

SEARCHING FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE ADVOCACY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MALAYSIAN EDUCATION BLUEPRINT

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Abstract. Despite the high-profile 2025 government mandates to integrate new ASEAN languages such as Thai, Vietnamese, and Khmer into the national curriculum, the newly released Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2026-2035 presents a striking omission; foreign languages are virtually absent from the strategic framework. This research critically investigates the policy-practice gap that has emerged between political rhetoric and documented educational priorities. While 2025 was marked by significant hype regarding regional linguistic integration, the MEB 2026-2035 reveals a lack of concrete consideration for the institutional capacity required to sustain such expansion. Using a Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) approach and comparative analysis, this study examines the positioning of existing foreign languages such as Japanese, German, and French which have long struggled for structural support within the MEB 2013-2025 and MEB 2026-2035, tracing the trajectory of foreign language advocacy over two decades of reform. Preliminary findings suggest that the national system is already grappling with a "bilingual duopoly" (Bahasa Melayu and English) that crowds out other languages, leaving them without measurable proficiency goals, standardized output, or sufficient teacher training. The study argues that introducing new foreign languages without addressing the issues of current foreign language programs is a performative rather than a pedagogical move. By mapping the silences in the Malaysian Education Blueprint, this paper calls for a shift from symbolic announcements to actual policy advocacy.

Keywords: *foreign language, education, Malaysian education, blueprint*

Introduction

A cornerstone of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013–2025 is the aspiration to produce "Global Citizens" through the mastery of additional languages beyond the national and second language requirements. This policy envisions a multilingual graduate proficient not only in Bahasa Malaysia and English but also in a third (or fourth) additional language. However, over the past decade, institutional priority has remained entrenched in a bilingual binary. This is evidenced by the massive structural investment in the Upholding Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthening English Language (MBMMBI) policy, the Dual Language Programme (DLP), and the rigorous alignment of English standards to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Consequently, the trajectory for foreign languages such as Japanese, French, and German remains structurally ambiguous. Despite their constant positioning as essential tools for cultural and linguistic capital, these languages often lack the dedicated teacher-training pathways and budget afforded to the core subjects. This systemic ambiguity was further highlighted in April 2025, when Minister of Education Fadhlina Sidek announced that ASEAN languages, which include Thai, Khmer, and Vietnamese would be introduced as elective subjects to bolster regional ties.

While politically significant, such a directive raises critical questions regarding implementation. In a nation already home to over 130 living languages, the addition of more elective subjects without addressing the pre-existing gaps in foreign language management risks exacerbating systemic inefficiencies. Utilizing Spolsky (2004) Language Policy Framework, this article interrogates the rhetorical-structural gap within the Malaysian education system. By analyzing the MEB 2013-2025 and its sequence of Annual Reports, this study evaluates whether the state's multilingual management has moved beyond mere symbolic inclusion toward a sustainable and robust pedagogical reality.

Language education in Malaysia

The Malaysian education system is a complex reflection of the nation's multi-ethnic and post-colonial history. Under the Education Act 1996, the linguistic landscape is structured into a clear hierarchy that dictates resource allocation and pedagogical priority. Bahasa Malaysia sits at the top as the national language mandated by Article 152 of the Federal Constitution to serve as the unifying force of national identity (Albury and Aye, 2016). Parallel to this is English, designated as a compulsory second language, which has seen renewed structural emphasis through the CEFR alignment to ensure global economic competitiveness. Beyond this bilingual core, the system accommodates diverse linguistic needs through several distinct categories. Vernacular languages, such as Mandarin and Tamil serve as the primary media of instruction in National-Type Schools (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan), maintaining a legally protected status as heritage languages for the Chinese and Indian communities. Indigenous languages, which include languages such as Iban, Kadazandusun, and Semai are offered under the "Pupil's Own Language" (POL) framework, aimed at preserving the cultural heritage of East Malaysia and the Orang Asli communities. Foreign or additional languages usually refers to Arabic (often prioritized due to religious significance), French, Japanese, German, and Korean. According to the Ministry of Education, a total of 142 national schools offer these languages including 79 schools offering Japanese, 27 offering German and 36 offering French, while 69 residential schools offer combinations of the three languages.

In the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013–2025, these languages are collectively framed under "Shift 2," which aims to produce "Global Citizens." However, the structural support for these languages differs significantly. While vernacular and indigenous languages are tied to ethnic and cultural identity, foreign languages are discursively framed as instrumental assets for the international market. This study focuses on this final category, interrogating how the state manages the "Foreign and Additional Language" aspiration in its annual reporting, particularly when these languages lack the constitutional protection of the national language or the economic hegemony of English. The disparity on this issue can even be seen in the literature. Studies on the issues regarding to Bahasa Malaysia and English in the MEB has been widely covered over the years. For instance, Azman (2016) provides a review of the MEB specifically through the lens of English language delivery and its reform trajectories. Similarly, Yamat et al. (2014) conduct a document analysis of national language planning, yet their scope is confined to the Upholding Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthening English Language (MBMMBI) policy. This academic focus on the binary core is further reinforced by Chan and Abdullah (2015), who highlight the profound discrepancies between policy aspirations and classroom realities, specifically regarding

bilingual education. Consequently, while the challenges of the 'English-Malay' pivot are well-documented, the 'Global Citizen' aspiration, which intended to foster proficiency in additional foreign languages, remains an under-researched peripheral concern. This concentration on the bilingual core has resulted in what can be termed a scholarly silence regarding the management of foreign languages (FL) within the national curriculum.

While the aforementioned studies effectively critique the state's management of English and Bahasa Malaysia, they leave the 'Additional Language' pillar of the MEB largely unexamined. This oversight is significant because, as Spolsky (2004) asserts, a language policy is only as robust as its weakest component. In the Malaysian context, the FL mandate represents a critical site of tension between 'Language Beliefs', referring to the aspirational value of producing globalized, multilingual citizens and 'Language Management', which is the actual structural mechanisms used to implement these aspirations. Without a dedicated investigation into the structural support systems (e.g., specialized KPIs and teacher recruitment) provided for languages such as French, Japanese, or German, the MEB's promise of multilingualism remains a theoretical abstraction rather than a measurable pedagogical outcome. This study therefore utilizes a document analysis of the MEB Annual Reports to determine if the state has provided the necessary structural scaffolding to move FL education from the rhetorical periphery to a position of institutional stability.

Materials and Methods

This study aims to investigate the reporting of foreign language initiatives within the MEB and its annual reports from 2013 to 2025, and to analyze the rhetorical-structural gap between the government's aspirations and the actual provision of support provided for foreign languages. The research questions are: (1) How has the institutional reporting of foreign language initiatives evolved across the MEB Annual Reports (2013- 2024)? (2) To what extent do these reports reveal a rhetorical-structural gap between aspiration and the actual provision of resources for foreign languages?

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative longitudinal document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022) and is framed by Spolsky (2004) Language Policy Framework. According To Spolsky (2009), language policy is a complex, ecological system consisting of three interrelated components which are 1) language management, 2) language beliefs, and 3) language practices. Language management is defined as the explicit and formal efforts by an authority to control the language situation through legislation, curricula and blueprints, while language beliefs represent the values or status assigned to certain languages by stakeholders, and language practices are the actual linguistic behaviors and choices made by speakers in real world contexts (Spolsky, 2009; 2012). Following this tripartite model, this article conceptualizes the MEB 2013 – 2025 as a form of language management that should be evaluated against the sociolinguistic practices and beliefs of a nation. As pointed out by Habuan (2018), management efforts can be disregarded when they conflict with the underlying language beliefs of a nation.

The documents analysed are the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 and the annual reports from 2013 to 2023. In total, 12 documents were examined for this study.

Considering that these documents are produced by the Ministry of Education Malaysia, it fits the four factors of document analysis in which it is authentic, credible, representative and meaningful (Flick, 2018; Morgan, 2022). The coding framework for this study was developed using deductive and inductive reasoning. Following the approach by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), deductive codes were created based on Spolsky's language policy. The inductive codes were developed through multiple probing of the MEB and its annual reports. Statements were coded for Strategic Clarity when they provided specific, measurable, and time-bound commitments, and for Resource Allocation when the text explicitly documented the distribution of budget, teachers, or physical infrastructure. Conversely, statements were coded as Strategic Ambiguity when they utilized hedging type language to provide the appearance of policy movement without concrete institutional accountability.

Results and Discussion

The initial stage of analysis established the frequency of foreign or additional languages that were mentioned, in contrast to the number of times the word 'language' was mentioned in the overall documents. As shown in *Table 1*, at its highest point in 2018, foreign language discourse accounted for a mere 15% of the total discussion on language. This marginalization is further evidenced by a complete 'rhetorical blackout' during two distinct periods (2013–2014 and 2019–2022), during which foreign languages were not mentioned at all in the reports.

Table 1. Frequency of foreign or additional languages mentioned in the MEB and annual reports.

Year/Document	Total Number of times the word [language] was mentioned	Number of times the word [language] referred to foreign or additional languages	Visibility Percentage
MEB 2013-2025	46	2	4.35
Annual Report 2013	81	0	-
Annual Report 2014	76	0	-
Annual Report 2015	106	12	11.32
Annual Report 2016	270	23	8.52
Annual Report 2017	322	29	9.01
Annual Report 2018	255	33	14.67
Annual Report 2019	28	0	-
Annual Report 2020	94	0	-
Annual Report 2021	58	0	-
Annual Report 2022	139	0	-
Annual Report 2023	272	33	12.13

Further analysis would reveal that the reporting on foreign languages from 2015 to 2018 remained nearly the same. The reports clearly state facts on the number of schools and languages that are being provided but rarely go into detail about the outcomes or proficiency achieved by the students.

Table 2. Example of symbolic management reporting in the annual reports

Document	Excerpt from Annual Report
Annual Report 2015	A total of 142 national schools offer third language classes comprising 79 schools offering Japanese, 27 offering German and 36 offering French, while 69 residential schools offer combinations of the three languages – pg. 68
Annual Report 2016	Currently, there are 142 national daily schools offering third language classes comprising 70 for Japanese language, 40 for French language and 32 for German language. -pg. 51
Annual Report 2017	In 2017, international language classes were offered at 141 daily national secondary schools; 76 schools offered the Japanese language, 36 schools offered the French language, and 29 schools offered the German language. – pg. 53
Annual Report 2018	In 2018, 186 daily schools were involved in a third language international language programmes

The repetitive statements observed between 2015 and 2018 (*Table 2*) are in line with what Westphal and Zajac (2001) define as symbolic management. This refers to the process of adopting policies or programs to appeal to external stakeholders, without properly implementing them in practice. The annual reports repeatedly state the existence of foreign language programs in schools but fail to provide in depth data on student proficiency or teacher training. By reporting static metrics such as the number of schools involved without disclosing performance indicators or teacher competency levels, the Ministry engages in 'Decoupling' (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In this state, the formal reporting structure serves to secure institutional legitimacy while remaining substantively disconnected from the actual educational outcomes of the foreign language mandate.

Qualitative coding

To further examine the structural integrity of the foreign language mandate, the researcher mapped the intersection of Spolsky (2004) primary pillars with the identified secondary structural markers. As illustrated in *Table 3*, the data reveals a high concentration of Strategic Clarity within Language Practices during the 2017 period, which subsequently gave way to increased Strategic Ambiguity in 2018. A primary finding is the peak of Language Practices-Strategic Clarity in 2017 (14 excerpts), which indicates a period where the Ministry moved beyond vague goals to document specific curriculum details and program implementations. However, this clarity was mirrored by a simultaneous peak in Language Management-Strategic Ambiguity (9 excerpts in 2017), suggesting that while the curriculum was being defined, the long-term structural support remained non-committal.

Table 3. *Distribution of language policy primary and secondary codes (2013 – 2023)*

Primary Code (Spolsky)	Secondary Code (Marker)	Peak Year (Volume)	Example Excerpt from document
Language Practices	Strategic Clarity	2017 (14)	In 2017, a total of 54 fully residential schools offered Japanese language, involving 58 teachers and 270 classes nationwide. To strengthen the proficiency in the language, several programmes involving teachers and students were conducted.
Language Practices	Strategic Ambiguity	2018 (8)	French Language PdP at STAR Ipoh
Language Management	Strategic Clarity	2023 (6)	In 2023, the focus of this initiative is to ensure that pupils learning additional languages achieve independent proficiency or reach at least Level 3 in the PBD based on the following activities.
Language Management	Strategic Ambiguity	2017 (9)	Encouraging the use of contextual methods in teaching and learning to increase students' levels of communication in the international language.
Language Beliefs	Strategic Ambiguity	2016/2023 (4)	The acquisition of a third language after BM and English language is greatly encouraged among students to become competitive multilingual human resource at the national and international stage. (2016) The aim of this initiative is to ensure that pupils achieve independent proficiency in the additional

Resource Allocation	(Merged with Practices)	2015-2018	language. (2023) The government of Japan invites students throughout the world to partake in this programme, to experience the cultural exchange between Japan and other countries.
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The data further highlights a notable shift in 2018, where Language Practices - Strategic Ambiguity spiked to 8 excerpts. This represents a transition toward more generalized reporting that lacked the granular detail seen in previous years. This trend of ambiguity is characteristic of symbolic management (Westphal and Zajac, 1998). While the mid-blueprint years were marked by a decrease in clear management, the 2023 report shows a resurgence in Language Management - Strategic Clarity (reaching a high of 6 excerpts). This suggests a belated attempt to formalize management actions such as teacher competency training and standardized assessments, as the Blueprint reaches its final phase. Despite this late-stage clarity, the persistent presence of Language Beliefs - Strategic Ambiguity (peaking at 4 excerpts in both 2016 and 2023) reinforces the conclusion that foreign language policy in Malaysia continues to rely heavily on aspirational value statements rather than sustained, internally funded operational practices. Final observations of the data suggest that when Resource Allocation is mentioned, it is frequently tied to external partnerships (e.g., the Japanese Foundation or French Embassy), further highlighting a gap in autonomous national management.

Atmore (1996) and Gordon (1988) used the term cyclical visibility to describe how certain issues or policy topics gain intense media and government attention for a short period, only to disappear once the political pressure fades before resurfacing again. This is in line with the quantitative findings observed in the annual reports, where reporting on foreign languages was completely omitted from 2019 to 2022, and resurging in 2023, just before the end of the 2013- 2025 blueprint. While data was provided from 2015 to 2018, statements related to foreign language were often ambiguous or mere statement of facts. Even in 2023, where the first mention of teacher training for foreign language teachers was mentioned, it did not elaborate on the details. A simple comparison in the 2023 annual report can show how reporting on the English language (*Table 4*) reveals the output of teachers and their proficiency levels, whereas reporting on foreign languages (*Figure 1*) only has numbers to show that guidance did occur.

Table 4. Example reporting of English data extracted from the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2023 Annual Report.

Year	English language option teachers who achieved the minimum CEFR C1 level		Total number of teachers who took the English proficiency test
	Number	Percentage	
2019	15593	62	25129
2020	17191	52.6	32712
2021	18878	49.89	37843
2022	18066	49.53	36473
2023	19485	52.78	37090

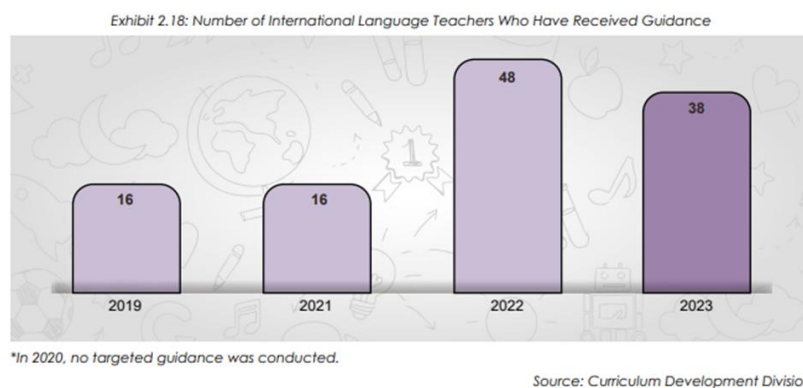


Figure 1. Example reporting of foreign language data extracted from the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2023 Annual Report.

Another interesting finding is the realization that the 'Language Practices' and resource allocation of the foreign language mandate are largely dependent on the foreign organizations related to the language, such as Japan Foundation for Japanese and Goethe Institute for German. (Table 5). A critical question to ask is if there is any contribution of the ministry and government itself in sustaining these foreign languages. While collaborations and opportunities to speak with native speakers are valuable and enhance the student learning experience, these types of programmes are not available for all schools. In that case, what can the ministry offer to level the gap?

Table 5. Foreign organisations and their programmes in the annual reports.

Foreign Organization	Name of Programme
Japan Foundation	Nihongo Partner Programme
Government of the Republic of Korea	Korean Volunteer Teachers
Goethe Institut Kuala Lumpur	PASCH Schulen Programme
Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie	Franco Tour
Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Bahasa Antarabangsa, the French Teachers' Malaysian Association and the French Embassy	Jomfrancais - La journée de théâtre

More obvious however, is the absent reporting of longitudinal outcomes. For example, there is no data reported for the Ujian Penilaian Bahasa Asing (UBPA) and other international assessments. The 2023 report was the only one that included data on the Classroom Based Assessment (PBD). This suggests that proficiency may not be the primary goal. This lack of strategic clarity results in significant pedagogical confusion for teachers tasked with implementing a curriculum that lacks a defined objective. This disconnect confirms that the Ministry's 'Language Management' is decoupled from the actual linguistic outcomes required to produce a multilingual citizen.

Conclusion

The longitudinal trajectory of foreign language policy within the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 reveals a profound rhetorical-structural gap that characterizes the nation's approach to multilingualism. This study's findings indicate that while the Ministry of Education successfully promotes the belief of producing globally competitive citizens, the actual management of these aspirations remains in a state of cyclical visibility. The quantitative data illustrates a stark marginalization of foreign languages, reaching a point of total rhetorical silence between 2019 and 2022.

This suggests that foreign language mandates are often treated as second-hand policy electives, easily eclipsed by the structural bilingual duopoly of Bahasa Melayu and English. By utilizing strategic ambiguity and conditionality clauses, the Ministry has effectively decoupled its high-profile aspirations from the substantive investments required to sustain them. Furthermore, the qualitative evidence highlights a concerning trend of externalized agency. The most reported language practices documented throughout the blueprint's lifecycle appear to be spearheaded by international diplomatic bodies rather than being driven by a self-sustaining domestic initiative. This reliance on foreign government support, coupled with the recurring lack of reported output data, such as UPBA results or international proficiency certifications, reinforces the argument that the mandate remains performative rather than pedagogical. The sudden resurgence of foreign language mentions in 2023 appears to be a reactive attempt at late-stage strategic clarity, yet it is starkly undermined by the striking omission of foreign languages in the strategic framework of the upcoming MEB 2026-2035.

While this study provides a comprehensive longitudinal mapping of foreign language policy discourse within the Malaysian Education Blueprint, it is not without limitations. Primarily, this research is restricted to the analysis of official government documents and annual reports. As a result, it captures only the rhetorical reality and institutional image projected by the Ministry of Education, which may not fully reflect the grassroots implementation within individual schools. Furthermore, the reliance on document frequency and modality as proxies for institutional attention does not account for internal budgetary shifts or private-sector initiatives that may support language learning outside the public reporting cycle. In light of the high-profile 2025 government mandates to integrate new languages like Thai, Vietnamese, and Khmer, this research concludes that adding new linguistic layers without addressing existing structural failures is a symbolic gesture. To move beyond mere political hype, there must be a fundamental shift from symbolic announcements to substantive advocacy. This requires the internalization of teacher training, the establishment of clear proficiency benchmarks, and the inclusion of foreign languages as a core strategic pillar in future blueprints. Without such a transition, the global citizen aspiration will remain a rhetorical construct, and the initiatives for future foreign languages will likely follow the same trajectory of visibility followed by silence that has defined the past two decades of Malaysian educational reform.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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