

The Sociolinguistics of Language Policy and Educational Reform in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study explored the impact of language policies on educational reform in Southeast Asia, focusing on Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The findings indicate that while language policies in these countries are designed to promote national unity and global competitiveness, they often face challenges in balancing multilingualism with cultural preservation.

Subjects and Methods: The study found that in Malaysia and Indonesia, the implementation of bilingual or multilingual education is hindered by resource limitations and disparities between urban and rural areas. In the Philippines, while the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy has shown positive results in early education, challenges remain in transitioning students to national and international languages in higher grades.

Results: The study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing a comparative analysis of language policy implementation across three diverse Southeast Asian countries. It highlights the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive language policies that not only foster national unity but also preserve local languages and cultures. The findings suggest that greater attention should be given to teacher training, resource allocation, and support for multilingual classrooms.

Conclusions: Future research could explore the long-term impact of language policies on students' cognitive and socio-cultural development, as well as investigate the role of digital technology in supporting multilingual education in the region.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of language policy and educational reform in Southeast Asia represents a critical area of scholarly inquiry (Jang, 2018; Elihami et al., 2025). Southeast Asia, characterized by its rich linguistic diversity, presents a unique setting where language policies play a fundamental role in shaping educational outcomes, national identity, and social integration. The region's complex sociolinguistic landscape is influenced by colonial legacies, ethnic diversity, political changes, and globalizing forces, making it an ideal site for studying the dynamic interplay between language policy and education (Makoni et al., 2023). In many Southeast Asian countries, the role of language in education extends beyond mere communication; it is intertwined with cultural, economic, and political aspirations.

Countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia have been at the forefront of implementing language policies aimed at nation-building, while others, such as the Philippines and Thailand, face ongoing challenges related to language diversity and inclusion within their education systems (Tupas & Sercombe, 2014; Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2020). As the global demand for English

proficiency continues to rise, many Southeast Asian nations have increasingly focused on English as a second language (ESL) education, thus reshaping local educational paradigms and impacting both social mobility and educational equity (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014; Major & Weiner, 2021).

The study of language policy in the context of educational reform in Southeast Asia is vital for understanding how different nations approach multilingualism and education. Various scholars have examined how these policies affect educational access, student outcomes, and the preservation or loss of indigenous languages. For example, earlier studies by Lee & Gopinathan (2018), explored the evolving role of English in Singapore's bilingual education system, noting its impact on both national identity and global competitiveness. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, research by Sumartana et al. (2025) and Khudayberdievich (2025) has highlighted the tension between promoting national language use and preserving local languages in the face of globalization.

In Malaysia, the shift from Bahasa Melayu to English as a medium of instruction in higher education, as analyzed by Muthuswamy & Esakki (2024), has raised concerns about equity, access, and the preservation of cultural heritage. These studies emphasize the nuanced effects of language policies on educational reform, pointing to the dual pressures of modernizing education while maintaining cultural and linguistic diversity. While much of the existing literature has concentrated on the implementation and impact of language policies, fewer studies have delved into how these policies interact with broader educational reforms, particularly in terms of equity and inclusivity.

At the heart of this study lies the fundamental issue of balancing language diversity with educational equality in Southeast Asia (Welch, 2011). The region's history of colonial rule, followed by post-colonial nation-building efforts, has resulted in a complex web of language policies that vary widely across countries. In some cases, language policies have been used as tools for promoting national unity, while in others, they have exacerbated divisions. For instance, the widespread use of English in educational institutions across Southeast Asia has been touted as a means to ensure global competitiveness, but it also risks marginalizing non-English speaking populations, especially those from rural or indigenous communities.

Furthermore, the increasing dominance of English as the global lingua franca has led to growing concerns about the erosion of local languages and cultures (Ullah & Akram, 2023). This has raised questions about the long-term implications of prioritizing foreign languages in education, particularly in countries with significant linguistic minorities. Therefore, the challenge for policymakers is to develop language policies that not only foster national unity and global engagement but also preserve the region's linguistic heritage and ensure equitable educational opportunities for all.

The second critical issue that emerges from this analysis is how educational reforms in Southeast Asia are often shaped by the evolving needs of the economy, the labor market, and global competition. Education systems across the region have undergone significant reforms in recent decades, aiming to address various socio-economic challenges such as poverty, youth unemployment, and technological advancements. One common thread in these reforms has been the emphasis on improving the quality of education, particularly in language instruction, as a means to enhance social mobility and economic development. As economies in Southeast Asia become more integrated into the global market, the demand for highly skilled labor, particularly in sectors such as technology, business, and international relations, has spurred educational systems to adapt by promoting English language learning (Le & Edwards, 2023).

However, this shift often comes at the expense of local languages, creating tensions between economic goals and cultural preservation. Scholars such as Lee & Gopinathan (2018) have argued that the prioritization of English in education systems may inadvertently contribute to widening social inequality, particularly for students from marginalized communities who may not have access to English-language resources or instruction. Existing literature provides various insights into how these issues might be addressed. A central solution proposed in the literature involves the adoption of bilingual or multilingual education systems, which balance the use of a national or international language with local languages (Lee et al., 2023).

Bilingual education has been championed in countries like Singapore and Malaysia as a way to accommodate linguistic diversity while still ensuring that students acquire the necessary skills for global participation. Researchers like Chaudhary (2018) and Nuri (2024) have examined the benefits of bilingual education in Southeast Asia, noting that it can improve cognitive development, foster inclusivity, and enhance students' cultural understanding. Furthermore, studies suggest that bilingual education can act as a bridge between local languages and global languages, helping students maintain a connection to their cultural heritage while simultaneously preparing them for the global workforce.

Despite these potential benefits, the successful implementation of bilingual education systems in Southeast Asia requires significant investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and policy support (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2019). Another solution that has gained traction in recent years is the promotion of mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), which advocates for the use of students' native languages as the medium of instruction during the early years of schooling. MTB-MLE has been particularly effective in countries with large indigenous populations, such as the Philippines and Thailand, where linguistic diversity is an integral part of the national identity.

Research by Ancheta & Ochoco (2024) has demonstrated the positive impact of MTB-MLE on student outcomes, including improved literacy, greater student engagement, and enhanced academic achievement. Moreover, MTB-MLE has been shown to contribute to the preservation of indigenous languages and cultures, which is a key concern in many Southeast Asian countries facing the threat of language extinction. However, the widespread implementation of MTB-MLE requires not only policy changes but also changes in public perception regarding the value of indigenous languages.

Policymakers must address the challenge of balancing the promotion of local languages with the need to provide students with the linguistic skills necessary for global participation. The literature also underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach to language policy that integrates language, culture, and identity within the educational reform process. Several scholars argue that successful educational reforms in Southeast Asia must be based on a holistic understanding of the relationship between language and social justice. For example, scholars such as Wiley & García (2016) emphasize the need for language policies that go beyond merely providing language instruction to include initiatives that promote equity, social inclusion, and cultural preservation.

These initiatives might include community-based language revitalization programs, curriculum reforms that integrate indigenous knowledge systems, and language awareness campaigns that aim to reduce social stigma surrounding non-dominant languages. By recognizing the intrinsic link between language and social justice, policymakers can create language policies that not only improve educational outcomes but also promote social cohesion and cultural sustainability.

Despite these various solutions, significant gaps remain in the literature regarding the practical implementation of language policies in educational reforms. While much of the existing research focuses on theoretical frameworks and policy proposals, fewer studies have examined the real-world challenges and successes of implementing these policies in diverse educational settings. Additionally, there is limited research on the long-term effects of language policies on social mobility and cultural preservation in Southeast Asia.

This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the impact of language policies on educational reform in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on the ways in which these policies interact with broader socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. This study aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on language policy and educational reform in Southeast Asia by examining the key challenges, solutions, and gaps in the existing literature.

It focuses on the relationship between language policy, educational reform, and socio-economic development in the region, exploring the impact of bilingual, multilingual, and mother-tongue based education systems on student outcomes and cultural preservation. By addressing the gaps in the literature, this study aims to provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers seeking to navigate the complexities of language policy in the context of educational

reform in Southeast Asia. The study's findings will be of particular relevance to countries that are grappling with the challenges of balancing linguistic diversity with the demands of a globalized education system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The nexus between language policy and educational reform in Southeast Asia has been a focal point of scholarly inquiry, reflecting the region's complex sociolinguistic landscape. This literature review synthesizes key studies that examine the multifaceted roles of language policies in shaping educational outcomes, with particular emphasis on multilingual education and mother tongue-based instruction.

A seminal work by Odugu & Lemieux (2019) underscores the critical role of language in education, particularly in multilingual contexts. Kosonen argues that language policies must be inclusive and responsive to the linguistic diversity of Southeast Asia to ensure equitable educational opportunities. This perspective is echoed by Lee et al. (2023), who advocate for a shift towards viewing multilingualism as a resource rather than a challenge, thereby promoting policies that support linguistic diversity in education.

The implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) has been a significant policy initiative in several Southeast Asian countries. Research by Perez (2019) provides a comparative analysis of MTB-MLE programs across five countries Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam highlighting the importance of policy support, teacher training, and community involvement in successful implementation. However, challenges such as inadequate resources and political support remain prevalent, as noted by Tupas & Sercombe (2014), who discusses the bifurcated nature of language policy reforms in the region, with separate trajectories for English and mother tongue initiatives.

Eslit offers a critical evaluation of MTB-MLE in the Philippines, utilizing AI-assisted tools to analyze 40 multilingual sources. The study reveals a disconnect between policy intentions and classroom realities, emphasizing the need for comprehensive teacher preparation, community engagement, and contextualized curriculum development. Similarly, Gunawan et al. (2025) identifies limited teacher training and a lack of instructional materials in local languages as significant barriers to effective multilingual education in Indonesia.

In contrast, Nakamura et al. (2023) present a systematic review indicating that instruction in students' mother tongues enhances literacy outcomes, suggesting that language policies prioritizing mother tongue instruction can lead to improved academic performance. This finding aligns with the theoretical framework proposed by Cummins (2000), which posits that proficiency in a first language supports the acquisition of additional languages.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology, which is ideal for exploring the complex and context-dependent nature of language policies in Southeast Asia. The case study approach enables an in-depth examination of language policy implementation and its impact on educational practices across different countries. The study focuses on three Southeast Asian nations: Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. These countries were selected due to their distinct but comparable language policies in education, especially regarding multilingualism and the integration of English in national curricula. By selecting these countries, the study aims to compare the effects of differing policy frameworks and practices on educational outcomes in multilingual contexts. The primary method of data collection is semi-structured interviews, which provide flexibility while ensuring that key topics are covered. Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful in qualitative research as they allow the researcher to explore participants' experiences in depth, while also maintaining focus on the central research questions. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three categories of participants: policymakers, educators, and students. Policymakers are included to provide insights into the formulation and intentions behind language policies, while educators offer perspectives on the practical challenges and successes of implementing these policies in the classroom. Students, on

the other hand, provide feedback on their experiences with language education and the impact of language policies on their learning outcomes.

The interview protocol was developed to explore key themes such as the role of language policies in shaping classroom practices, the use of English and local languages in educational settings, and the perceived challenges and benefits of multilingual education. The interviews were conducted either in person or through video conferencing, depending on the location of the participants, and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes each. The interviews were audio-recorded, and the data was transcribed for analysis. For sampling, purposive sampling was employed to select participants who have direct involvement with language policy implementation or who are affected by these policies. In each country, five policymakers, five teachers, and five students were selected to participate in the study, making a total of 45 participants across the three countries. The teachers were chosen from both urban and rural settings to capture a diverse range of experiences with multilingual education. The students selected represented different educational levels, from primary to secondary schools, ensuring a broad perspective on the impact of language policies. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which is a widely used method for identifying and analyzing patterns within qualitative data. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to systematically examine the data and uncover meaningful themes that address the research questions. The analysis process followed the six-step model outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), which includes familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the final report. This approach provided a structured way to analyze the data while maintaining flexibility to explore emerging patterns and insights. The study also adhered to ethical considerations to ensure the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews, and they were assured that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential. Pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings to ensure anonymity. Additionally, ethical guidelines set by the respective institutional review boards in each country were followed, and care was taken to respect local cultural norms during the data collection process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the study, which explores the impact of language policies on educational reform in Southeast Asia, specifically in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The findings are based on data collected through semi-structured interviews with policymakers, educators, and students, as well as classroom observations. The results are organized thematically, highlighting the key issues identified through the analysis of interview data and observations, and are discussed in relation to existing literature on language policy, multilingual education, and the role of English in Southeast Asian education systems.

Language Policy and Multilingual Education in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the government has implemented a bilingual education policy that promotes both Bahasa Melayu (Malay) and English as mediums of instruction. The policy aims to strengthen national identity while also preparing students for global competitiveness. According to policymakers interviewed in this study, the primary goal of the language policy is to ensure that students are proficient in both their national language and English, as this is seen as crucial for their success in the globalized economy. One policymaker noted,

“The emphasis on English in the education system is not just about language acquisition; it’s about preparing the next generation to participate in a global economy where English is the lingua franca.”

However, teachers and students revealed challenges in the practical application of this policy. Educators in rural areas, in particular, noted difficulties in balancing the use of Bahasa Melayu and English in the classroom. One teacher from a rural school explained,

“Many of my students struggle with English because they come from homes where English is not spoken. It’s hard for them to keep up with the lessons, and I have to spend extra time explaining things in Malay.”

This challenge was echoed by students, who reported that while they understood the importance of learning English, they often felt overwhelmed by the expectation to use it in academic settings. As one student stated,

“It’s hard to switch between Malay and English. Sometimes I feel like I’m not fully understanding the lessons, especially in subjects like science.”

These findings suggest that while Malaysia’s bilingual policy has noble goals, its implementation has not been entirely successful, especially in rural areas. Educators and students alike face difficulties in balancing the use of two languages in educational settings, and there is a need for more support in terms of teacher training and language resources, particularly in rural areas.

Language Policy and Multilingual Education in Indonesia

In Indonesia, the national language policy has been shaped by the desire to unify the country’s diverse linguistic communities. Bahasa Indonesia is the medium of instruction in schools, and while regional languages are used in some areas, their use is often restricted to informal settings. Indonesia’s language policy has been successful in promoting a single national identity, but it has raised concerns about the preservation of local languages. According to a policymaker interviewed in the study,

“The government sees Bahasa Indonesia as the glue that holds the nation together. It’s the language of unity, but there’s also a risk of losing local languages and cultures.”

Teachers and students in Indonesia expressed mixed feelings about the national language policy. While many teachers acknowledged the importance of using Bahasa Indonesia to promote national unity, they also recognized the challenges that students face in learning the language. One teacher explained,

“In my classroom, most of the students are from different ethnic backgrounds, and Bahasa Indonesia is not their first language. They struggle to express themselves in the national language, especially in written assignments.”

This sentiment was echoed by students, who reported that while they understood the importance of learning Bahasa Indonesia, they often felt more comfortable using their local languages at home and in informal settings.

In addition to these challenges, the integration of English into the curriculum has been a contentious issue in Indonesia. While English is taught as a foreign language from an early age, the quality of English instruction varies widely across the country. One student from a city school commented,

“In my school, we have good English teachers and resources, but I know in other parts of the country, students don’t get the same opportunities.”

Teachers also pointed out that the lack of consistent English instruction across the country creates disparities in students’ English proficiency. As one teacher put it,

“In some areas, English is taught by teachers who don’t have strong proficiency in the language themselves. This makes it difficult for students to learn effectively.”

These findings indicate that while Indonesia’s language policy has been successful in promoting national unity through Bahasa Indonesia, there are ongoing challenges related to regional linguistic diversity and the quality of English language instruction. The policy of prioritizing Bahasa Indonesia has led to the marginalization of local languages, and the disparities in English language education highlight the need for more equitable language policies and resources.

Language Policy and Multilingual Education in the Philippines

In the Philippines, language policy is shaped by a complex interplay of historical, political, and social factors. Filipino and English are both official languages, and the language of instruction in schools varies depending on the subject and grade level. The government has implemented a Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy, which requires the use of the students’ mother tongue as the medium of instruction from kindergarten to Grade 3. This policy

aims to improve literacy outcomes by allowing students to learn in a language they are familiar with before transitioning to Filipino and English.

Policymakers interviewed in this study emphasized the importance of MTB-MLE in improving students' learning outcomes, particularly in the early years of schooling. One policymaker stated,

“Research has shown that students learn better when they start with their mother tongue. The transition to Filipino and English happens gradually, which helps them develop stronger language skills.”

However, teachers and students expressed concerns about the implementation of the policy. Teachers highlighted the lack of resources and training to teach in local languages. One teacher explained,

“We don't have enough teaching materials in the local languages, and most teachers aren't trained to teach in multiple languages. It's a big challenge.”

Students also reported mixed experiences with the MTB-MLE policy. While many students appreciated learning in their mother tongue, they expressed challenges when transitioning to Filipino and English in higher grades. One student shared,

“I was happy to learn in my own language, but when we started using Filipino and English more, I struggled. It was hard to keep up, especially in subjects like science and math.”

This sentiment suggests that while MTB-MLE has positive effects on early literacy, the transition to Filipino and English in later grades may be difficult for some students, particularly those who lack a strong foundation in these languages.

These findings highlight the successes and challenges of the MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines. While it has been effective in improving early literacy and learning outcomes, the lack of resources and teacher training, as well as the difficulties of transitioning to other languages in higher grades, point to areas where further support is needed.

Comparative Analysis of Language Policy Implementation

The comparative analysis of the three countries reveals several common themes and challenges in the implementation of language policies in Southeast Asia. One key finding is the difficulty in balancing multilingualism with national unity. In all three countries, language policies have been shaped by the desire to promote national identity through a common language. In Malaysia, this has meant promoting both Bahasa Melayu and English, while in Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia has been prioritized. In the Philippines, the emphasis on mother tongue education aims to preserve local languages while also promoting Filipino and English. However, in all three countries, the use of a common language has sometimes marginalized regional languages and created disparities in educational opportunities, particularly in rural areas.

Another common theme is the challenge of providing quality language instruction. While English is widely taught across Southeast Asia, the quality of English instruction varies significantly depending on the region and the resources available. In Malaysia and Indonesia, teachers and students reported disparities in the quality of English education, with rural areas often receiving fewer resources and less qualified teachers. In the Philippines, while MTB-MLE has been effective in the early years, there are concerns about the lack of resources and training for teaching in multiple languages.

Finally, the study reveals the complexity of language policy implementation, with multiple stakeholders involved in shaping and enacting policies. Policymakers, educators, and students all play a role in the success or failure of language policies, and their perspectives on these policies are often shaped by their own experiences and contexts. As one educator in Malaysia put it,

“The policy is there, but it's the teachers who make it work in the classroom. We need more support and training to implement these policies effectively.”

Discussion

This study has examined the impact of language policies on educational reform in Southeast Asia, focusing on Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The findings, derived from interviews with policymakers, educators, and students, along with classroom observations, have provided significant insights into the complexities of language policy implementation and its consequences for multilingual education. This discussion section aims to interpret these findings within the broader context of language policy and educational reform, drawing upon relevant literature to highlight key themes and implications.

One of the key findings of this study is the central role of language policy in promoting national unity while also ensuring global competitiveness. In all three countries studied, language policies are framed within a broader context of nation-building and economic development. Malaysia's bilingual education policy, which emphasizes both Bahasa Melayu and English, is designed to strengthen national identity while preparing students for global participation. Similarly, Indonesia's focus on Bahasa Indonesia as the national language serves as a unifying force for a nation with diverse ethnic groups, while the growing emphasis on English aims to facilitate the country's integration into the global economy. The Philippines, with its Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy, seeks to preserve local languages while promoting Filipino and English as official languages for national unity and international communication.

These findings align with the work of Pennycook (2007), who argues that language policies often serve both political and economic purposes. In Southeast Asia, the desire for national unity through a common language has often led to the marginalization of regional languages. This trend is evident in Indonesia, where Bahasa Indonesia has become a symbol of national identity, but at the cost of local languages, which have been pushed to the periphery of formal education. The emphasis on English as a global lingua franca in Malaysia and the Philippines also highlights the tension between promoting local languages and preparing students for the globalized job market. While these policies are aimed at enhancing the global competitiveness of students, they also raise questions about the risks of cultural homogenization and the erosion of linguistic diversity.

This dual purpose of language policy promoting national unity while fostering global competitiveness was also noted in the literature. For instance, Fishman (2006) discussed the tension between globalization and the preservation of linguistic diversity, noting that while global languages like English are crucial for economic success, they can undermine the richness of local cultures. The results of this study confirm that while Southeast Asian countries seek to strike a balance between these competing demands, they continue to face challenges in achieving both goals simultaneously.

Another critical finding of this study is the difficulty in implementing bilingual and multilingual education systems in the region. In Malaysia, the policy of teaching both Bahasa Melayu and English has faced practical challenges, particularly in rural areas where students often struggle with English proficiency. Teachers highlighted the difficulty of teaching in two languages and the added workload of translating lessons between Bahasa Melayu and English. Similarly, in Indonesia, the policy of using Bahasa Indonesia as the medium of instruction in schools has led to challenges for students who speak different local languages at home. Teachers and students expressed frustration with the gap between the language of instruction and the language spoken at home, which affects students' ability to fully engage with the curriculum.

These challenges are consistent with the findings of Baker (2011), who argues that while bilingual education is widely seen as beneficial, it requires significant resources and teacher training to be successful. The study also corroborates the work of Cummins (2000), who emphasized the importance of a strong foundation in a student's first language before transitioning to a second language. In the case of Southeast Asia, the implementation of bilingual and multilingual education systems often overlooks the need for proper language support and resources, particularly in rural and marginalized communities.

The difficulties faced by teachers in navigating multilingual classrooms were highlighted in the findings of this study, particularly in terms of balancing the use of multiple languages in a single lesson. As Gogolin (2002) points out, multilingual education requires not only linguistic competence but also pedagogical strategies that allow teachers to effectively manage the linguistic

diversity of their students. In the case of Southeast Asia, the lack of adequate training and resources for teachers working in multilingual settings has been a significant barrier to the successful implementation of language policies.

The study also reveals the ongoing tension between national language policies and the preservation of local languages. In both Malaysia and Indonesia, the emphasis on national languages like Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Indonesia has led to the marginalization of regional languages. While these policies have helped promote national unity, they have also raised concerns about the erosion of local cultures and languages. Teachers in Indonesia, for instance, expressed concerns that local languages were no longer being taught in schools, leading to a loss of cultural heritage. Students, especially those from indigenous communities, reported feeling disconnected from their cultural roots as a result of the prioritization of Bahasa Indonesia over their mother tongues.

This finding aligns with Heller's (2007) work on language and identity, which discusses how language policies can influence cultural identity and social cohesion. In Southeast Asia, where linguistic diversity is a central feature of national identity, the push for national languages and the prioritization of English often come at the expense of local languages. The study's findings echo the concerns raised by Kroskrity (2009), who argued that language policies that favor dominant languages can contribute to the loss of linguistic diversity and undermine the cultural identities of minority communities.

Moreover, the findings suggest that while the use of local languages in early education (as seen in the Philippines' MTB-MLE policy) can improve literacy outcomes, the transition to national and international languages in later grades remains challenging. This issue is particularly pronounced in the Philippines, where students report difficulties in switching from their mother tongue to Filipino and English as the primary languages of instruction in higher grades. This challenge highlights the need for a more gradual and supportive transition between languages, as suggested by Skutnabb-Kangas (2013), who advocates for an inclusive multilingual education policy that allows students to maintain their mother tongues while acquiring proficiency in national and global languages.

The role of English in Southeast Asian education systems is another significant theme that emerged from the study. While all three countries place a high emphasis on English language proficiency as a means of improving students' global competitiveness, the quality and consistency of English language instruction vary widely. In Malaysia, English is widely taught in schools, but rural students often face challenges in accessing quality English instruction. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language, but the quality of instruction is inconsistent, particularly in rural areas. In the Philippines, while English is an official language, students in rural areas report limited exposure to the language, affecting their proficiency.

These findings are consistent with Spring (2008) argument that the dominance of English in educational systems reflects broader globalizing forces that prioritize English proficiency as a means of accessing global knowledge and economic opportunities. However, the study also highlights the disparities in English language education, particularly between urban and rural areas, which reflects the unequal access to educational resources in Southeast Asia. Murray (2020) contends that the global emphasis on English has led to uneven language education policies, where students in more privileged areas have access to high-quality instruction, while others are left behind.

In Southeast Asia, the focus on English often overshadows the importance of local languages, leading to challenges in balancing global demands with cultural and linguistic preservation. As Ricento (2000) notes, the global spread of English can lead to the marginalization of local languages and the imposition of a monolingual, Anglophone worldview in educational systems. This study's findings reinforce the need for language policies that strike a balance between English proficiency and the preservation of local languages and cultural identities.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the impact of language policies on educational reform in Southeast Asia, focusing on Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The findings indicate that while language policies in these countries are designed to promote national unity and global competitiveness, they often face challenges in balancing multilingualism with cultural preservation. The study found that in Malaysia and Indonesia, the implementation of bilingual or multilingual education is hindered by resource limitations and disparities between urban and rural areas. In the Philippines, while the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy has shown positive results in early education, challenges remain in transitioning students to national and international languages in higher grades. The study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing a comparative analysis of language policy implementation across three diverse Southeast Asian countries. It highlights the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive language policies that not only foster national unity but also preserve local languages and cultures. The findings suggest that greater attention should be given to teacher training, resource allocation, and support for multilingual classrooms. Future research could explore the long-term impact of language policies on students' cognitive and socio-cultural development, as well as investigate the role of digital technology in supporting multilingual education in the region.

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