EXPECTATIONS OF THE UPHOLDING THE MALAY LANGUAGE AND STRENGTHENING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE POLICY: A DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the expectations as aspired under the Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language Policy (abbreviated as MBMMBI).The MBMMBI policy was launched in 2009 by the Malaysian Ministry of Education. Later, the Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (2012) and 2015-2025 (2015) by the education ministry stipulated implementation of the MBMMBI policy. This study has analyzed the MBMMBI Policy document and subsequent education plans through qualitative data analysis software Atlas-ti employing thematic analysis approach. The results reveal that boosting students' proficiency in BM and English and making the students "operationally proficient" in BM and English are the key aspirations of the existing language-in-education policy of Malaysia. To fulfill these aspirations, certain strategies have been proposed that include improvements in the English curriculum, increase in the credit hours for the subject of English, training of English language teachers, introducing BM as the language of knowledge, utilization of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scales as benchmarks for BM and English, introducing blended-learning models, and upholding BM as the language of knowledge. The study has highlighted various challenges with regards to actual realization of the aspirations linked to the MBMMBI policy.

Keywords: Malaysian language policy, MBMMBI aspirations, policy and plans document analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiracial country which comprises Malays, Chinese and Indians as main ethnic groups. The Malays mark 67%, the Chinese 24.6% and the Indians 7.3% of the whole population (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2014). This presents the multilingual scene of the country. Bahasa Melayu (BM) is the national language of the country used extensively usual interactions among all races. Minority languages also project their existence in their typical domains (Tan, 2005).Interleaving its global importance, and penetrating in academic, social and professional realms, English establishes to be the second most important language of the country as well as the formal second language (Asmah 1982; Hassan & Hashim, 2009). This phenomenon of multi-lingualism enables everyone to speak at least two or more languages (Gill, 2014) which project a unique Malaysian identity. Furthermore, it also highlights the parameters as to which language is to be held and which to be strengthened.

This particular concern has taken to several measures in order to ensure that each student attains the

language proficiency in at least two languages. The latest measure adopted is the MBMMBI language policy. The MBMMBI is being considered as a hallmark initiative with regards to the language-in-education that gears the education system of Malaysia more to maintaining the national language as its cultural legacy, as well as gaining market outcomes of English as a global language. This has been, furthermore, elucidated in the Malaysian Education Plan-MEP 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education, 2012) and the Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint-MHEB 2015-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).In connection with the MBMMBI policy, the Ministry of Education has, so far, introduced English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025 (2015);The Pelan Tindakan Memartabatkan BM Sebagai Bahasa Ilmu di Universiti Awam 2016–2020 (2016); and implemented DLP (Dual Language Programme) at schools (2016).

Utmost, the MEP 2013-2025 finds poor English of Malaysian fresh graduates as one of the top five factors behind graduate unemployability. The Roadmap 2015-2025 quotes from The Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 that more than half of the undergraduate students at six Malaysian universities showed merely a limited proficiency in English. Likewise, poor English proficiency has been reported the most highlighted issue by 55.8% employers in Malaysia. Hazita Azman (2016) refers to Job Street that cites low English as one of the main reasons of Malaysian graduates' un-employability. She apprehends this phenomenon as a threat to Vision 2020. The MHEB 2015-2025 also points out that Malaysian graduates lack critical thinking, communication skills (especially in English) which are critical for success in the 21st century" (p. 1-6).MBMMBI policy, in this perspective, is the leading principle.

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This study has analyzed these aspirations as stipulated in the MBMMBI policy and as postulated in the subsequent plans. For this purpose, this research has conducted thematic analysis of the following drafts:

1. MBMMBI (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2009)
2. Dasar MBMMBI (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2014)
3. Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MOE, 2012)
4. Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint-2015-2025 (MOE, 2015)
5. Pelan Tindakan Memartabatkan BM Sebagai Bahasa Ilmu di Universiti Awam 2016-2020 (KPT, 2015)
6. English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025 (MOE, 2015)

This study includes large interest and wide spectrum of bilingual education and adds an understanding into a large scale bilingual policy and its implementation.

2. METHODS

The primary objective of this study guides the researcher to employ case study approach for collecting and analyzing the needed data (Punch, 2005; Yin, 2008). The study focuses on developing a thorough understanding for the case of BM and English language aspirations in Malaysia. The research reviewed numerous language policy documents drawn up by the Malaysian Ministry of Education for this reason. Document analysis is considered a common method employed in Case Studies by Hancock and Algozzine (2006). Table 1 presents the under study documents alongwith labels assigned. Review of these manuscripts gave a clear picture of Malaysian government's goals for language-in-education.

Table 1 Policy Related Documents and their Labels

Sr.	Document	Label
1.	MBMMBI (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2009)	Doc-MBMMBI-2009
2.	Dasar MBMMBI (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2014)	Doc-Dasar-MBMMBI-2014
3.	Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MOE, 2012)	Doc-MEB-2013-25
4.	Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint-2015-2025 (MOE, 2015)	Doc-MHEB-2015-25
5.	Pelan Tindakan Memartabatkan BM Sebagai Bahasa Ilmu di UniversitiAwam 2016-2020 (KPT, 2015)	Doc-Plan-2015
6.	English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025 (MOE, 2015)	Doc-Roadmap-2015-25

A Case Study identifies its meaningful results by synthesizing divergent pieces of at hand information amassed in the whole research process (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). As a first step, a general understanding of the collected information was evolved. It followed coding and developing emergent themes about the study (Creswell, 2005). The process followed was inductive which moved from particular-detailed data e.g., documents– to the general – codes and themes (ibid: 231).The documents were read time and time again for a complete understanding of the aspirations under study. This computer package helped the researcher in managing, sorting and organizing large volumes of data, storing, annotating and retrieving text, locating words, phrases and segments of data, preparing diagrams and extracting quotes (Seale, 2000). The information patterns as created were later examined in accordance with the related research question. For analysis of the qualitative data collected via documents under study, thematic analysis techniques as guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used as demonstrated below:
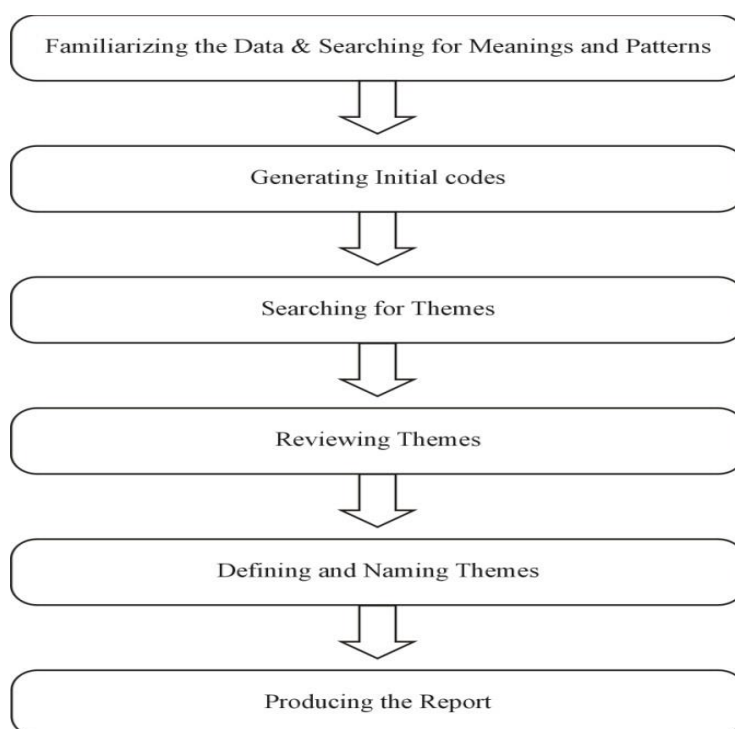

Figure 1 Six Steps of Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis (2006)

All the six documents were imported into Atlas ti 7 for analysis. Relevant quotes were carefully coded and named after the type of information they were providing. The Figure 2 as below exhibits the Atlas.ti-7 interface used in this research.
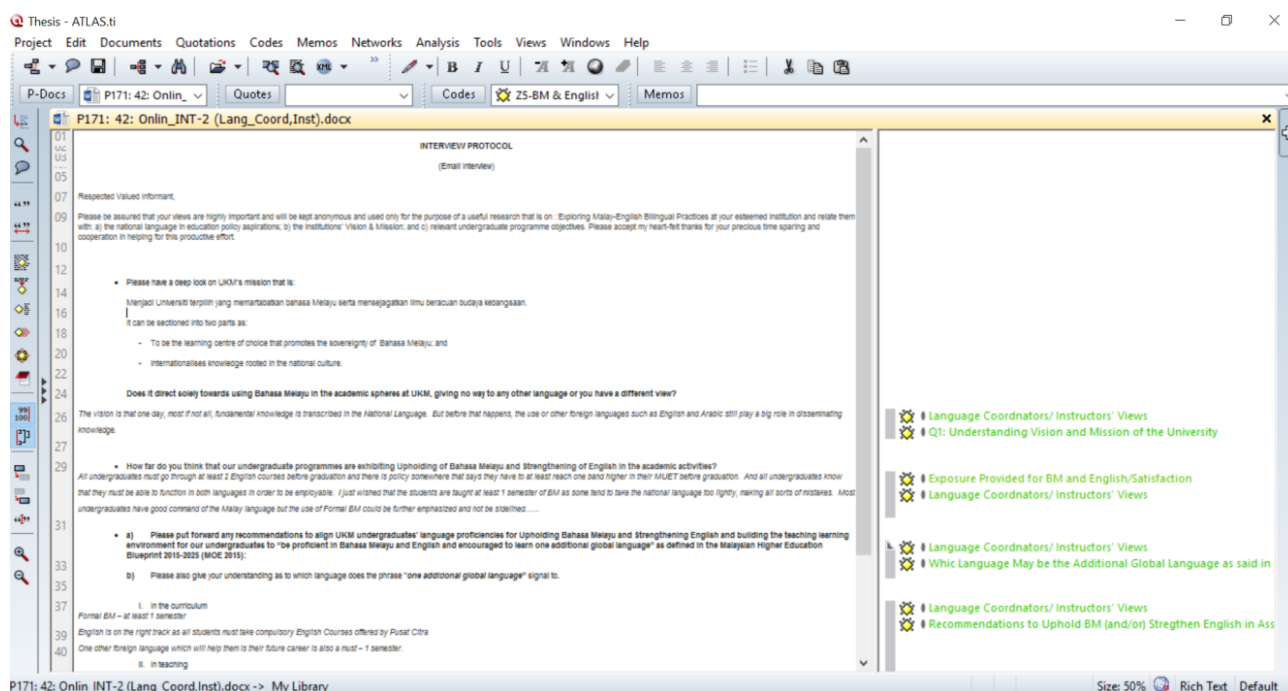

Figure 2 Themes: Bilingual Practices at PU

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Language Aspirations as Reflected in the Current Policies and Plans

The Figure 3 and Table 2 below offer a network view of the current language expectations stratified into Categories and Themes
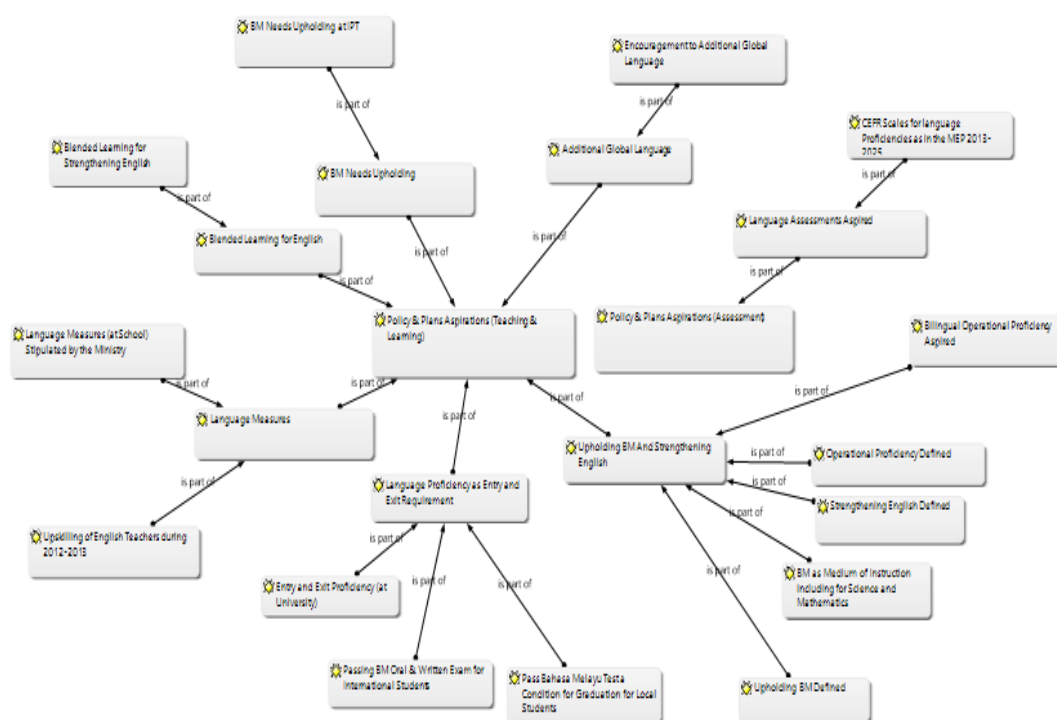

Figure 3 Network View of the Policy and Plans Aspirations and Concerns

Table 2 Categories and Themes of Policy and Plans Aspirations

Codes	Categories	Main Themes
Upholding BM Defined	Upholding BM And Strengthening English	Policy and Plans Aspirations (Teaching & Learning)
Strengthening English Defined		
BM as Medium of Instruction including for Science and Mathematics		
Bilingual Proficiency Aspired		
Operational Proficiency Defined		
Importance/ Place of Language/ Bilingual Proficiency		
Encouragement to Additional Global Language	Additional Global Language	
BM Needs Upholding at IPT	BM Needs Upholding	
Entry and Exit Proficiency (at University)	Language Proficiency as Entry and Exit Requirement	
Pass BM Test a Condition for Graduation for Local Students		
Passing BM Oral & Written Exam for International Students		
Blended Learning for Strengthening English	Blended Learning for English	
Language Measures (at School) Stipulated by the Ministry	Language Measures	
Credit Hours Increased for English as Subject		
Upskilling of English Teachers during 2012-2013		
Targeted English language proficiencies as Stage-wise planned in The Roadmap 2015-2025		
CEFR Scales for language Proficiencies as in the MEP 2013-2025	Language Assessments Aspired	Policy and Plans Aspirations (Assessment)
Establishment of CEFR Assessment Scales scheduled in The Roadmap 2015-2025		

3.2. Current Language Policy and Plans' Aspirations in Teaching and Learning

As in the MBMMBI policy draft (MOE, 2009), strategy of upholding BM involves the use of BM as a medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics in primary and secondary schools as well as the improvement of teaching and learning BM. It also defines that BM should be placed, as specified in the Article 152, Federal Constitution of Malaysia, in its position as a national language. It also acknowledges the status of BM as the main medium of education under the Education Act 1996.In the plan for improving English language mastery, the English curriculum requires to be changed, including teacher education and the appropriate standard of materials needed for the course to be enforced.

Furthering the implementation of the MBMMBI policy, the MEP 2013-2025 (MOE, 2012) targets that boosting all students' proficiency in BM and English will be the ministry's most immediate priority. The ministry includes bilingual proficiency as one of the six key attributes needed by every student to be globally competitive (aligned with the National Education Philosophy, 1988) and recognizes the status of BM as key language of education.

At minimum, the MEP anticipates that each child will be "operatively proficient" in BM as national language and unity language and the international language of communication in English (MOE, 2012). Likewise, MHEB 2015-2025 (MOE, 2015) demonstrates its desire to make students "operationally proficient" at least in BM and English. The Figure 4, as below, demonstrates the language aspirations as presented in the MHEB 2015-2025.
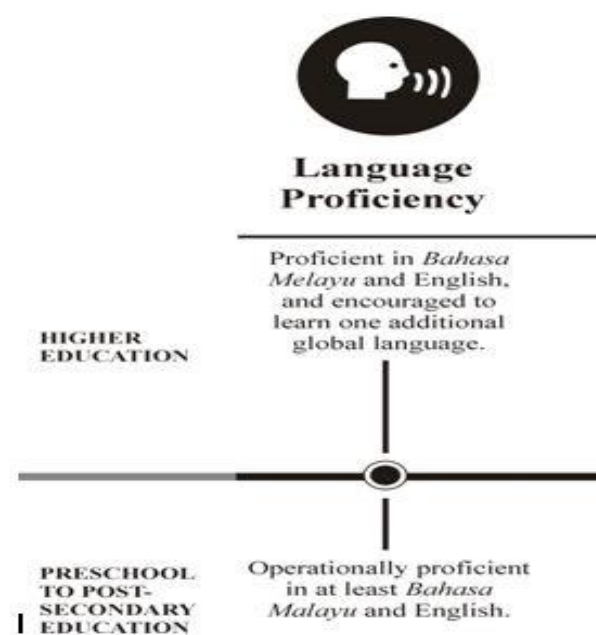
Figure 4: Language Concerns as Outlined in MHEB 2015-2025

The MHEB recognizes that English skills are one of the best attributes for Malaysian business sectors. The MEP refers to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages-CEFR for Languages (CoE, 2001) for defining 'operation proficiency'. CEFR for Languages defines 'operational proficiency' as 'the linguistic fluency required to participate fully in professional and academic life" (Exhibit 4-5).This level of proficiency is the highest level of language ability as described in the CEFR skills, usually taken as academic native speaker abilities (Iber, 2014).As highlighted, per annum exposure of English provided in schools is around 8.5 days (with 16 hours of teaching every day) which is by no means sufficient to produce any type of academic fluency; thus the prescribed CEFR level stands unrealistic for this very set of students (Iber, 2014).

Nevertheless, it is clearly stated in the policy that BM is the main medium of education whereas 'Strengthening English' means enhancing English language abilities with the help ofa good quality curriculum and standard materials for the subject of English and increasing credit hours for English. In order to compensate the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English, the education ministry has expressed a very deep interest to intensify the training for English teachers (MOE, 2012). Moreover, the establishment of DLP at only selected schools is an open agreement to Teaching of Science and Mathematics in English. Furthermore, the ministry has the intention to make English subject paper compulsory for passing SPM from 2016. However, Iber (2014) finds lack in preparations for marking English as a compulsory paper at SPM as early as 2016.

The next development set by the Ministry of Education, essentially an outspreaded from the MEB, was the creation of The English Language Education Roadmap for Malaysia 2015-2025 (Don et al., 2015). This roadmap is in line with MEB. The Roadmap 2015-2025 (Don et al., 2015) has been added as an allied building stone in association with MBMMBI. It offers a map-line for teaching of English in Malaysia. It builds parameters for English teachers and curriculum developers so to align the English language curriculum and students' language assessments under CEFR which has today become an international benchmark for language education and proficiency standards. This reform is a holistic outline of learners' language improvement as competent users, supporting them "to participate fully in both professional and academic contexts". It demonstrates the whole plan of a gradual advancement from school to tertiary level and in teachers training as in the following Table 3:

Table 3 Achievement of CEFR Targets set by The Roadmap 2015-2025

Stage	CEFR Level To Be Achieved
Preschool	A1
Primary school	A2
Secondary school	B1/B2
Post-Secondary	B2
University	B2/C1
Teacher Education	C2

3.3. BM Needs Upholding

Along with the place allotted to BM as stipulated in the MBMMBI language policy 2009 and plans 2013-25 and 2015-25 under the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2012-2015), the Audit Report for BM at Public Universities 2014 (MOE, 2014) and the Action Plan Upholding Bahasa Melayu as the Language of Knowledge in Public Universities 2016-2020 (KPT, 2015) outline that there exists a need to Uphold BM as language of knowledge in public universities. The aspiration to uphold BM is also very much critical. As discussed, Chinese form the second (24.6) whereas the Indians (7.3) form the third largest majority in the multiracial Malaysia. Ignoring BM is ignoring Malay identity. In such circumstances, upholding BM becomes needful.

3.4. Additional Global Language

Other than aiming 'operational bilingual proficiency' in BM and English, the ministry of education also has expressed the aspiration to encourage Malaysian students to learn an additional language with independent proficiency (MOE, 2012, 2015). Still, we do not find any clues as to which additional global language the ministry refers to. As elaborated in the CEFR for Languages, 'independent proficiency' is the ability to hold one's own in social discourse'.

3.5. Language Proficiency as Entry and Exit Requirement

The Ministry of Education (2015) has expressed the intention for implementing guidelines that include raising minimum language proficiency requirements for getting admission to university where needed. Moreover, students must have to attain an improved level of language proficiency for their graduation.

In this regard, universities can have a language requirement for admission to any programmes. This requirement can be based on those competencies which school has produced among students when they left the school and universities may start enhancement of language competencies from there. Further, as a condition, students should earn improved proficiency in language for attainment of their graduation.

3.6. Blended Learning for English

The Ministry of Education also has shown a vibrant intention of introducing blended learning models in order to strengthen English abilities of students. Basing on extensive use of internet gadgets, the ministry has successfully established the use of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). Universities are already taking steps to adopt blended learning which is indeed more closer to learning styles of today's university intakes.

3.7. Language Assessments Aspired in the Current Language Policy and Plans

For language assessments, the MEP 2013-2025 has clearly indicated the step to use the CEFR for Languages scales as benchmarks. The Plan also highlights the commitment for redesigning and realigning the BM curriculum and assessments along CEFR. The Roadmap 2015-2025 specifies the criteria for language assessments. The Roadmap, as deliberated earlier, presents a way-line to align the language curriculum and assessments with the CEFR standards.

The question of this study has been raised to know about aspirations related with BM and English language linked to MBMMBI policy in Malaysia. The results of the document analysis show that Malaysian government has outlined a number of aspirations related with both languages i.e. English and BM out of which, maintaining BM (the country's national language) as bearer of Malaysian cultural heritage and strengthening English as a global language to gain market benefits for Malaysian graduates, has been observed as the key aspiration.

It shows that the MBMMBI aspirations address national as well as international concerns. For the national concern, the policy involves to stress Malaysian culture which is a unique blend of multiple races as well as cultures (see Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2014; Tan, 2005). The other concern i.e. international is related with strengthening of the English language. In fact, English is used as a second most important language in Malaysia (see Asmah, 1982; Bullah & Yunus, 2019; Hassan & Hashim, 2009).

The question remains how far the Malaysian government has succeeded to realize the aspirations related with BM and English as outlined in MBMMBI policy. It is important to mention here that the government has also set certain strategies to facilitate the implementation process of the MBMMBI. One of those strategies is the improvement of the quality of the English language teachers in Malaysia (Kepol, 2017). Improvement in the quality of teachers is very significant for it has been linked with learners' achievements (Goe, 2007; Goe & Stickler, 2008). The strategy to improve the teachers' quality was supported by a number of several sub-strategies i.e. improvement in teachers' knowledge, increasing the number of English language teachers, and monitoring and evaluation of teachers' knowledge and pedagogical practices. In the view of Kepol (2017, P. 204) "the MBMMBI policy has not been able to capture the full complexity of the concept of teacher quality". Similarly, the scales of the Common European Framework of Reference were also proposed to be implemented in Malaysia in 2013 (Aziz & Uri, 2017) i.e. the government of Malaysia agreed to incorporate the said framework into the current Malaysian education system by accelerating its implementation (see English Language Education Reforms 2015-2025; Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 -2025). But in the view of Aziz and Uri (2017) this strategy has also not properly been realized due to certain challenges e.g. English is the weakest core subject, lack of political will, incompetent teachers, and lack of studies for the implementation of CEFR in Malaysia.

The strategy of the implementation of the DLP at school level in Malaysia was initiated in 2016 to provide the learners with an opportunity to use English language while learning Mathematics and Science subjects. The purpose behind this drive was to produce such learners as were proficient in English as a lingua franca. But unfortunately, this strategy has also been reported to have been facing challenges as lack of teaching facilities and resources (see Bullah & Yunus, 2019). Much the same way, Iber (2014) regarded the exposure of English provided to the learners every year in schools, as being insufficient to facilitate the development of the "operational proficiency" which is the highest level of CEFR language proficiency abilities.

4. CONCLUSION

The discussion leads to the conclusion that MBMMBI focuses on to fulfill certain aspirations i.e.: (1) upholding BM and strengthening English. The strategy of upholding BM involves the use of BM as a medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics in primary and secondary schools as well as the improvement of teaching and learning BM. It defines for further that it means to put BM in its position as a national language. While strategy of strengthening mastery in English involves improving English curriculum that includes teacher preparation and sufficient quality of materials to implement the curriculum; (2) boosting students' proficiency in BM and English as the ministry's most immediate priority; and (3) making the students "operationally proficient" in BM and English. In this regard, certain measures have been proposed i.e. (a) improving English through quality curriculum and materials for English as a subject and increasing credit hours for English as a subject; (b) upholding BM as the language of knowledge in public universities; (c) introducing blended-learning models to strengthen English proficiencies of the students; (d) training of English language teachers; and utilizing the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) scales as benchmarks for all languages; and (e) stipulating the standards for languages' assessments in the Malaysian education system. Moreover, the said aspirations have not been properly realized. Challenges to implement the strategies to facilitate the realization of the aspiration have been reported as the main reasons behind it.

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