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CHALLENGES  
FACING MOTHER  
TONGUE BASED  
MULTILINGUAL  
EDUCATION IN  
MALAYSIA



# PRESENTATION SEQUENCE

Introduction/Literature

- Background

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Findings and conclusion

- Analysis, suggestions,  
and conclusion

# ABSTRACT

• UNESCO has emphasised the importance of mother tongue based multilingual education. Many countries like Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines and more recently India have initiated or are initiating MTE as a Medium of Instruction in the early stages of prekindergarten, kindergarten and even primary level education arguing that this will help minority language communities feel included and make the education policy more inclusive and in turn will help reduce the dropout and unemployment rates. Multilinguistic Malaysia with more than 130 languages will not be able to initiate teaching in all mother tongues. In fact, soon after independence the top-down language policy was to have Malay as the medium of instruction in government schools for it was believed that this would help promote national unity. The two other major racial groups, the Chinese and the Indians could attend vernacular primary schools where they would have MT education for the first 6 years of schooling. Therefore, for historical reasons MT education for the Indians and Chinese was and is still available as an option although Malay was and is the medium of instruction in all Government schools. Malaysia had initiated such a policy for many reasons. The limitations of this policy will be discussed. One assumption made was that all Chinese and Indian children had Mandarin and Tamil respectively as their mother tongue. This is not true as the Chinese spoke a variety of dialects and Indians had several ethnic languages. Even the standard Malay which was introduced in schools was not always the variety used in the homes as MT as there are many dialects of Malay. More recently, some other languages like Kadazandusun, Bidayuh and Semai are being used in schools in Sabah, Sarawak and in Peninsular Malaysia respectively as a subject in locations where many of the school going children are from those communities. It must be pointed out that although Kadazandusun is the largest indigenous group in Sabah there are at least 10 distinct languages within this group. For Bidayuh a choice had also to be made from the many varieties being used and only 5 were chosen in an UNESCO aided kindergarten project and as for Semai it is merely one of the many indigenous languages. According to Riget and Campbell (2020), Bidayuh has 6 dialects which are not mutually understandable. In this paper, the focus will be on some of the challenges Malaysia faces in attempting to implement more MT based multilingual education. Some of the socio-psychological benefits of our current language policy will be discussed.

• Keywords: education, language policy, Malaysia, medium of instruction, mother tongue



# I. INTRODUCTION

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- Malaysia consists of Peninsular Malaysia and the states of Sabah and Sarawak; in 1957, Peninsular Malaysia or West Malaya gained its independence from the British colonial rule, and the states of Sabah and Sarawak joined to form Malaysia much later (David, Cavallaro and Coluzzi, 2009). Malaysia's population is 35 million, and there are 138 languages spoken in the country, and many among these are listed as endangered (Smith and Smith, 2017). It is a multi-ethnic, multicultural country, where three main ethnic groups Malays, Chinese and Indians live (Dumanig, David and Symaco, 2012). According to Omar (2014), there are 80 indigenous languages used in Sabah and Sarawak which belong to the Austronesian language family.
- The Chinese and the Indians constitute 23% and 7% of Malaysia's total population respectively, and within each group, there is a variety of dialects and languages used and spoken (David, 2017). As of 2017 the Indigenous Peoples of Malaysia were estimated to account for about 13 % of the country's total population .In the Peninsular there are about 18 Orang Asli subgroups , in Sarawak they include the Iban, Bidayuh, Kenyah Lunbawang, Melanau, Penan and many others and in Sabah the main groups are the Kadazandusun, Murut, and Bajau groups.

- **What is the mother tongue of Malaysians?**

- Soon after independence Malay was suggested as the sole medium of instruction in government schools with the aim of creating national unity among the multilingual peoples of Malaysia, and over time this policy was implemented though Tamil and Mandarin were retained as MOI in the vernacular schools (Darus, 2010).
- There are many dialects of Malay, however, the variety used as the national language or medium of instruction may not be the variety used at home (Le Page, 1985; Clynes and Deterding, 2011).
- According to recent population estimates, there are 6.7 million ethnic Chinese made up of 10 dialect groups and since 1975, at least 3 generations of these Chinese have been Mandarin educated and the number of Chinese children being Mandarin proficient is likely to increase to 70% (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021).
- The majority of the Indians are Tamils and Tamil is offered as the medium of instruction in vernacular schools but only 50 % of Indians attend such vernacular schools.

- As for the Orang Asli they have many languages but like the other language groups within each group there are many varieties. For instance, the Semai language has also many different dialects that in each village of Semais, a different variety is used (Phillips, 2013).
- As for the states of Sarawak and Sabah in East Malaysia, Bidayuh is the fourth largest group in Sarawak (217,800), preceded by the Iban, Malay, and Chinese (Kayad and Ting, 2021). Bidayuh mainly belongs to Sarawak, and the community speaks many varieties (25) of the Bidayuh language (Joyik et al., 2017). For Bidayuh, a choice had also to be made from the many varieties used, and only 5 were chosen in an UNESCO aided project (see Rensch et al., 2012). In 2007, UNESCO in collaboration with other stakeholders launched Bidayuh medium playschools to provide foundational education to Bidayuh students (Joyik et al., 2017).
- Sabah has 32 ethnic groups and with about 3,387,880 speakers, Kadazandusun who comprise 17.8 % of the population is the largest community. Kadazandusun has 13 different dialects (Logijin, 2008). There are also 2 groups of Bajau, West coast and East Coast speaking different languages (Baker, 1984:110).
- Given such varieties of these languages, it has become difficult to choose and develop a medium of instruction in one or two languages, and in the absence of such MOIs, these communities are shifting towards dominant languages – Malay or English or Mandarin (see Kayad and Ting, 2021; Nadarajan and Balan, 2017; David, 2017).





Against this background, I argue that there are many challenges posed to mother tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in Malaysia, and these challenges have been explored by analysing primary data collected from a small sample of Malaysian parents with regard to decisions on types of schools selected for their children. This will be discussed later in the paper.

First it is important to say something about the types of schools functioning in Malaysia and language-in-education policies in Malaysia. There are four types of schools in Malaysia: government/public schools, international schools, vernacular schools, and private schools (Sis Group, 2020). Government schools are funded by the government, and Malay is used as MOI in these schools-both primary and secondary; in contrast, Tamil or Chinese is used in the vernacular primary schools (Sis Group, 2020). In most international schools, English is used as MOI, Private schools which follow the Government curriculum charge fees, and in these schools, Malay is MOI, while Maths and Science are taught in English (School Malaysia, nd).



## **1.1 History of Language in Education Policies in Malaysia**

Before independence, there were four media of instructions (English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil) used in Malaysia (Darus, 2010). Also, Malays living in rural areas supported Islamic-based education system and schools (Pondok) (Language Education Policy Studies) (see Roald, 1994). Malay was declared as the national/official language in 1967 (see Government of Malaysia, nd). After 1971 English as MOI was phased out of schools (Darus, 2010). The Third Malaysian Plan (1976-1980) was introduced, and it stated “Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) is the basis for national integration...measures will be taken to ensure that English is taught as a strong second language” (Government of Malaysia, 1976: 386). As a result of this plan, English was then taught as a subject in both national (from Primary 1 onwards) and vernacular schools (from Primary 3 onwards), however, Malay in the former and Tamil or Mandarin in the latter were maintained as MOI (Darus, 2010).

In the post-independence period, two types of schools (national schools and national type schools) were established by educational changes brought about by Malaysia (Language Education Policy Studies, nd). In the National schools Malay was the MOI, while in the national type schools vernacular languages were the MOI (Language Education Policy Studies, nd).

It is clear then that soon after independence much like many other emerging and developed countries, such as Indonesia, Japan, Britain, Thailand, the United States, and France, Malaysia adopted a monolingual policy (Puteh, 2006). In Malaysia Malay has been the national language and the medium of instruction used in educational institutions in Malaysia. This policy was made for nation building purposes (Albury, 2019; Lan and Tan, 2008), and later English was used to teach Science, Maths, and Technology (PPSMI) courses (Zaaba et al., 2010). After the policy was introduced, English became a MOI for teaching Science subjects, while Malay was retained as a MOI for teaching non-Science subjects (Cheng, nd).



The purpose of introducing such a policy was to improve proficiency in English and mastery of Science and Maths among students (Ministry of Education, 2004; Tengku Zaman, 2019). This policy was introduced in phases starting with Year 1 in the primary level education and Form 1 of the secondary education level (Cheng, nd). English is also taught as a compulsory subject from grade 1 to Form 5 (Latiff Azmi, 2013). In order to effectively introduce this policy plan, the Ministry of Education organized a professional development course, English for Teaching Maths and Science (ETeMS), for improving English language skills of Maths and Science teachers (MSTs). However, the course was not effective because it was one-time event, rather than an ongoing process (Lan and Tan, 2008).

This policy decision of using English as MOI also created concerns among some parents and educators because neither teachers nor students were proficient in English (Albury, 2020). Many among the Malay community feared that such a policy posed a threat to Malay because it purportedly downgraded the national language (Gooch, 2009). Limited proficiency of English among students also made it harder for them to learn Maths (Soong, 2019), and teachers had to rely on Malay to teach students resulting in the use of code switching (see David, 2009). Pemuafakatan Badan Ilmiah National in a survey showed that PPSMI (the teaching of Maths and Science in English) had exacerbated the problem as a large number of students performed poorly in English, Science and Maths. And this in turn worsened the learning gap and the socio-economic gap between rural and urban students. The number of students who failed Maths and Science shockingly crossed 50% (Cheng, nd). PPSMI was also seen as a step taken towards weakening and eroding vernacular school education (Tamil and Chinese) (Cheng, nd). Given this situation, the decision of using English as MOI met resistance, and the government decided to phase out the use of English for teaching Maths and Science.

In 2009, Malaysia's Education Minister, Yassin announced that English as MOI for Maths and Science would be phased out from schools from 2012 onwards (Lotbiniere, 2009). He was quoted as saying, "the government is convinced that science and maths need to be taught in a language that will be easily understood by students, which is Bahasa Melayu in national schools, Mandarin in Chinese schools and Tamil in Tamil schools".

Many parents also resisted this decision and demanded that they as parents need to decide on the language of instruction for their children's education and many among them showed support to maintain PPSMI (Dap Malaysia, 2009). This led the government to introduce Dual Language Programme (DLP) by which, it allowed some schools to teach science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) in English (Arumugam, 2020).



The Chinese and the Indians in Malaysia have the opportunity to go to primary vernacular schools where Mandarin or Tamil is taught as the medium of instruction (David, 2017). As mentioned earlier, Mandarin is not the mother tongue of all the Chinese in Malaysia who may speak different varieties of Chinese languages or dialects, such as Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese, Hakka, etc (Ong and Ben-Said, 2021). However, many Chinese students in Malaysia want to be associated with and learn Mandarin (Gill, 2013). The trend of sending their children to Chinese medium schools is also increasing among Malay parents who see many advantages in doing so (The Straits Times, 2020).

Similarly, Tamil is not the mother tongue of many Malaysian Indians, such as the Gujaratis, the Malayalee's, Telugus, the Punjabis, the Malayalees, Sindhis, etc (see Minority Rights Group International, 2020). Therefore, the option of teaching/learning Mandarin/Tamil as a mother-tongue based medium of instruction is not therefore literally compatible with feelings on the ground.

In Government schools non-Malay children (L1) were given the choice to study their own languages as a subject in what is called Pupils' Own Language (POL) if there were fifteen or more students in a class showing interest in learning the language and if a language teacher was available (Joshi, 2005; Omar, 2014). This rarely happened however because minority communities with the same ethnic identity did not often number 15. Malaysians were theoretically given the right to learn their mother tongue or a language if they wanted to and if their numbers were sufficient. This notion of MT lessons as a subject with the provision of 15 students was not often feasible. In addition, languages taught outside the students' class timetable may be perceived as being unduly burdensome by both the students and parents. Students and parents need to be highly motivated

In fact, when Sabah and Sarawak joined Peninsular Malaya to become Malaysia the Education Act 1996 stated that indigenous languages would be made available if it is reasonable and practical. The reasonability and practicality of this possibility like the case of the POL in Malaya really depends on resources made available. However, in 1990 Kadazandusun was a subject offered in primary and secondary schools in Sabah, but it was taught for 120 minutes a week outside the actual school time. (Logijin, 2008) It is also the case for Iban in Sarawak, and in 2018 Bidayuh was introduced as a medium of instruction in a number of preschools (Ting and Campbell, 2017).

Given this background, it is the aim of this research to explore and discuss how mother tongue based multilingual education in Malaysia is facing multifarious challenges, and how these challenges can be overcome. But first let us discuss the advantages of MT education and challenges in other contexts.





## 1.2 Mother tongue based multilingual education in different contexts: its advantages and challenges

Multilingual education begins schooling in a child's L1 and transitions to additional languages (K12 Academics, nd). It can preserve cultural diversity and bring about **inclusion and quality** in education (Ali and David, 2021). This model of education **humanises** the classroom environment (Ferguson, 2003). Mother tongue-based education can also **link** a student to his/her **culture** (Nishanthi, 2020). Multilingual approaches in education can improve students' performance and enhance their socio-cognitive processes (Ali, 2020).

There is strong evidence to support the importance of developing a child's mother tongue for their overall development. UNESCO (2021) has emphasised the importance of mother tongue based multilingual education. Many countries like Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines and more recently India have initiated or are initiating MTE as a MOI in the early stages of prekindergarten, kindergarten and even primary level education arguing that this will help minority language communities not feel excluded and will result in an inclusive education policy and will help reduce dropout and unemployment rates. Such support for mother tongue-based education in different countries has not convinced Malaysian education policymakers, For the last sixty years they have pushed for and implemented a single medium of instruction for national schools. But detractors notwithstanding, there are and will continue to be vernacular Chinese and Tamil schools in Malaysia. That is a political reality.

There are many countries in the world which have bilingual/multilingual societies, and there are about twenty states that have more than one national language (ACDP Indonesia, 2014). Many researchers have shown that mother tongue as a medium of instruction used early in schools can **reduce dropout rates** and make education a long-term investment (Grin, 2005; Carvajal and Morris, 1990). Children who benefit from mother tongue-based-multilingual education (MTB-MLE) also perform better in their second/additional language (Nishanthi, 2020). Okal (2014) conducted a survey of countries in Africa and countries out of the continent and demonstrated that multilingual education creates cultural awareness, adds to academic and educational value, and increases creativity of students.



## *Africa*

Many studies on benefits of mother tongue education have been conducted in a wide range of contexts (Alidou et al., 2008; Nikiema, 2011; Lopez and Kuper, 2000; Bamgbose, 2004). Alidou et al. (2008) in their survey of sub-Saharan Africa demonstrated that using African languages as media of instruction for the formative six years “will not only increase considerably the social returns of investments in education but will additionally boost the social and economic development of African nations and contribute to the improvement of...knowledge creation and scientific development” (p. 7). Conducting research in former French colonies of West Africa (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger), Nikiema (2011) showed that the use of mother tongue as media of instruction in these francophone regions guarantee quality education and mastery of French.

## *Latin America.*

In the context of Latin America, Lopez and Kuper (2000) investigated the effects of Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) and demonstrated its positive effects on students, such as **cognitive and affective development**. Focusing on Brazil, Bolivia, Guatemala, Paraguay and Peru, Cummings, and Tamayo (2012) showed that bilingual education in these countries involves the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction, and this is helpful in engaging the minoritized students.





# CHALLENGES

- I will now discuss some of the challenges faced in other countries before discussing the challenges faced in Malaysia.
- *The power of English.*
- There are many challenges often associated to effectively implementing MTB-MLE. These challenges have been systematically investigated (see Philipson, 1992; Steiger, 2017). According to Philipson (1992) and Steiger (2017), this system of education is not supported by **students, parents,** and teachers because there is a **strong desire of learning English**, and there is a belief that using English as MOI is the most effective way to do it. This instrumental value assigned to English is due to its global status and official recognition in a range of post-colonial contexts (Stavans and Hoffman, 2015; Ricento, 2010; Crystal, 2003).
- Compared to education in European languages, mother tongue instruction is often perceived by some as inferior and valueless (Bangbose, 2014; Walter, 2014). Such attitudes towards medium of instruction puts pressure on teachers and schools to use English only though this is often done ineffectively (Arkorful, 2014; Kiramba, 2014) Tupas (2015) identifies this situation as ‘inequalities of multilingualism’ wherein promotion of MTB-MLE clashes with international socio-political structures which promote English.
- *Teachers not trained adequately,*
- Another challenge posed to MTB-MLE is that teachers/educators do not usually speak such languages (Piper et al., 2016). **Teachers are also not sufficiently trained** to implement such policies (Jones and Barkhuizen, 2015; Begi, 2014). Also, there is a **lack of resources/teaching material** for many languages (Mackenzie and Walker, 2013). Linguistic diversity of a region also hinders the process of recruiting, training, and paying many teachers (UNESCO, 2016; Simpson, 2017).

- ***Language Shift***

- Language shift from a language to a more dominant language is also a challenge to bilingual/multilingual education (Ng, 2014; Portes and Hao, 1998). Language shift in its many manifestations also contribute to the waning of vernacular languages. The pressure to be proficient in English to be successful in life appears to cut across the different language groups, including those whose mother tongue is the official language.

- Using these challenges as a conceptual framework, I will identify and discuss a range of challenges faced by MTB-MLE in Malaysia. I will also give some suggestions and discuss how implementing MTB-MLE can be beneficial for students in many ways. By this, I do not imply or suggest that students ought to be taught their mother tongues only. I am of the view that in today's globalized world, all students benefit from a multilingual education that gives them a chance to become fluent in their L1s as well as in the official language of the state, and one or more foreign languages, letting them pursue higher education, communicate easily in more than one language, through different media and contribute meaningfully to society. Mother tongue based multilingual education has many forms, and each school and each community should determine what works best for them.



## 2. Methodology

In this research, I used qualitative methods of collecting and analysing data. Participants belonging to Malay, Chinese and Indian communities in Malaysia were sent questions regarding their views of MTB-MOI/MLE. The participants were chosen based on my personal familiarity with them. Although questions were sent to 20 participants, only 10 participants responded, and their responses are provided for analysis. Among the 10 participants, 5 were females, while 5 were males. Their average age was 34. They were graduates and some of them worked as professionals in different sectors. The participants spoke more than one language, such as Malay, English, Chinese, Sindhi, Punjabi, or others. The participants were mainly from Kuala Lumpur. Admittedly, it is a small sample from a particular site, nevertheless it gives us a view of the mindset of parents who make choices regarding schools for their children. The questions asked from the participants were open ended. They were designed to get detailed answers regarding parents'/students' choice of schools and media of instructions. Reasons for making such choices were also explored. The number of questions varied in number when collecting responses from the participants. The questions were asked in a semi-structured way that enabled the researcher to encourage the participants to give context-specific and probing answers. The questions were asked in English which was a common second language shared by the researcher and the participants.

WhatsApp Messenger was used as a tool to send questions and receive answers. The researcher typed questions and sent to many participants. When the participants read the researcher's questions, they wrote back an answer. In response to such answers, the researcher asked questions, and this is how the process of collecting data went ahead. Those participants who were online and read the questions replied at their convenience, while those participants who were offline replied after they saw the researcher's message/question. In addition to WhatsApp methodology, email was also used. This process took two days and much relevant data were collected.

Responses were then further processed and copied to a Micro Soft Word document.. The researcher read and reread the participants' responses and noted general patterns and trends in the participants' responses. Based on these emergent trends and patterns, the responses were codified, and broader categories were developed. The participants' broader responses under such broader categories were qualitatively analysed using the concept of 'challenges to mother tongue-based MOI' discussed earlier.



# 3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

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- In this section, research findings based upon four main headings: *Lack of Training and Resources for Teachers*; *Positive Attitudes towards English MOI*; *Negative Attitudes towards MTB-MLE*; *Assimilation/Shift to Bahasa Melayu* are presented in a tabulated form and discussed.

- **3.1 Lack of Training and Resources**

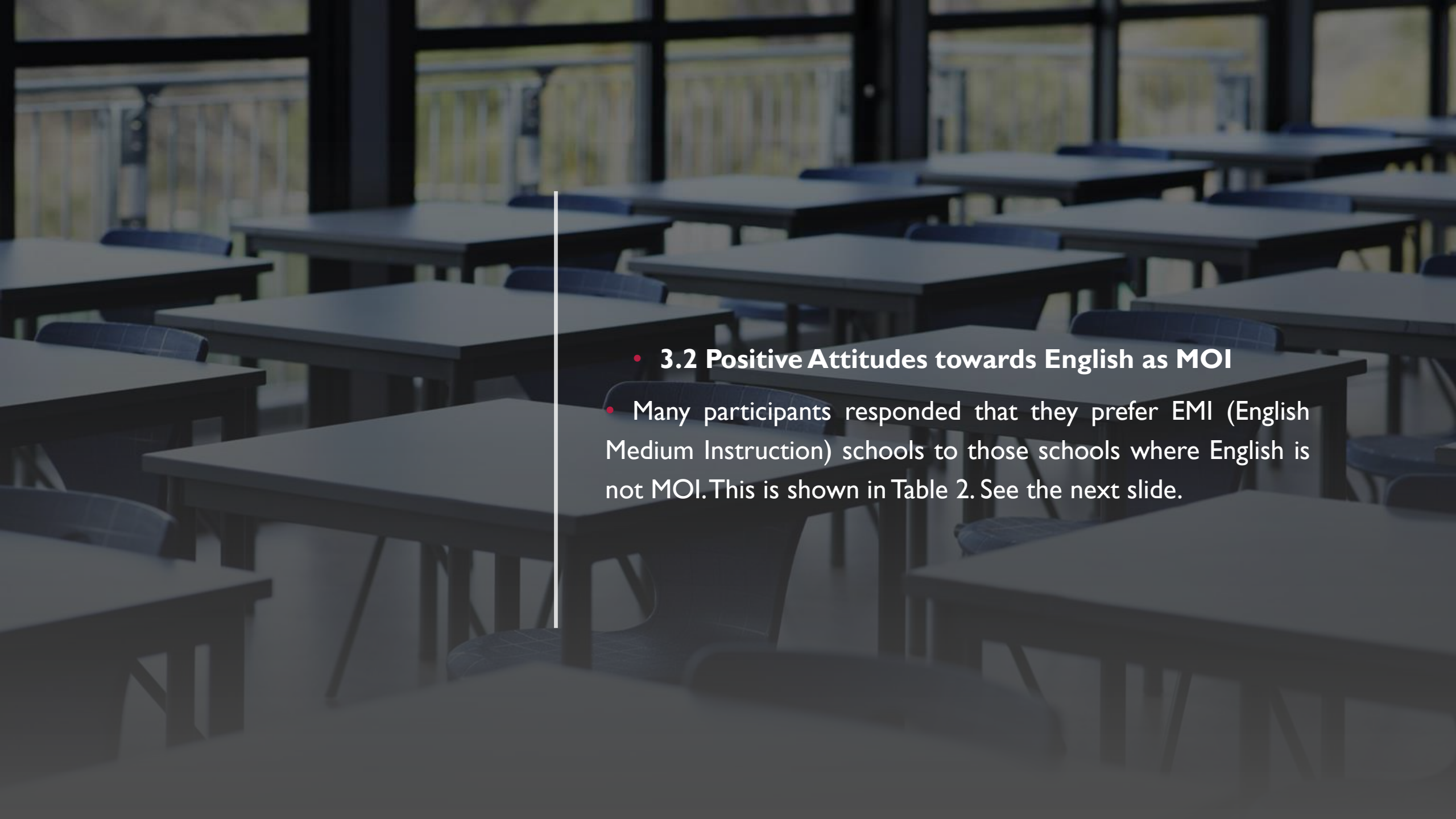
- According to Jones and Barkhuizen (2015), lack of teacher training and teaching materials is one of the main challenges faced by MTB-MLE. This challenge is also encountered by Malaysia. There are more than 136 languages spoken in Malaysia, and many languages, such as Bidayuh, have many varieties that it is difficult to develop reading materials and train teachers in all these languages. This may be a mammoth task, and thereby difficult to perform. See Table 1.

- Table 1: Challenges to MTB-MLE

| Participant no. | Response   | Ethnic identity |
|-----------------|--|-----------------|
| 1               | Financial resources and aid were provided by UNESCO, but these dried up after a while.                           | Unknown         |
| 2               | In many mother tongues, there are few book resources, and orthography of such languages is yet to be determined. | Unknown         |



- Responses in Table 1 refer to two types of resources: financial resources and book resources. There has been a lack of resources when it comes to training, recruiting, and paying mother tongue, multilingual teachers. Though UNESCO provide financial aid for the Bidayuh preschool, but the aid was not sufficient, and it quickly dried up. Books and other teaching materials are not published in target mother tongues and these, in the words of Begi (2014), also pose challenges to mother tongue based multilingual education. The lack of orthography in such languages is yet another hurdle to implementing MTB-MLE in Malaysia.
- Much like lack of training and resources, students, and parents' positive attitude towards English MOI is a challenge to MTB-MLE. This is now discussed.

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- **3.2 Positive Attitudes towards English as MOI**
  - Many participants responded that they prefer EMI (English Medium Instruction) schools to those schools where English is not MOI. This is shown in Table 2. See the next slide.



## TABLE 2: PREFERRING ENGLISH MOI

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| Response no. | Response   | Ethnic identity |
|--------------|--|-----------------|
| 1            | ...I did not enrol my son in the Chinese Primary school. I enrolled him in an international school actually...with English as the medium of instruction. The reason was that the pedagogy of learning is important for a young growing child.  | Chinese         |
| 2            | I prefer private or international, so the child is able to focus on English rather than Malay. Though its key to learn Malay, but I prefer English.  | Punjabi         |
| 3            | ... other than English as the medium of instruction, it is also more convenient to transfer the children to any international school outside the country in case we decide to move to another country. The national curriculum is not competitive enough on top of putting English as a secondary language in school | Chinese         |
| 4            | Government first then switch to private mainly because of the teaching method and syllabus. And yes, medium of instruction played a part in the decision. Secondary continue in private school - medium of instruction is English.   | Chinese         |
| 5            | My second son suffered in a government school as he had no Malay, and the teacher refused to speak in anything but Malay. And I had to move him to a private school where English was the medium of instruction.<br>And with my daughter I sent her to the same private school!                                      | Indian          |
| 6            | But by the end of primary education, did not have much faith in the system as there was no consistency in the policies, so enrolled in secondary private education. Now medium of instruction is   | Indian          |

Responses in Table 2 demonstrate how many parents prefer English MOI schools to other schools. Such preference and support meted out to English MOI is a main hurdle to MTB-MLE (Steiger, 2017). Also, in Malaysia, parents tend to enrol their children in EMI schools because pedagogy used in such schools, according to a participant, adapts to the learning needs of a growing child.

Many parents even pay fees and send their children to those private/international schools where English MOI is a norm. According to Philipson (1972), this preference is influenced by parents, students, and teachers' desire to learn English and their belief that this can be effectively done using English MOI. Similarly, many parents sending their children to EMI schools in Malaysia are influenced by the same desire and belief.

Some parents want their children to go to EMI schools in case they after some time choose to migrate to a foreign country where English is the official or first language. In the words of Crystal (2003), this instrumental value assigned to English is because it is a global language and official language in many post-colonial contexts. Many Malaysian parents realize this instrumental value of English and send their children to EMI schools; however, this poses serious challenges to students L1s and thereby to MTB-MLE. Response 6 also demonstrates that curriculum/syllabus used in English medium schools is more organized and structured, and therefore parents like their children to be admitted in such schools.





### 3.3 POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS VERNACULARS AS MOI

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- Some parents send their children to vernacular schools because they see many benefits in doing this. There is a trend among many Chinese to send their children to schools where Mandarin is used as MOI. This trend is also growing among the Malay community. See Table 3 in the next slide.

## TABLE 3: SENDING CHILDREN TO VERNACULAR SCHOOLS

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| Response no. | Response   | Ethnic identity. |
|--------------|--|------------------|
| 1            | I always believe that Chinese should know their own language even English is poor. At least they know their own mother tongue. So, all my kids learn Chinese, and I give them tuition for Bahasa Melayu & English. I am always proud to know Chinese even my English is not perfect. | Chinese          |
| 2            | I want my children to learn Chinese as a subject in school.  | Chinese          |
| 3            | I send my children to Chinese medium schools where they will learn discipline and many other things.   | Malay            |



Many parents in the Chinese and Malay communities are now sending their children to Chinese medium schools. According to a Chinese parent, learning Chinese can enable children to learn and preserve their mother tongue and thereby maintain connection with their culture and heritage. Though their English is not perfect, but emphasis on learning Chinese remains constant. A Malay parent sends his/her children to Chinese medium schools because in addition to many benefits these schools will create discipline among children. Although this may be encouraging and advantageous for some parents, but the emphasis of learning and teaching Mandarin in schools comes at the cost of other varieties of the Chinese language in Malaysia whose speakers, according to Ong and Ben-Said (2020), are shifting towards Mandarin. Thus, these positive attitudes towards one language puts other varieties at stake.

In addition, negative attitudes towards MTB-MLE are a challenge and these are now discussed.



### **3.4 NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS MTB-MLE**

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- Many participants showed negative attitudes towards learning or sending their children to schools where their L1 is MOI. How the participants expressed their attitudes towards their L1s and thus implicitly to MTB-MLE is given in Table 4 in the next slide .

## TABLE 4: LACK OF INTEREST IN MTB-MLE

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| Response no. | Response   | Ethnic identity |
|--------------|--|-----------------|
| 1            | “Originally we always thought that we would send her to a Chinese medium school due to the perceived higher standards of education there. However, we changed our mind after many deliberations mainly due to their infamous workload and also our own worry that we may not be able to help her in her homework as neither of us could read or write in Mandarin. So, we decided to bite the bullet and take a leap of faith by sending her to private / international school. Primarily because we really wanted a good standard of education for her. We had previously sent her to mandarin tuition because we figured she’s half Chinese so she should know. Also, China is going to be an economic force so knowing Mandarin can only be advantageous for her. | Chinese         |
| 2            | In some learners, there is no interest to learn their language.  | Unknown         |
| 3            | She speaks English at home with mum and dad and using Malay with her granny.   | Malay           |



In Table 4, the participants' responses show how education in their L1 is linked with workload, worries and the lack of their interest in making their children learn such languages. Many parents made decisions to send their children to their (parents)desired schools, and in some cases students' preferences might not have been involved. Though the participant (see response 1) sees some economic advantages for her child in learning L1, however, workload in such schools and the parents' lack of proficiency in their L1 hinders them from sending their child to such schools where mother tongue education is the norm. Also, among some communities, parents do not speak L1 with their children, and in such cases, children enrolled in L1 MOI schools speak with their grandparents (see response 3 in Table 4). In this case, parents' use, and emphasis on L2 can be a hurdle to effective imposition of MTB-MLE in Malaysia.

Minority communities shift away from their language to Bahasa Melayu is also a challenge to MTB-MLE, and this is now discussed.



### 3.5 ASSIMILATION/SHIFT TO BAHASA MELAYU

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- There are many reasons for language shift among some minority communities and this is a serious challenge to MTB-MLE for those whose MT is not Malay . For details, see Table 5 in the next slide.

**TABLE 5:  
LANGUAGE SHIFT:A  
CHALLENGE TO  
MTB-MLE**

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| Response no. | Response  | Ethnic identity |
|--------------|---|-----------------|
| 1.           | <p>We then decided to enrol her into the sekolah kebangsaan Chinese where Malay is the medium of instruction because we Indian figured that we're a minority in Malaysia so she should be exposed to the majority ethnic group. Hoping that she would learn more about them, ... She was there for a term but generally we just felt very uncomfortable that Islamic elements have been subtly incorporated into their daily study like greetings,</p> <p>We were also tired of the constant flip flop in things like whether to use English as the main language for certain subjects.</p> |                 |
| 2.           | <p>We do have concerns about her Bahasa now because it's Chinese quite weak so it's an area that we will need to work on. No Indian question for us, she has to be able to converse fluently in the national language.</p>  |                 |
| 3.           | <p>Then to secondary government schools where Medium of Chinese. instruction is Malay and English for Science &amp; Maths subjects.</p>   |                 |
| 4.           | <p>Mixed marriages, such as Chindian marriages result in two Unknown LIs so this may also result in shift to a more dominant</p>  |                 |



Response 1 in Table 5 shows the participant's willingness to assimilate to the national language, and this was done by admitting his/her child to a school where Malay was MOI. However, due to religious interference and language policy dilemma, the parents felt uncomfortable. Response 2 also refers to parents' desire to help their child learn and converse in Malay, that is the national language in Malaysia. The same attitudes can be observed in responses 3 and 4 in Table 5. Although some parents expect that the current MOI can contribute to their children's multilingual proficiency, however, this often results in language shift towards a more dominant language (see David et al., 2003). This shift towards a dominant language can pose challenges to MTB-MLE, because, according to Ng (2014), such shift results in waning of the mother tongue.

These are some of the challenges that MTB-MLE is facing in Malaysia, however, these challenges can be overcome. How these challenges might be overcome, and how MTB-MLE can be utilized to its fullest potential are discussed in the next section.



## 4. COUNTER-PERSPECTIVE: POSITIVE EFFECTS OF MALAYSIA'S LANGUAGE-IN-EDUCATION POLICY

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- Vernacular schools where medium of instruction is Chinese, or Tamil are positive effects of Malaysia's language in education policy. Government of Malaysia has also provided funding to these schools, and this shows its concern for preserving diversity (see Suaib, 2020). Parents have also played a proactive role in influencing the government's decision regarding the choice of MOI. In this regard, Parent Action Group for Education is doing appreciable work. Many parents also submitted an online petition against government MOI policy decision in 2009 (see Dap Malaysia, 2009). The Government of Malaysia has also facilitated UNESCO to work with the Bidayuh community and fund its preschool programmes to preserve the community's language and culture (Kayad and Ting, 2021). Pupils' Own Language is also a great step taken towards preserving multilingual reality of Malaysia, however, the provision on the required number in this case needs to be negotiated and reduced from 15 to 10 or 5.
- Also, some communities, such as the Sikh Punjabi community is doing great work by facilitating the Punjabi language classes for their youth in gurdwaras. Such steps are independent and need support. Other positive effects of Malaysia's language policy are given in Table 6. See Table 6 in the next slide.

## TABLE 6: POSITIVE EFFECTS OF MALAYSIA'S LANGUAGE-IN- EDUCATION POLICIES

| Response no | Response  | Ethnic identity |
|-------------|---|-----------------|
| 1           | ...but as the syllabus is so structured & transparent, no complaints.         | Indian          |
| 2           | I think this MOI in government schools will enhance multilingual proficiency. |                 |



Some parents are satisfied with the medium of instruction policy and send their children to schools with hope. They believe that such policy will bring about multilingual proficiency among their children. Also, one positive thing about Malaysia's MOI policy is that it has given parents a choice to send their children to government (Malay), vernacular (Chinese and Tamil ) or other type of schools.

Malaysian policymakers understand that learning English can help students achieve upward social mobility, learning Malay can help them achieve national integrity, and learning Chinese can help them gain more jobs in the Chinese market. However, I suggest, MOI policy should not only focus on financial gains or integrity, but also there is a need to consider a child's language rights, and this can be done by allowing him/her to have education in their mother tongue, which, according to is their inalienable right (Ali and David,2021),. This right has also been protected in Malaysia's Federal Constitution (Heng, 2019).

# 5. SUGGESTIONS

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- There is strong research evidence to show the importance of developing a child's mother tongue for their overall personal development during the early years of schooling, (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013). The importance of mother tongue education has been raised by those championing vernacular schools in Malaysia.. There is however a strong push among policy makers for a single stream education for all Malaysians,
- There is Research evidence that says a solid foundation in the mother tongue of a child also helps develop its second language skills and that non-Malay students with strong mother tongue abilities may be better prepared to assimilate the national language has also not been persuasive.
- There are different models of bi/multilingual education, and the choice of the correct model for Malaysia can be made after conducting research in this regard. Nevertheless, some suggestions regarding MTB-MLE are given and its potential advantages for Malaysia are discussed. See Table 7 in the next slide.

## TABLE 7. USING MTB- MLE

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| Suggestion no. | Suggestion   | Advantage   |
|----------------|--|---|
| 1              | Increase students, and parents' interest in their LI.                | Preserving LI and culture.                            |
| 2              | Creating orthography   | Literacy in LI.                                       |
| 3              | Training teachers and publishing books and teaching materials.       | Socio-cognitive development.                          |
| 4              | Sufficient financial aid should be provided.                         | Linguistic diversity preserving.                      |
| 5              | A child must learn in LI during the formative years of his learning. | Construction of knowledge and scientific development. |



I suggest that students, and parents should be made aware about their L1 and culture. They must know that learning their language can preserve their culture and language. They, including parents, need to realize that MTB-MLE is an effective way of learning and developing academically. They need to take interest in their L1 and culture.

Furthermore, out of many varieties of a language, a variety with comparatively more speakers than other varieties should be standardized, and its orthography needs to be developed. Once its orthography has been developed, it becomes easier to develop its speakers' literacy in their L1.

After developing orthography of such languages, teachers should be trained from within the communities. The teachers must be made aware of modern techniques of teaching and learning. Also, books and teaching materials should be published and digitalized to make learning L1 an effective and sophisticated process. Using such sophisticated ways when teaching L1s in MTB-MLE can lead to socio-cognitive development of students.

It often happens that financial aid provided for implementing MTB-MLE is not sufficient, and it dries up before such MOI is fully implemented. Aid donors and other stakeholders must make sure that sufficient financial aid is provided for encouraging such educational models and policies. If this happens, this will be an important step taken towards preserving linguistic diversity in Malaysia.



Finally, if a child is allowed to learn in MTB-MLE during his/her first formative years of schooling, this can, in the words of Alidou et al. (2008), lead to knowledge creation and scientific development or as Nishanthi (2020) says in learning additional languages. Parents must be made to realise this. A number of parents who were members of minority speech communities I interviewed in Malaysia expressed the view that the mother tongue had no utility as compared to Malay and English.

Recent collaborative efforts by government organisations like the Curriculum Development sections of MOE, community support by Malaysian NGOs, technical support by international NGOs like SIL, funding support by UNESCO are necessary and have helped MTB-MLE projects for minority languages like Iranun, Tobilung and Rungus in Sabah (Maratin, 2019) SIL for instance helped in the development of the writing system for Iranun in Sabah and developed orthographies (Chin and Smith, 2011). Maratin (2019) says there are 16 different language preschools based on MTB-MLE in Sabah.



# CONCLUSION

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- By providing vernacular education at the primary level for the Chinese and Indian (Tamil) students the Malaysian government has provided mother tongue education for two major communities in Malaysia. Admittedly the Chinese community had many dialects but due to the schooling system Mandarin for many has become the language used in the home with their peers and in effect has become a mother tongue. As for the Tamils 50 per cent of the Tamil school going population receive their primary education in Tamil. The use of Malay in national schools as a medium of instruction did give an opportunity for many who used Malay or a variety of Malay in their homes to continue with their home language as the medium of instruction in schools. The introduction of POL also gave an option, though it was riddled with many administrative problems to students to learn their mother tongue as a subject though not as the medium of instruction.
- Unfortunately for many of the other major communities especially those in East Malaysia their respective mother tongues have not been used as a medium of instruction for a number of reasons including the fact that there are many varieties of their language. Findings showed that MTB-MLE is facing educational, financial, attitudinal, and social challenges in Malaysia. These challenges can be overcome by training teachers, developing orthography, sufficiently funding MTB-MLE projects and encouraging students and more importantly their parents in learning and supporting L1.
- Notwithstanding these challenges, some of the socio-psychological issues of Malaysia's language policy as perceived by a small sample of Malaysian parents were also discussed. If MTB-MLE is adopted in Malaysia views and perceptions of parents must be taken into consideration.



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