



LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICIES IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Language education serves as a strategic instrument in shaping cultural and national identity, particularly in multi-ethnic nations such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Utilizing a qualitative approach based on literature review, this article analyzes the contribution of language education to the construction of cultural identity in both countries. The theoretical framework encompasses Language Policy and Planning (Spolsky, 2004) and Language Ideology (Woolard, 1998). Findings indicate that Indonesia develops an integrative-pluralist model through the assertion of Bahasa Indonesia as a national unifier, while Malaysia implements an ethno-national orientation in language education with Bahasa Melayu as a symbol of majority identity. Despite sharing Malay linguistic roots, historical politics and social dynamics have shaped ideological differences in language education. This study also identifies research gaps in comparative language education policy studies that integrate globalization dynamics and multilingual realities within the ASEAN context. The article contributes to understanding how postcolonial nations navigate the tension between national unity, ethnic diversity, and global competitiveness through language education policies.

Keywords: *Language Education, Cultural Identity, Language Policy, Indonesia, Malaysia, Comparative Study, Nation-Building, ASEAN*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental element in the construction of national and cultural identity. As a complex communication system, language serves not only as a medium for exchanging information but also as a vehicle for transmitting cultural values, political ideology, and the collective memory of a nation (May, 2012). In the context of postcolonial countries in Southeast Asia, language education plays a strategic role in the nation-building process, given the demographic complexities and colonial legacies that shape the contemporary linguistic landscape (Simpson, 2007). Indonesia and Malaysia represent interesting cases in the comparative study of language education and identity construction. Both countries share linguistic roots in the Austronesian language family, share a history of pre-colonial trade and culture, but have experienced different colonial trajectories—Indonesia under the Dutch and Malaysia under the British (Collins, 1996; Sneddon, 2003). These differing historical

experiences have resulted in divergent language policy orientations, although both countries face similar challenges in managing ethnic and linguistic diversity.

Indonesia, with over 700 regional languages and a population of over 270 million people spread across 17,000 islands, faces unique challenges of national integration (Ethnologue, 2023). The choice of Indonesian, a variety of Riau Malay developed as a *lingua franca*, as the national language since the 1928 Youth Pledge was a strategic, supra-ethnic political decision (Moeliono, 1993). Unlike many postcolonial countries that retain colonial languages, Indonesia deliberately rejected Dutch in favor of Malay, which has served as a language of commerce and inter-ethnic communication in the archipelago (Sneddon, 2003). Malaysia, with a demographic composition consisting of Malays (69%), Chinese (23%), and Indians (7%), faces different dynamics (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Malay is positioned not only as the national language but also as a symbol of the majority ethnic identity and an instrument of *bumiputera* policies that privilege the Malays (Asmah, 2008). The Malaysian Constitution (Article 152) establishes Malay as the official language of the state, reflecting an ethnonational orientation in language policy (Federal Constitution of Malaysia, 1957).

In the era of globalization and ASEAN regional integration, Indonesia and Malaysia face increasing pressure to balance the preservation of national identity through language with the need for international language competence, particularly English as a regional and global *lingua franca* (Kirkpatrick, 2012). This dynamic presents a policy paradox: on the one hand, national languages are positioned as symbols of sovereignty, collective identity, and instruments of nation-building; on the other hand, the demands of the global economy and regional integration are driving an increasing role for English in the education system. The interaction between nationalist aspirations and global economic imperatives creates new complexities in the formulation and implementation of language education policies in both countries.

In this context, language education can no longer be understood solely as a pedagogical issue, but rather as an ideological and political arena where cultural identity, state interests, and development strategies are negotiated. Indonesia and Malaysia, despite sharing linguistic roots in the Malay language, exhibit different policy trajectories in managing the relationship between national, ethnic, and global languages. These differences raise fundamental questions about how language education contributes to the construction of cultural identity, the ideological orientations underlying these policies, and how the two countries respond to the challenges of globalization and the reality of multilingualism within a nation-building framework.

Based on these issues, this article comparatively analyzes the role of language education in shaping cultural identity in Indonesia and Malaysia. Specifically, it examines the ideological orientation of language education policies in both countries and the historical factors that shaped them, compares the similarities and differences in policy approaches within the context of nation-building, and examines policy responses to the pressures of globalization and regional integration. Thus, this research not only maps existing policy configurations but also identifies gaps in the comparative literature, which has focused primarily on single-country studies and has not adequately integrated the perspectives of language policy, sociolinguistics, and education studies within a holistic analytical framework.

Academically, this study contributes to the growing literature on language policy in Southeast Asia by offering a comparative analytical framework that highlights the relationship between language education and the construction of national identity in postcolonial countries. Practically, the findings of this study provide critical reflection for policymakers on the best practices and challenges of language policy implementation in multiethnic societies, and offer

perspectives for formulating language education policies that are more responsive to the dynamics of multilingualism and globalization in the ASEAN region.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study builds on the Language Policy and Planning (LPP) framework to understand how language education functions as an instrument for constructing national identity in the context of a postcolonial state. The concept of LPP was first introduced by Haugen (1959) and then comprehensively developed by Spolsky (2004), who distinguished three dimensions of language policy: language practices (actual usage patterns), language beliefs/ideology (belief systems about language), and language management (deliberative policy interventions). These three dimensions allow for analysis that focuses not only on formal policy documents but also on the underlying social practices and ideologies. In the context of education, language policy does not stop at official regulations. Shohamy (2006) emphasizes that language policy also operates through hidden mechanisms such as curricula, textbooks, national exams, and classroom pedagogical practices. Thus, the education system becomes the primary arena where status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning (Cooper, 1989) interact. In Indonesia and Malaysia, the establishment of a national language (status), language standardization (corpus), and transmission through schools (acquisition) shape both the linguistic landscape and collective identity.

This framework is expanded with the perspective of language ideology, which views language as an arena for contestation of power. Woolard (1998) defines language ideology as a representation of the relationship between language and social life, which is fraught with political and economic interests (Irvine & Gal, 2000). In the context of nation-building, ideologies such as linguistic homogeneity, standard language ideology, and linguistic purism (Blommaert, 1999) are often used to legitimize the dominance of the national language while limiting the space for other languages. This perspective is relevant to analyzing how the national language is institutionalized through education as a symbol of unity.

This ideological dimension cannot be separated from the nation-building process. Anderson (1991) argued that a nation is an imagined community constructed through shared symbols, particularly a national language and print media. In postcolonial Southeast Asian countries, nation-building faced challenges because colonial political boundaries did not always align with ethnolinguistic realities (Reid, 2010). Fishman (1972) referred to this tension as the nationalism–nationism tension, a conflict between the project of national unity and primordial ethnic loyalties. Gellner (1983) added that the modern state requires cultural homogenization through a national education system, making schools the primary instrument for language standardization and the production of national identity. However, contemporary paradigms in language education increasingly recognize multilingualism as a resource, not a barrier (Ruiz, 1984). García (2009), through the concept of translanguaging, emphasizes that multilingual speakers use linguistic repertoires integratively. Cummins (2000) showed that first language competence supports second language acquisition, strengthening the argument for mother tongue-based multilingual education (UNESCO, 2003). However, the implementation of multilingual education often clashes with the ideology of national homogenization (Lo Bianco, 2008), creating a policy dilemma between recognizing diversity and the imperative of unity.

This complexity has increased in the era of globalization and the dominance of English. English has functioned as a global lingua franca in economics and science (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006). Phillipson (1992) criticized this phenomenon as linguistic imperialism, while Brutt-Griffler (2002) viewed its spread as a dynamic process that produces World Englishes. In the Southeast Asian context, Kirkpatrick (2012) proposed the concept of ASEAN English

as a regional variety that supports ASEAN economic integration. Thus, language education policies in Indonesia and Malaysia are under three-pronged pressure: national languages as symbols of identity, local languages as representations of diversity, and English as a global imperative.

Previous studies have examined Indonesian and Malaysian language policies separately. Lowenberg (1991) and Goebel (2010) highlighted the dynamics of Indonesian language policy, including decentralization and local language preservation. Alwasilah (2013) discussed the challenges of globalization on Indonesian language education. In Malaysia, Gill (2002), Hashim (2009), and Mustapha (2013) analyzed changes in medium of instruction policy and the tension between Malay and English. However, comparative studies that explicitly position language education as an arena for cultural identity construction in both countries are still limited. Based on this theoretical framework, this study fills the literature gap by integrating the perspectives of language policy, language ideology, nation-building, and multilingual education to comparatively analyze how Indonesia and Malaysia construct cultural identities through language education in the context of globalization and ASEAN regional integration.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative approach with a comparative design based on a literature review. This approach was chosen because the focus of the study was on analyzing language education policies as texts, institutional practices, and ideological constructs, rather than on collecting empirical field data. Therefore, the primary sources of the study were policy documents, academic literature, and relevant institutional reports. The comparative design was used to identify systematic patterns of similarities and differences between Indonesia and Malaysia in constructing cultural identities through language education. This approach allows for broader theoretical generalizations than a single-case study and helps understand how historical, political, and demographic factors shape different policy trajectories (Ragin, 1987).

The research data came from four main categories. First, official policy documents, including education system laws, national language regulations, curriculum documents, and education blueprints. For Indonesia, these documents included the National Education System Law and regulations related to the Indonesian language. For Malaysia, these documents included Article 152 of the Federal Constitution, the Education Act, and the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025. Second, scholarly journal articles obtained through academic databases such as JSTOR, ProQuest, and Google Scholar with keywords including “language education policy,” “Indonesia and Malaysia,” “language and identity,” “nation-building,” and “bilingual education.” Priority was given to articles published in reputable journals in the fields of language policy and multilingual education. Third, academic books and monographs on language policy, nationalism, sociolinguistics, and specific studies on the language situation in Indonesia and Malaysia. Fourth, institutional and international reports from institutions such as the Language Development and Fostering Agency (Indonesia), the Language and Library Council (Malaysia), UNESCO, and the World Bank to provide context for policy implementation.

Sources were selected based on thematic relevance, academic credibility, peer-reviewed status (for journal articles), methodological clarity (for empirical studies), and publication timeframe, with priority given to works published between 2000 and 2024, along with classic works that serve as primary theoretical references. The analysis was conducted through several interrelated stages. First, content analysis was used to identify policy objectives, ideological orientations, and language representations in official documents and academic literature. This analysis highlighted how language is positioned in relation to national unity, ethnic diversity, and global competitiveness. Second, a thematic analysis was conducted

by organizing the data based on key dimensions derived from the theoretical framework, namely: (1) the historical foundations of language policy; (2) ideological orientations; (3) implementation strategies in the education system; (4) tensions between unity and diversity; and (5) negotiations between national and global languages.

Third, a comparative analysis was conducted using the method of agreement and difference to identify structural similarities and differences between the two countries. This approach allows for the exploration of contextual, historical, demographic, and political factors that explain policy variations. Fourth, elements of critical discourse analysis were applied to examine how discourses on national language, cultural identity, and multilingualism are constructed within policy texts. The analysis focused on the ideological assumptions and power relations implicit in the policy narratives.

In this context, this study has several limitations. First, because it is based on secondary data, it does not include direct observation, interviews, or quantitative data related to implementation at the school level. Therefore, the analysis focuses more on the policy and discourse domains. Second, although most Malaysian policy documents are available in English, some Malay-language sources may contain specific interpretive nuances. Third, the analysis is limited to policies and literature available as of 2024, while the dynamics of education policy are constantly evolving. Fourth, as a two-case study, the findings are not intended to be directly generalized to all multilingual contexts, but rather to provide a conceptual contribution to understanding the relationship between language education and the construction of cultural identity in the context of postcolonial Southeast Asian countries. Nevertheless, a qualitative-comparative approach based on a literature review remains relevant for analyzing policy orientations, ideological frameworks, and nation-building strategies institutionalized through the language education system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The decision to adopt Indonesian as the national language was one of the most crucial moments in the history of the formation of Indonesian national identity. This momentum reached its symbolic articulation in the Youth Pledge, when at the Second Youth Congress in 1928, young people from various ethnic backgrounds pledged to "speak one language, Indonesian" (Moeliono, 1993). This choice was both visionary and strategic. Malay—the basis of Indonesian—is not the most widely spoken language, as Javanese is spoken by nearly 40% of the population. However, Malay has long served as a *lingua franca* for inter-island trade and communication (Sneddon, 2003). Thus, this decision not only reflected existing linguistic realities but also represented a conscious rejection of colonial languages and a forward-looking step oriented toward nation-building.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this success is seen as a relatively unique case. Lowenberg (1991) considers Indonesian to be an example of how a non-dominant language can be widely accepted as a national language without significant resistance from the majority ethnic group. Several factors explain this success: the ethnic neutrality of Malay, which is not associated with the dominance of any particular group; its relatively simple linguistic structure, making it easy to learn; the strong political will of the nationalist elite; and the absence of deep emotional attachment to the colonial language due to exclusionary colonial education policies. This combination of factors created a social and political foundation that allowed Indonesian to function not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of national integration.

The transition from pre-independence symbolic commitments to post-independence institutional practices demonstrates the continuity of the state's linguistic project. After 1945, the Indonesian government systematically implemented corpus planning and acquisition planning to ensure that Indonesian could meet the demands of modern administration,

education, and scientific development. The establishment of the Language Development and Fostering Agency was a crucial step in the process of language standardization, modernization, and codification (Moeliono, 1986). This effort was realized through a series of policy milestones: the publication of the Republic Spelling or Soewandi Spelling in 1947 as the basis for standardizing orthography; the Malaysian joint spelling agreement in 1972 that gave birth to the Improved Spelling; the Fifth Indonesian Language Congress in 1988, which addressed the challenges of language modernization; and the publication of the Fifth Edition of the Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language in 2015, which reflected vocabulary expansion in line with contemporary dynamics.

Strengthening the corpus aspect goes hand in hand with policies promoting language acquisition through the formal education system. Legal frameworks such as Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System affirm Indonesian as the primary language of instruction at all levels of education. In practice, the national curriculum recognizes that Indonesian is not only taught as a subject but is also used as a medium of instruction for various fields of study. This integration ensures that language functions beyond the symbolic realm and becomes the primary infrastructure for the production and distribution of knowledge.

Traced as a single line of development, this journey demonstrates a strong continuity between political choices during the national movement and the institutionalization of language in an independent nation. From an ideological pledge of unity to a technocratic standardization and integration of education, Indonesian developed as both a unifying tool and a means of modernization. This historical transition emphasizes that language policy is not a fleeting decision, but rather a long-term project linking national identity, institution-building, and social transformation (Moeliono, 1993; Sneddon, 2003; Lowenberg, 1991; Moeliono, 1986).

Following the 1998 reforms, changes in Indonesia's political structure had direct consequences for the language policy landscape through educational decentralization. Legal frameworks such as the Regional Autonomy Law provided space for regional governments to design education policies that were more responsive to local contexts, including the revitalization of regional languages (Goebel, 2010). In practice, several regions began developing bilingual education models with regional languages as the medium of instruction in early grades. Provinces such as Bali and East Java, for example, integrated regional languages as local content in the curriculum to strengthen early literacy and students' cultural identity. Despite its significant pedagogical potential, the implementation of this policy faces structural challenges such as limited trained teachers, limited development of teaching materials, and inconsistent political support at the regional level (Zein, 2020).

Interestingly, the strengthening of the local dimension coincided with an intensification of global orientation in education. During the same period, the use of English in higher education and the economic sector increased sharply. Many universities offered international programs in English as the medium of instruction, driven by the need for global competitiveness and academic mobility. This situation created a policy paradox: on the one hand, efforts to preserve national and regional languages as a pillar of identity, while on the other, there was strong pressure to master a global language for economic competitiveness. This tension reflects the reality that language policy in the reform era is not simply a linguistic issue, but an arena for negotiation between locality and globalization.

While Indonesia's dynamics demonstrate a negotiation between decentralization and globalization, Malaysia's historical context demonstrates a different but equally complex developmental trajectory. During the colonial period, British education policies in Malaya established a school system segmented by ethnicity—Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English—that reinforced social and linguistic compartmentalization (Tan, 1997). This structure aligns with the concept of plural society identified by J.S. Furnivall, where ethnic communities coexist but remain separate in social, economic, and educational dimensions (Furnivall, 1948).

Unlike Indonesia, which adopted a unifying language from the outset, Malaysia inherited a public sphere lacking a single, fully dominant national *lingua franca*.

After independence in 1957, the Malaysian state took a more assertive approach to making Malay a nation-building instrument. Formal provisions, through Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution, declared Malay as the national language, while still providing protection for the use of other languages and the continuation of vernacular schools. This policy reflected a compromise between national integration and the recognition of linguistic plurality. The intensification of the language project occurred during the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad, when educational legislation strengthened Malay's position as the primary medium of learning (Gill, 2002). During this period, the Language and Library Council played a central role in corpus planning—developing scientific terminology, publishing dictionaries and grammars, and promoting Malay literature—with the goal of making Malay capable of expressing modern scientific and technical concepts.

However, the Malay language policy did not proceed in a linear fashion. Global economic changes gave rise to pragmatic needs that triggered a series of policy reversals. The English for Teaching Mathematics and Science (ETeMS) program introduced English as the medium of instruction for mathematics and science starting in 2003 to enhance graduates' global competency (Hashim, 2009). This policy sparked resistance from various groups—some viewed it as a threat to the status of Malay, while others worried about its impact on vernacular schools. Evaluations showed that policy implementation faced serious obstacles, particularly in rural areas with limited teacher English proficiency (Azman, 2016). Consequently, in 2012 the government discontinued ETeMS and reinstated Malay as the primary medium.

In response to this dilemma, the government introduced the *Memrahatakan Bahasa Melayu Mengukuruh Bahasa Inggeris* (MBMMBI) policy, which sought to balance nation-building aspirations with global pragmatic needs. Malay was maintained as the primary medium of instruction, while English instruction was strengthened through increased study hours and the introduction of English literature as an elective. This direction was later affirmed in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, which targeted bilingual competency for all students while recognizing the importance of multilingualism through support for mother tongue education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

Read as a single historical narrative, the experiences of Indonesia and Malaysia demonstrate that language policy has always been at the intersection of identity, politics, and global demands. Indonesia's decentralization expanded space for local linguistic diversity while facing international pressures, while Malaysia negotiated the affirmation of its national language with the pragmatic needs of the global economy through a series of policy adjustments. The similarity between the two lies in the fact that language is not simply a medium of communication, but a strategic instrument in building social cohesion, political legitimacy, and modern competitiveness.

Comparative Analysis: Ideological Orientation of Language Policy

From a comparative perspective, Indonesian and Malaysian language policies exhibit two distinct ideological orientations, yet both attempt to address the challenges of national integration in a pluralistic society. In Indonesia, the policy direction can be understood as an integrative-pluralist model—an approach that seeks to balance linguistic unity with the recognition of diversity. Indonesian is positioned as a supra-ethnic national language: it is presented not as belonging to a particular group, but as a collective symbol of all citizens. Within the national discourse, Indonesian is detached from its original ethnic associations and functions as a marker of shared identity, reflecting the ideology of linguistic unity that emphasizes “one nation, one language” as the foundation of social cohesion (Errington, 1998).

This approach allows the national language to operate as a neutral space that bridges ethnic diversity without negating local identities.

At the same time, state policy does not negate domestic linguistic plurality. Legal frameworks such as Law No. 24 of 2009 concerning the National Flag, Language, and Emblem explicitly recognize regional languages as national cultural assets that need to be preserved. This recognition is translated into educational practice through the teaching of regional languages as local content, reflecting an acceptance of the multilingual reality of Indonesian society. Thus, national integration is not understood as homogenization, but rather as the coexistence of a unified language and local diversity. Externally, Indonesia's approach to foreign languages is pragmatic. English is taught as a foreign language, oriented toward academic literacy—reading, writing, and formal communication skills—without making it the primary medium of learning across subjects. Unlike neighboring countries, Indonesia has experienced relatively little debate regarding the use of foreign languages as the medium of instruction. This overall orientation emphasizes the policy's priority on the function of Indonesian as a tool for national integration. Language education is positioned as a means of strengthening shared identity and culture amidst globalization, with an emphasis on the formation of an inclusive national identity (Nursyariah et al., 2024).

In contrast to Indonesia's integrative approach, Malaysia's language policy more closely reflects an ethno-national model that links the national language to the construction of ethnic identity. Malay serves not only as the state language but also as a historical and political symbol of the Malay community. Formal provisions such as Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution affirm Malay's status as the national language, but in social and political practice, it is often understood within a framework of bumiputera privilege. This situation creates a conceptual ambiguity: is Malay the property of all Malaysians or primarily a marker of a particular ethnic identity? This ambiguity coexists with a form of linguistic pluralism institutionalized through the continuation of Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools within the national education system. This policy represents a historical compromise to accommodate non-Malay communities, but simultaneously reinforces ethnic segmentation in education, where school choices often follow lines of community identity (Tan, 2005).

Ideological tensions are increasingly evident in the ongoing debate over the position of English. On the one hand, nationalists view the strengthening of English as a potential threat to the status of Malay; on the other, pragmatists emphasize the need for English language competence for global economic competitiveness (Gill, 2002). This debate is not simply a pedagogical issue, but a reflection of the ambivalence of postcolonial identity—between maintaining symbols of linguistic sovereignty and responding to the demands of globalization. More broadly, language policy in Malaysia is closely tied to the dynamics of ethnic politics. Every change in language education policy is often interpreted as an issue of group identity: Malay organizations mobilize support for the primacy of Malay, while Chinese and Indian associations oppose policies perceived as threatening their community schools. As a result, language policy has become a sensitive and difficult political arena to reform (Lee, 2011).

Comparative Framework: Similarities and Differences

The following table summarizes the systematic comparison:

Aspect	Indonesia	Malaysia
Ideological Basis	Integrative-pluralism: language as supra-ethnic unifier	Ethno-nationalism: language as an ethnic marker of the majority
Language Constitution	Indonesian as the national and unifying language	Malay is a national language with protected ethnic language status
Medium of Instruction	Indonesian for all levels and subjects	Malay for most schools; Chinese/Tamil in vernacular schools
Regional/Ethnic Language Status	Recognized as a cultural asset; local content optional	Vernacular schools as part of the national system with government funding
English Position	Foreign language; taught as a subject in secondary schools	Second language de facto; contested status with policy reversals
Language Planning Agency	Language Agency (Language Development and Guidance Agency)	Language and Literature Council (DBP)
Dominant Challenges	English dominance in higher education; preservation of regional languages	Balancing national language with ethnic pluralism; English proficiency
Ethnic Politics in Policy	At a minimum—language policy is relatively non-politicized	Highly politicized—every policy change contested along ethnic lines
Integration vs. Diversity Trade-off	Emphasis on integration with recognition of diversity	Institutionalized diversity with a contested vision of integration

When the experiences of Indonesia and Malaysia are read side by side, it appears that they share a number of structural points of contact as well as significant ideological differences in the management of language policy. At the level of similarity, both countries have made variations of Malay their national languages—Indonesia through Bahasa Indonesia and Malaysia through Bahasa Melayu—as the symbolic foundation of nation-state integration. In Indonesia, the historical legitimacy of the national language is rooted in the momentum of the Youth Pledge, which affirmed the unifying language as a national project, while in Malaysia the status of Malay is constitutionally affirmed through Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution. In practice, both countries face a similar challenge: how to balance the need for national unity with the reality of domestic linguistic diversity. Indonesia manages hundreds of regional languages through a framework of cultural preservation, while Malaysia maintains pluralism through vernacular schools—both demonstrating that national integration is always negotiated with diversity.

Another similarity is seen in the response to the pressures of globalization. Both Indonesia and Malaysia are concerned about the issue of English language competence in an increasingly integrated global economy. Educational policies in both countries reflect concerns about the readiness of human resources to face international competition, although the strategies adopted differ. Furthermore, both countries have language planning institutions that actively carry out corpus planning to ensure that the national languages are able to

accommodate the development of modern science—in Indonesia through the Language Development and Fostering Agency and in Malaysia through the Language and Library Council. The presence of these institutions confirms that language modernization is seen as an integral part of national development.

However, beneath these similarities lie fundamental differences in symbolic orientation and policy governance. In Indonesia, the national language functions as a supra-ethnic symbol—a tool of integration ideologically detached from specific group identities and positioned as the collective property of all citizens. In contrast, in Malaysia, Malay has a stronger historical and political connection to Malay ethnic identity, making its symbolic function less neutral. This difference resonates in the structure of the education system: Indonesia has developed a relatively unified system with Bahasa Indonesia as the primary medium of instruction, while Malaysia maintains a parallel system through vernacular schools that reflects ethnic plurality.

Policy stability also presents a stark contrast. Indonesia has tended to maintain a relatively consistent language policy direction since independence, with changes being gradual and administrative in nature. Malaysia, by contrast, has experienced several policy reversals reflecting the tension between aspirations for linguistic nationalism and economic pragmatism. This dynamic is closely related to the degree of politicization of language policy: in Indonesia, language issues are generally managed as a technical-administrative domain within the framework of national development, while in Malaysia, language policy often becomes an arena for intense identity political contestation. Thus, the similarities between the two countries demonstrate the universal challenges of multiethnic states in managing language as a tool for integration and modernization, while their differences highlight how history, social structure, and identity politics shape policy direction. Language, in both contexts, is not simply a medium of communication, but a strategic tool reflecting ideological choices about how unity and diversity are articulated within the nation-state project.

Policy Implementation: Curriculum and Educational Practices

The development of language curricula in Indonesia and Malaysia demonstrates how education policy serves as a strategic instrument in shaping literacy, cultural identity, and readiness for globalization. In Indonesia, the Indonesian language curriculum has undergone a series of transformations—from the 1984 and 1994 Curriculums, the 2004 Competency-Based Curriculum, the 2006 Curriculum, to the 2013 Curriculum and its revisions—reflecting a paradigm shift from a structural approach to communicative learning and integrated literacy. The 2013 Curriculum emphasizes a text-based approach, the integration of literacy with character building, and the development of critical thinking skills (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013). In practice, students are introduced to various text genres to build comprehensive literacy, while learning materials are designed to transmit cultural values such as mutual cooperation, tolerance, and diversity. This curriculum also adopts the concept of multiliteracies—encompassing digital, visual, and critical literacy—which positions language as a means of social participation in the information age. In line with this, Huslan and Dahlan (2025) emphasized that Indonesian language education has a strategic role in strengthening national identity through the transmission of national values and cultural literacy.

However, curriculum implementation faces structural challenges. The gap in teaching quality between urban and rural areas remains significant due to limited qualified teachers and learning resources. At the higher education level, the dominance of English-language teaching materials creates a disconnect with learning at earlier levels, while the preservation of regional languages is often hampered by a lack of materials and trained teachers. These tensions demonstrate that curriculum is not only a matter of pedagogical design, but also of resource allocation and policy consistency.

Malaysia has adopted a different framework but with similar goals in preparing a bilingual generation. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 prioritizes bilingualism: every student is expected to be proficient in both Malay and English and is encouraged to learn an additional language (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Within the curriculum, Malay serves as the primary medium of instruction in national schools and a marker of national identity, with an emphasis on language proficiency and appreciation of Malay literature. English is a compulsory subject from primary to secondary school, reinforced through the *Memperkuat Bahasa Melayu Memperkuk Bahasa Inggeris* (Strengthening Malay Language Strengthening English) policy, which increases teaching hours and offers English literature as an elective. Vernacular schools, on the other hand, continue to use Mandarin or Tamil as the medium of instruction while requiring the study of Malay—a compromise between national integration and the preservation of community identity. Like Indonesia, Malaysia also faces implementation challenges. Inequality in English language proficiency in rural areas remains a concern (Azman, 2016), while the existence of vernacular schools continues to spark debate about the balance between linguistic rights and social integration. Furthermore, repeated policy changes create uncertainty in long-term planning for teacher development and teaching materials.

The impact of this policy on the construction of cultural identity is evident in both countries. In Indonesia, Indonesian language education contributes to the formation of a national identity that transcends ethnic boundaries. Surveys of language institutions show very high levels of proficiency and acceptance across all segments of society, making Indonesian a veritable *lingua franca* in government, media, and education (Sneddon, 2003). The integration of language education with national history and civics education strengthens national consciousness (Nursyariah et al., 2024). However, this success creates a paradox: the vitality of regional languages is threatened by shifts in usage, the dominance of English among elites creates linguistic stratification, and the emphasis on national unity is sometimes perceived as reducing the space for the expression of diversity.

In contrast, the construction of identity through language in Malaysia is more contested. There is no single linguistic identity that is fully shared by all citizens; Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities maintain language as an ethnic marker. The vernacular school system, while protecting linguistic rights, tends to limit cross-ethnic interaction and create so-called parallel communities (Tan, 2005; Lee, 2011). Interestingly, English often serves as a neutral space for inter-ethnic communication in urban areas, creating a paradox where the colonial language actually facilitates social interaction. Nevertheless, the trend of increasing enrollment of non-Malay students in national schools and the commitment to bilingualism demonstrate the potential for the formation of a shared linguistic space.

Globalization adds a new layer of complexity. Both countries face the hegemony of English in higher education and the job market. Indonesia has responded by strengthening regulations on the use of Indonesian in universities and promoting Indonesian language teaching for foreign speakers through the Indonesian for Foreign Speakers program, while Malaysia has adopted a bilingual approach to balance the prestige of the national language with economic demands. Regional integration through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has emphasized the role of English as a working language (Kirkpatrick, 2012), but has also given rise to the discourse that linguistic diversity is a regional asset. Indonesia has sought to promote Indonesian regionally, while Malaysia has leveraged English language competence as a comparative advantage—both facing a tension between national identity and global integration.

In the digital era, opportunities and challenges are multifaceted. Access to online learning resources and adaptive technology opens up more personalized and cross-border language learning, but the digital divide widens regional disparities. The dominance of English

in the technology ecosystem has the potential to accelerate language shift, while informal language practices on social media challenge established linguistic norms. These dynamics demonstrate that language curricula and policies are not static entities, but rather a continuous field of adaptation between cultural identities, global demands, and technological transformation—a process that continues to shape how Indonesians and Malaysians interpret language as a means of communication and a foundation of nationality.

CONCLUSION

This article asserts that language education in Indonesia and Malaysia functions as an ideological mechanism that actively shapes the construction of national identity, not simply a pedagogical instrument. Comparative analysis shows that the two countries developed different policy orientations—an integrative-pluralist model in Indonesia and an ethno-national model in Malaysia—reflecting historical and political choices in managing the relationship between national unity, ethnic diversity, and the demands of globalization. These different orientations have structural consequences for the formation of public linguistic space, social cohesion, and symbolic stratification in access to national and global languages.

Conceptually, these findings broaden the understanding of language policy as a long-term nation-building project institutionalized through the education system. By operationalizing the frameworks of language policy and language ideology in a comparative context, this study demonstrates that language policy cannot be understood as a neutral administrative decision, but rather as an arena where visions of citizenship, collective identity, and modernity are negotiated. This analysis indicates that an integrative model tends to strengthen supra-ethnic identities but risks marginalizing local languages, while an institutionalized pluralistic model maintains community identities but faces challenges in building a truly inclusive national space.

The policy implications of these findings emphasize the need for a more adaptive approach to language education in response to multilingual realities and the pressures of globalization. Strengthening national languages should not be positioned in opposition to local or global languages, but rather as part of a complementary linguistic ecology. Sustainable policies need to integrate the preservation of regional languages, the development of international language competencies, and equitable access to education so that languages can function as social bridges, not sources of stratification. More broadly, this study demonstrates that the tension between integration and diversity is inherent in postcolonial multilingual states. No policy model is entirely free from this dilemma; what is crucial is the state's ability to manage this tension reflectively and contextually. In the era of globalization and digital transformation, language education policy needs to be understood as a dynamic process continually negotiated between national identity, global mobility, and linguistic justice.

Future research could expand on these findings through empirical studies at the school and community levels to examine how policy ideology translates into everyday pedagogical practices. A longitudinal approach is also crucial for assessing the long-term impact of language policy on social cohesion and educational mobility. Thus, future language policy studies should focus not only on normative design but also on the dynamics of implementation and the social experiences of speakers.

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