand their complementary roles. Vietnam's policy initiatives should similarly emphasize that Vietnamese remains the primary medium of instruction while English is systematically strengthened to support internationalization objectives. Such clarity is essential to avoid policy ambiguity and social resistance, while ensuring alignment with national development goals (Awang, n.d.; Azman et al., 2024).

#### 2. Teacher training and certification

Malaysia has invested heavily in enhancing English teacher capacity through internationally benchmarked proficiency assessments and continuous professional development. Vietnam can draw on this experience by further strengthening teacher training and certification aligned with CEFR standards, ensuring teachers are adequately prepared to deliver English-enhanced and bilingual programs. Regular in-service training, thematic workshops, and sustained professional

learning communities are critical to improving instructional quality ([Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013](#); [Vu, 2025](#)).

### 3. Learning materials and infrastructure

Ensuring access to high-quality learning materials—such as textbooks, workbooks, and English-language digital resources—is essential for effective English language education. Malaysia has actively promoted integrating technology into teaching and learning, including e-learning models ([Azman et al., 2024](#)). Vietnam can adapt this approach by investing in digital infrastructure and open educational resources, including online platforms, instructional videos, and language-learning software, to create a richer English-language learning environment.

### 4. Motivation and meaningful assessment

Malaysia has set ambitious targets, including the goal that all students attain basic operational proficiency in both Malay and English ([Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013](#)). Vietnam could similarly establish clear, realistic benchmarks—such as ensuring that most students achieve at least B1 proficiency upon completing upper secondary education—and maintain regular, formative English assessments to monitor progress. At the same time, it is important to avoid an excessive focus on test scores or international certificates (e.g., IELTS) at the expense of developing practical communicative competence for everyday use.

### 5. Cultural and political context

As a multi-ethnic society, Malaysia illustrates the importance of carefully balancing language policy to maintain social cohesion. Although Vietnam is relatively more homogeneous, Vietnamese continues to function as the “soul of the nation” and must remain central to educational and cultural life. English language policies should not generate perceptions of linguistic displacement or cultural loss. Malaysia’s experience also highlights how minority languages may be marginalized when policy attention focuses primarily on the national language and English ([Azman et al., 2024](#)). Vietnam should therefore adopt a sensitive approach when implementing Englishization in regions with large ethnic minority populations, such as the Central Highlands and the Northwest.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that Malaysia’s experience in English language education reflects a sustained effort to balance promoting English with preserving the national language. Rather than pursuing a single or fixed policy direction, Malaysia has gradually adapted its language planning strategies in response to changing economic, educational, and social conditions. The transition from earlier English-dominant arrangements to Malay-centered policies and, more recently, to a model of functional bilingualism illustrates the importance of aligning language policy with national development priorities while maintaining social cohesion.

The analysis also indicates that English serves as important linguistic and economic capital, enhancing access to higher education, international communication, and employment opportunities. At the same time, Malay remains central to national identity, cultural continuity, and public administration.

Policies such as the MBMMBI initiative and the Dual Language Programme demonstrate that expanding English education does not necessarily require reducing the institutional role of the national language. Instead, carefully designed bilingual strategies can support both objectives simultaneously when accompanied by appropriate governance mechanisms and educational investment.

The comparative findings also suggest that policy effectiveness depends not only on strategic

vision but also on implementation capacity. Malaysia's experience highlights the importance of teacher professional development, curriculum coherence, adequate learning resources, and continuous monitoring in achieving language policy objectives. Persistent disparities between urban and rural areas further indicate that equitable distribution of educational opportunities is essential if bilingual reforms are to benefit all learners rather than reinforce existing inequalities.

For Vietnam, these findings provide several relevant policy implications as the country advances its long-term plan to strengthen the role of English in general education. Establishing English as a second language should be understood as a gradual institutional process that requires sustained investment in teacher capacity, curriculum reform, assessment systems, and educational infrastructure. Equally important is ensuring that the expansion of English complements rather than diminishes the role of Vietnamese as the principal language of education and a central element of national identity.

From a theoretical perspective, the study supports integrating Spolsky's language policy model with Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital in comparative education research. The Malaysian case illustrates how language beliefs, language practices, and language management interact with the unequal distribution of linguistic resources and educational opportunities. This integrated framework helps explain why successful language reforms depend not only on policy design but also on institutional implementation and broader social conditions.

Overall, the evidence suggests that effective English language policy should pursue balanced bilingual development rather than treating English and the national language as competing alternatives. For multilingual and developing societies such as Malaysia and Vietnam, sustainable language planning requires clear policy objectives, long-term institutional commitment, equitable resource allocation, and continuous adaptation to evolving educational and socioeconomic needs.

## **LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study has several limitations that readers should consider when interpreting its findings. First, the analysis is based exclusively on documentary evidence and published secondary sources, including official policy documents, curriculum frameworks, institutional reports, and peer-reviewed literature. Although these materials provide valuable insights into policy formulation and implementation, they do not capture the perspectives and experiences of teachers, students, school leaders, or policymakers directly involved in English language education.

Second, the research adopts a qualitative comparative policy approach and therefore does not seek to establish causal relationships between language policies and educational outcomes. Instead, it emphasizes analytical interpretation of policy design, governance mechanisms, and implementation patterns. Consequently, the findings should be understood as context-sensitive policy lessons rather than universally generalizable conclusions.

Third, the comparative scope is limited to Malaysia and Vietnam. While the two countries share several regional and developmental characteristics, they differ in historical trajectories, sociolinguistic environments, and institutional arrangements. These contextual differences may influence the transferability of specific policy measures, particularly those related to bilingual education and the expansion of English-medium instruction.

Finally, the study does not incorporate large-scale quantitative indicators or longitudinal learner-performance data to evaluate the effectiveness of individual policy interventions. As a result, conclusions regarding educational outcomes rely primarily on documented evaluations reported in existing literature rather than original empirical measurement.

Future research could address these limitations by employing mixed-methods designs that combine policy analysis with interviews, surveys, and classroom observations involving key educational stakeholders. Comparative studies involving additional Southeast Asian countries, such

as Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, or Thailand, would also provide broader regional perspectives on language policy development and implementation.

Furthermore, longitudinal research examining the impact of teacher professional development, bilingual instructional models, and competency-based assessment reforms on students' English proficiency would contribute valuable empirical evidence to support policy formulation. For Vietnam in particular, future studies should monitor the implementation of the proposed transition toward English as a second language by 2035 and evaluate its implications for educational equity, teacher preparedness, and the preservation of Vietnamese linguistic and cultural identity.

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