

Improving Multilingual Education in Malaysia: Tailoring Language Teaching for SJKC Schools

Wong Sien Biang

University Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Multilingual education plays a critical role in linguistic and cognitive development, yet its implementation varies across Southeast Asia. While countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand initially mandated national language instruction, challenges in literacy acquisition among minority groups led to the adoption of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). Malaysia's Chinese National-Type Schools (SJKC) have long provided a form of multilingual education, yet the lack of a clear distinction between first-language (L1) instruction and second-language (L2/L3) acquisition has resulted in cognitive overload and limited linguistic fluency. This paper advocates for a differentiated approach in SJKC, where Mandarin (L1) is leveraged as the primary medium for cognitive and literacy development, while Malay (L2) and English (L3) are taught using second-language acquisition methods that emphasize functional communication over content mastery. Drawing on literature reviews and best practices, this study proposes a structured framework to optimize multilingual education in SJKC through differentiated syllabi, targeted pedagogical strategies, and curriculum reform. These measures aim to enhance linguistic proficiency while fostering higher-order thinking skills, ensuring that Malaysia's trilingual education model remains effective, sustainable, and globally competitive.

Keywords

Multilingual Education, Trilingual Education, Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), First-Language Instruction (L1), Second-Language Acquisition (L2/L3), Chinese National-Type Schools (SJKC), Mandarin Language Education

INTRODUCTION

The Role of MTB-MLE in Addressing Linguistic Barriers in Education

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) as a formal educational approach gained recognition in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Early research on bilingual education highlighted the benefits of mother tongue instruction for cognitive development and academic success (Cummins, 1979).

In the 1980s–1990s, studies by UNESCO and the World Bank emphasized the importance of learning in one's first language before transitioning to additional languages. A large-scale evaluation involving approximately 11,000 students in grades 4 and 6 revealed that those taught in their native Creole language performed comparably in French to peers who were instructed exclusively in French. This finding suggests that early education in the mother tongue does not hinder, and may even enhance, second-language acquisition (Dutcher, 1995).

In 2003, UNESCO's position paper, *Education in a Multilingual World*, formally advocated for MTB-MLE as a best practice in multilingual education. The First International Conference on Language and Education (2007, Bangkok) formally endorsed MTB-MLE as a policy recommendation for multilingual nations. In 2009–2010, the Philippines institutionalized MTB-MLE through DepEd Order No. 74, marking one of the most structured implementations of mother tongue-based education in ASEAN (Tupas, 2015). However, challenges in execution, teacher training, and policy consistency have been noted, particularly in ensuring that MTB-MLE remains an

inclusive and long-term policy rather than an experimental initiative (Tupas, 2015). Similarly, Thailand and Indonesia have initiated MTB-MLE pilot projects; however, their scale and effectiveness remain inconsistent due to political and administrative challenges (Tupas & Martin, 2017). In 2015, UNESCO’s Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) further reinforced the role of MTB-MLE in ensuring equitable learning opportunities.

Malaysia’s vernacular schools (SJKC & SJKT) have long practiced a form of MTB-MLE, even before its international recognition, allowing students to learn in Mandarin or Tamil alongside Malay and English. MTB-MLE is designed to mitigate educational inequalities by providing instruction in students’ first languages, thus fostering stronger literacy skills and cognitive development. However, Tupas (2018) highlights that many ASEAN nations, despite recognizing the benefits of MTB-MLE, still struggle with deeply ingrained language hierarchies and political resistance to fully implementing mother tongue education. The imposition of a single national language as the primary medium of instruction has led to linguistic marginalization of minority groups, limiting their access to education, government resources, and long-term academic success (Tupas, 2018; UNESCO, 2016).

EQUALITY VERSUS EQUITY



In the first image, it is assumed that everyone will benefit from the same supports. They are being treated equally.



In the second image, individuals are given different supports to make it possible for them to have equal access to the game. They are being treated equitably.



In the third image, all three can see the game without any supports or accommodations because the cause of the inequity was addressed. The systemic barrier has been removed.

Pic 1: Equity Versus Equality in Language Policy

The equity versus equality framework, illustrated through the widely recognized visual (Pic 1) of individuals attempting to watch a baseball game, offers a useful analogy for understanding language policy.

1. Equality: The first image represents equality, where all individuals receive identical support. However, this fails to account for differences in linguistic background—just as imposing a single national language as the sole medium of instruction disregards the educational needs of minority language speakers.

2. **Equity:** The second image illustrates equity, where individuals receive customized support based on their linguistic needs. This reflects the MTB-MLE approach, which accommodates different linguistic backgrounds to promote more effective learning outcomes.
3. **Systemic Change:** The third image represents an ideal scenario, where the systemic barrier itself—symbolized by the wooden fence—is removed. In the context of language policy, this means eliminating the linguistic barrier imposed by monolingual instruction. By allowing students to learn in their mother tongue first, they develop stronger cognitive skills and literacy, leading to more effective multilingual learning.

Recognizing these disparities, ASEAN countries have increasingly incorporated MTB-MLE into their education policies, but with varying levels of success (Tupas & Martin, 2017). Tupas (2018) argues that while the policy frameworks exist, practical challenges such as lack of qualified teachers, inadequate teaching materials, and resistance from dominant-language policymakers continue to hinder full implementation. The Philippines remains one of the most comprehensive adopters of MTB-MLE, whereas Thailand and Indonesia still rely on pilot programs that lack nationwide enforcement (Tupas, 2015).

Malaysia's Unique Position in MTB-MLE

Malaysia has not required a major overhaul of its education system in this regard. Since its formation as a nation, Malaysia has maintained national-type schools that offer instruction in Mandarin and Tamil alongside Malay, inherently aligning with MTB-MLE principles. This structure has preserved linguistic diversity and facilitated greater educational access for minority language groups, preventing the cognitive disadvantages observed in nations with rigid monolingual policies (Gill, 2014).

However, while Malaysia's multilingual education system is well-established, improvements are still necessary. Curriculum reforms, clearer pedagogical distinctions between first and second languages, and enhanced language transition strategies are needed to ensure that multilingual education continues to support—not hinder—cognitive and linguistic development.

By adopting evidence-based multilingual education strategies, Malaysia can further strengthen its trilingual education framework, ensuring that students develop both linguistic competence and cognitive growth in a balanced, equitable manner.

Research Background: The Role of MTB-MLE in Southeast Asia and the Malaysian Context

Ruanni Tupas (2018) argues that although MTB-MLE is proven to be effective, its real-world implementation in Southeast Asia remains limited and inconsistent due to political, economic, and ideological barriers. Instead of full-fledged adoption, many countries only apply weak, transitional versions of MTB-MLE, using mother tongue instruction as a temporary tool to facilitate the shift to the national language or English. Without sustained policy commitment and long-term implementation, MTB-MLE initiatives in Southeast Asia will remain fragmented and ineffective.

The gap between policy and practice has resulted in the limited success of MTB-MLE in Southeast Asia. UNESCO (2003) acknowledges that mother tongue instruction “is far from being the rule”, with most efforts confined to non-formal education or experimental community school projects led by NGOs and religious organizations (Kosonen, 2005, 2013).

Tupas (2018) identifies three key reasons for the limited success of MTB-MLE implementation in ASEAN countries:

1. **Limited integration into formal education** – MTB-MLE remains confined to pilot programs rather than nationwide curricula, restricting its long-term impact.
2. **Deviation from UNESCO's MTB-MLE framework** – Research suggests that at least six years of mother tongue instruction is necessary for sustained literacy and cognitive benefits, yet most implementations fall short of this benchmark (UNESCO, 2003).

3. MTB-MLE as a transitional rather than foundational approach – Mother tongue instruction is often used merely as a stepping stone to acquiring the national language, rather than as a long-term tool for literacy and academic growth.

Among ASEAN nations, the Philippines stands out as the only country that has fully institutionalized MTB-MLE with measurable positive outcomes. In contrast, Thailand and Indonesia have struggled to implement MTB-MLE sustainably due to inconsistent policies, teacher shortages, and weak administrative support (Tupas & Martin, 2017).

Unlike other ASEAN nations, Malaysia has historically implemented a multilingual education model, eliminating the need for large-scale restructuring to accommodate MTB-MLE. Since the colonial era, the establishment of national-type schools (SJKC and SJKT) has facilitated formal first-language instruction in Mandarin and Tamil, making Malaysia an early adopter of MTB-MLE principles (David & McLellan, 2014).

Given Malaysia's well-established multilingual education framework, further efforts should move beyond policy debates and focus on enhancing the quality of first-language instruction. This study will explore three core areas of first-language instruction in Malaysia's multilingual education system:

- Curriculum Design – To what extent do current syllabi promote literacy development and cognitive skills in first-language instruction?
- Pedagogical Approaches – How do teaching methods in first-language instruction facilitate higher-order thinking skills (critical thinking, creativity, and communication)? Do they reflect first-language learning principles, or do they mimic second-language acquisition strategies?
- Assessment Practices – Do existing evaluation methods measure deep linguistic proficiency, or are they largely based on rote memorization and standardized testing?

By shifting the focus from external policy barriers to internal educational structures, Malaysia can further strengthen its multilingual education system, ensuring that first-language instruction supports cognitive development and long-term academic success.

Research Questions:

1. To what extent do different types of primary schools in Malaysia implement a first-language-based instructional approach, and how does this influence students' cognitive development, particularly in fostering the 4Cs (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity)?
2. What are the most effective pedagogical strategies for first-language instruction to optimize learning outcomes for students in Malaysia's multilingual education system?
3. How can the learning of three languages—Malay, English, and Mandarin/Tamil—be effectively integrated in Malaysia's primary schools to ensure linguistic proficiency while supporting cognitive and academic development?

Problem Statement:

Multilingual education plays a crucial role in shaping students' cognitive and academic development, particularly in linguistically diverse countries such as Malaysia. Research indicates that first-language instruction enhances literacy, fosters cognitive growth, and supports higher-order thinking skills, particularly in multilingual contexts (Cummins, 2000). The concept of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) has been widely adopted in ASEAN countries, ensuring that students develop foundational literacy and critical thinking skills in their first language before transitioning to additional languages (Tupas & Martin, 2017).

While Malaysia accommodates multiple language mediums through national and national-type schools, the extent to which first-language instruction is effectively implemented across different school types and its impact on cognitive development remain unclear. Studies suggest that a strong linguistic foundation in the first language

enhances higher-order thinking skills, particularly in fostering the 4Cs: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. However, variation in instructional approaches across Malaysia's primary schools raises concerns about pedagogical effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

This study aims to:

- Examine the implementation of first-language instruction in Malaysia's primary education system and its impact on students' cognitive and linguistic development.
- Identify best practices in first-language pedagogy that optimize learning outcomes for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.
- Explore strategies for effective multilingual education, ensuring that the learning of Malay, English, and Mandarin/Tamil is integrated without causing cognitive overload. Research suggests that differentiated instruction and contextualized language learning approaches are essential for maximizing academic success in multilingual settings (Gill, 2014). Additionally, balancing multiple language acquisition without overwhelming students remains a critical challenge.

By addressing these key questions, this study will contribute to the ongoing discourse on multilingual education, offering practical insights for policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers. The findings will inform future language policies and instructional strategies, enhancing the quality and effectiveness of Malaysia's multilingual education framework.

Rethinking First-Language Instruction in Malaysian SJKC Schools: Moving Beyond Second-Language Pedagogy

A. Introduction: The Misalignment Between First-Language (L1) Instruction and Pedagogical Practices in SJKC

A well-structured first-language (L1) curriculum should cultivate fluency, critical thinking, and meaningful engagement with language (Cummins, 2001). However, an analysis of the syllabus, textbook content, and pedagogical approaches in Malaysian Chinese national-type schools (SJKC) reveals a fundamental misalignment. Instead of fostering fluency in expressing ideas and meaningful interaction, first-language instruction in SJKC schools mirrors second-language (L2) methodologies, prioritizing vocabulary accumulation and mechanical literacy over expressive communication and response-based interaction.

This discussion highlights three major areas where SJKC's first-language instruction diverges from effective L1 pedagogy:

1. Speaking and listening—focusing on vocabulary accumulation rather than developing fluency in idea expression and meaningful interaction.
2. Writing instruction—emphasizing mechanical character formation and standardized writing models over expressive and creative writing.
3. Reading instruction—treating reading as a tool for memorizing vocabulary, rather than engaging with texts analytically and critically.

By evaluating the syllabus and textbook structure, this discussion highlights how the SJKC curriculum's deviation from authentic L1 pedagogy limits students' cognitive development and hinders their ability to become 4C learners (critical thinkers, communicators, collaborators, and creative individuals).

B. Speaking Instruction: Vocabulary Accumulation vs. Expressive and Meaningful Interaction

A key misalignment in SJKC speaking instruction lies in its focus on vocabulary acquisition rather than fluency in expressing ideas and meaningful communication.



Pic 2: Comparison of TESL Speaking Material and SJKC Textbook

TESL Teaching Material (Image 1):

Students are asked to identify objects in the picture (e.g., cat, mouse, girl, cupboard) and construct sentences using prepositions (e.g., "The girl is standing at the door.").

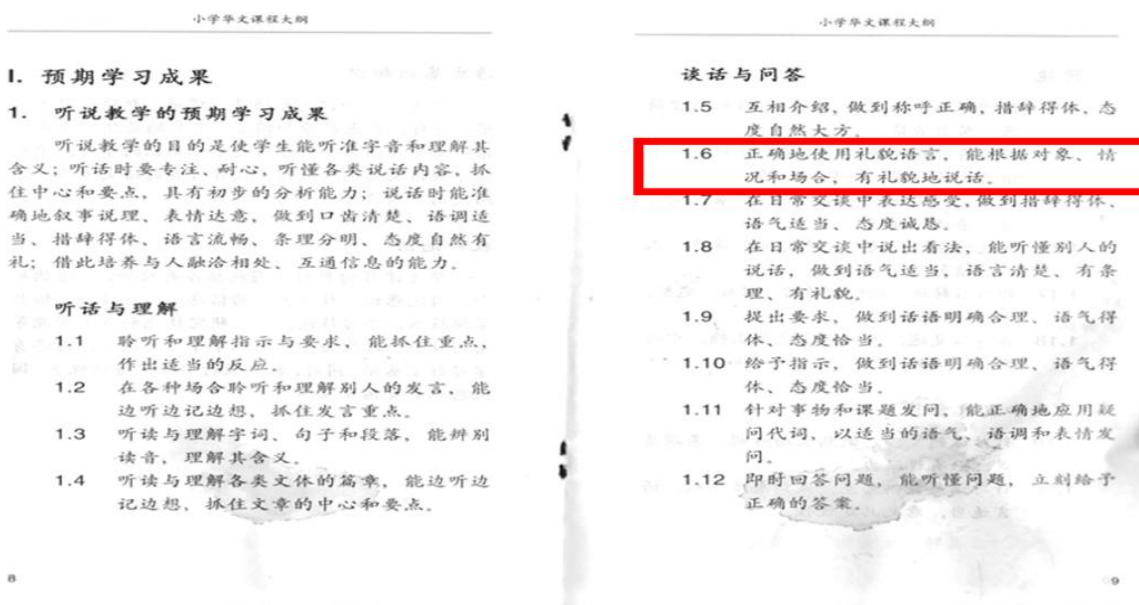
This method is appropriate for second-language (L2) learners, as it helps them build structured sentences through explicit vocabulary instruction.

SJKC Speaking Material (Image 2):

Although designed for L1 speakers, the SJKC syllabus applies a similar approach—students are first asked to name objects, then construct fixed-sentence structures based on those words.

Instead of encouraging discussions or response-based communication, the task reinforces rote language drills that emphasize word recognition over interactive language use.

In addition to that, the Chinese language syllabus in SJKC schools also emphasizes learning polite expressions and situational phrases, following an L2 teaching framework rather than fostering natural language use.



Pic 3: Syllabus excerpt from KBSR SJKC Chinese Language in 1990s 1.6: "Students should correctly use polite expressions and adjust speech according to the audience, context, and situation."

What is Effective:

- Encouraging context-appropriate communication is useful for social awareness and linguistic adaptation.

What is Problematic:

- The syllabus emphasizes fixed expressions ("please," "thank you," "excuse me") rather than developing the ability to express ideas fluently in real-world interactions.
- This does not necessarily improve communication skills, as these polite expressions are already acquired through daily social exposure at home and in early childhood.
- A more effective L1 speaking curriculum should focus on engaging students in discussions, debates, and interactive storytelling to develop spontaneous verbal expression.

Key Issue: Instead of fostering fluency in expressing ideas and responding meaningfully in conversations, the syllabus focuses on accumulating vocabulary, reinforcing passive rather than active language use.

C. Writing Instruction: Prioritizing Stroke Standardization Over Expressive Writing

Writing in an L1 should allow students to explore ideas, construct arguments, and express creativity (Cummins, 2001). However, the SJKC writing syllabus focuses primarily on character formation and stroke order, treating writing as a mechanical skill rather than a cognitive tool.

3.0 书写技能

内容标准	学习标准	备注
3.1 应用铅笔写字，感受汉字的形体美。做到笔画和笔顺正确，字的间架结构匀称，字体规范，工整美观，有一定的速度，并养成良好的写字习惯。	学生能够： 3.1.1 应用铅笔书写正楷，感受汉字的形体美。做到字体规范，端正整洁，有一定的书写速度，并养成良好的写字习惯。	附注： 教师必须关注学生写字的姿势与习惯，重视书写的正确、端正、整洁，激发学生写字的积极性，不能简单地用罚抄的方式来达到纠正错别字的目的。
表现标准		
学习表现	说明	
1 尚未掌握	稍能以正确的坐姿和执笔法书写，初步掌握正确的笔画、运笔的规律，笔顺错误少，字体尚可辨认，卷面尚整洁。	
2 有待改进	能以正确的坐姿和执笔法书写，初步掌握正确的笔画、运笔的规律，笔顺错误少，字体稍可辨认，卷面尚整洁。	
3 基本掌握	能以正确的坐姿和执笔法书写，掌握正确的笔画、运笔的规律，笔顺错误极少，字体端正，卷面整洁。	
4 满意	能以正确的坐姿和执笔法书写，掌握笔画和笔顺的规律，字体端正、尚规范，字的间架结构稍匀称，卷面整洁。	
5 良好	能以正确的坐姿和执笔法书写，掌握笔画和笔顺的规律，字体端正、规范，字的间架结构匀称，卷面整洁。	
6 优良	能以正确的坐姿和执笔法熟练地书写，掌握笔画和笔顺的规律，整体字体端正、规范，字的间架结构匀称，卷面整洁。	

Pic 4: Syllabus excerpt from SJKC Chinese Language KSSR revise 2017 for Standard 4

"Students must master stroke order, maintain structural accuracy (follow standardized character-writing practices set by China)."

What is Effective:

- Ensuring character legibility and consistency supports functional literacy.

What is Problematic:

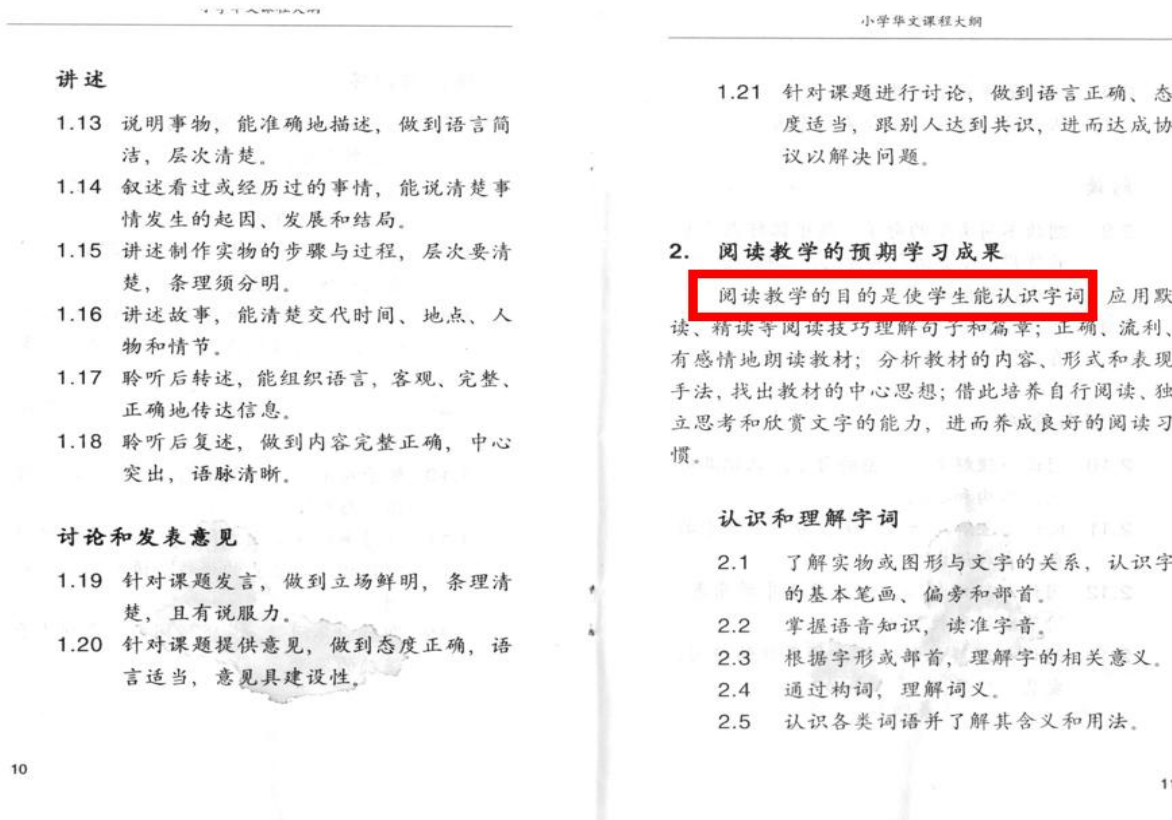
- Writing is reduced to mechanical reproduction rather than an expressive skill.

- Rigid standardization discourages creativity, reinforcing a passive learning approach.
- Instead of fostering self-motivated writing experiences, students follow a fixed, task-driven model ("要我写") rather than a self-driven engagement ("我要写").

Key Issue: By prioritizing handwriting mechanics over content creation, the syllabus limits students' ability to engage in authentic, meaningful writing.

D. Reading Instruction: Vocabulary Accumulation Over Literary Engagement

A strong L1 reading program should emphasize interpretation, engagement with narratives, and appreciation of literary aesthetics (OECD, 2018). However, SJKC reading instruction primarily serves as a tool for vocabulary acquisition, rather than as a platform for analysis and discussion.



Pic5: Syllabus excerpt from SJKC KBSR Chinese Language in 1990s

Learning outcome 2: "The goal of reading instruction is to help students recognize words and expand their vocabulary."

What is Effective:

- Vocabulary expansion is an important part of literacy development.

What is Problematic:

- Teachers introduce texts by explaining word meanings before students engage with the passage.
- Reading is treated as a decoding process, focusing on word recognition rather than comprehension.
- Narrative appreciation, character analysis, and literary interpretation are largely ignored.
- Text modification for syllabus compliance alters content logic, diminishing reading engagement.



Pic 6: An example: Text Modification in Textbooks.

- Original Version: The original story (Right Image) follows a logical sequence where a mother snail explains the need for self-reliance, offering an engaging and meaningful lesson.
- Textbook Version: The textbook replaces *earthworm* (蚯蚓) with *snake* (蛇) because 蚯蚓 was not part of the syllabus vocabulary list, creating logical inconsistencies (since snakes do not burrow underground).
- These unnecessary changes disrupt coherence, reducing the story’s effectiveness as a literary and analytical text.

Key Issue: SJKC reading instruction focuses on word memorization rather than deep comprehension, contradicting global literacy guidelines (PISA, OECD, 2018).

E. The Cognitive Impact of L2-Oriented First-Language Instruction

L1 education is essential for developing cognitive growth and higher-order thinking skills. However, the L2-oriented approach in SJKC syllabi limits students’ ability to:

- Think critically—reading instruction prioritizes vocabulary over interpretation.
- Communicate effectively—speaking instruction focuses on formulaic expressions.
- Collaborate meaningfully—writing instruction lacks creative engagement.
- Develop independent ideas—reading and writing are mechanical tasks rather than cognitive activities.

These limitations hinder students from becoming 4C learners (Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, Creativity), essential skills for 21st-century education (OECD, 2018).

Final Issue: SJKC’s first-language instruction does not align with the cognitive and linguistic benefits expected from an L1 curriculum. Instead, it resembles an L2 teaching model, restricting cognitive development.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of syllabi, textbooks, and pedagogical practices in SJKC reveals a fundamental misalignment between first-language (L1) instructional objectives and actual teaching methods. Instead of leveraging Chinese as a medium for deep cognitive engagement and literacy development, the curriculum adopts second-language (L2) instructional strategies, prioritizing vocabulary acquisition, standardized writing mechanics, and scripted

speech over authentic language use.

This deviation from research-based first-language instructional strategies restricts students' ability to develop higher-order thinking skills, critical literacy, and creative expression, key components of 21st-century education and the 4C learning framework (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity) (OECD, 2018). Studies on language and cognitive development consistently highlight that first-language instruction should serve as a tool for deep engagement rather than mechanical language acquisition (Cummins, 2001). However, the SJKC syllabus follows a word-based, fragmented approach to reading rather than fostering analytical and interpretative reading skills, contradicting global literacy benchmarks set by the PISA framework (OECD, 2018).

In essence, SJKC's first-language education does not align with well-established L1 pedagogy. This misalignment limits students' cognitive growth and academic potential, reinforcing a rote-learning model that fails to support literacy development as outlined by international standards (UNESCO, 2016). The current instructional approach requires a critical re-evaluation to ensure that first-language instruction serves as a foundation for comprehensive cognitive and linguistic development rather than an obstacle to it.

Optimizing First-Language Instruction in Malaysian Chinese National-Type Schools: A Holistic and Literature-Integrated Approach

A. Introduction: Rethinking First-Language Instruction in SJKC

While SJKC offer Mandarin as the primary medium of instruction, their pedagogical approach often resembles second-language (L2) learning models rather than a first-language (L1) acquisition framework. Instead of developing fluency, cognitive engagement, and higher-order thinking skills, SJKC teaching methods prioritize vocabulary accumulation, character-writing precision, and structured sentence drills, limiting the potential for deeper literacy and communication development.

To optimize first-language instruction and enhance students' learning outcomes, this section proposes three core pedagogical improvements:

1. A holistic approach to first-language teaching, integrating language with content learning and real-world application.
2. Whole-book reading, promoting deep reading comprehension and literary appreciation.
3. The integration of literature and language education, ensuring meaningful language acquisition through storytelling, discussion, and creative writing.

By shifting away from isolated vocabulary drills and prescriptive writing models, these strategies ensure that first-language instruction fosters comprehensive literacy development, linguistic fluency, and cognitive growth in young learners.

B. A Holistic Approach to First-Language Teaching

A holistic first-language curriculum treats language as a dynamic tool for knowledge acquisition, creativity, and self-expression rather than a set of isolated linguistic components.

Current Limitations in SJKC L1 Teaching

- Language is fragmented into disconnected skills (e.g., grammar, reading, and writing taught separately).
- Speaking exercises rely on memorization rather than fostering spontaneous expression.
- Writing is treated as a mechanical skill, prioritizing character formation over content creation.
- Reading instruction focuses on word recognition rather than interpretation and analysis.

A Holistic First-Language Pedagogical Framework

- Interdisciplinary Language Learning – Using Chinese as a tool to engage with other subjects (e.g., integrating language with history, science, and social studies) (Cummins, 2001).

- Thematic Learning – Organizing lessons around big ideas and real-world applications, rather than isolated vocabulary lists.
- Project-Based Learning – Encouraging collaborative inquiry, discussions, and writing projects that use language in authentic contexts (OECD, 2018).

Expected Outcomes

- Improved cognitive development – Using language as a tool for problem-solving and critical thinking.
- Increased motivation – Learning becomes meaningful when students see language as relevant to their lived experiences.
- Greater language fluency – Moving beyond memorization toward active, meaningful use of language.

C. Whole-Book Reading: A Strategy for Comprehensive Literacy Development

Current SJKC reading instruction treats reading as a means of vocabulary accumulation, rather than a tool for literary appreciation and cognitive development. The adoption of whole-book reading offers a transformative approach to enhance literacy education.

Challenges in the Existing Reading Curriculum

- Textbook passages are heavily edited and simplified, reducing narrative depth.
- Reading is primarily used to teach vocabulary, rather than fostering discussion or analysis.
- Students are not encouraged to engage with texts independently, limiting exposure to diverse genres.

Whole-Book Reading as an Alternative Approach

Whole-book reading provides students with complete, unabridged literary experiences, allowing for deeper engagement, discussion, and analysis (OECD, 2018). This approach has been widely adopted in Finland and Singapore, where students read full-length books rather than isolated passages.

Key Benefits of Whole-Book Reading

- Vocabulary Growth in Context – Students acquire new words naturally through exposure rather than memorization.
- Higher-Order Thinking Skills – Engaging with full narratives encourages interpretation, inference, and critical questioning (UNESCO, 2016).
- Increased Engagement – Students develop reading habits when exposed to compelling, age-appropriate literature.

Implementation Strategies

- Encouraging independent reading through classroom libraries.
- Organizing student-led discussions on literary themes.
- Incorporating interdisciplinary connections (e.g., linking historical fiction to social studies lessons).

Expected Outcomes

- Enhanced literacy skills – Students become more proficient readers with greater comprehension abilities.
- Stronger analytical thinking – Reading beyond surface meaning fosters interpretation and debate.
- Improved writing proficiency – Exposure to rich, diverse texts improves students' ability to structure their own narratives.

D. Integrating Literature and Language: A Unified Approach for Early Childhood Learning

The separation of literature and language instruction in the current SJKC syllabus has weakened students' engagement with texts and limited their linguistic creativity. A literature-integrated language curriculum fosters

a more immersive and engaging learning environment (Cambridge Assessment, 2013).

Why Literature Should Be Integrated into Language Teaching

- Literature offers aesthetic and cultural richness, helping students understand language beyond functional communication (PISA, OECD, 2018).
- Children who are exposed to literature develop a deeper appreciation for storytelling, creativity, and emotional intelligence (Cummins, 2001).
- Studies in Nordic education systems demonstrate that students exposed to literature-based language learning outperform peers in analytical reading and creative writing (Cambridge Assessment, 2013; OECD, 2018).

Current Challenges in the SJKC Curriculum

- Literature and language are treated as separate subjects, reducing meaningful engagement.
- Students memorize set phrases and rigid writing structures, limiting originality.
- Text modifications in textbooks remove literary depth, diminishing students' analytical skills.

How to Integrate Literature into Language Teaching

- Thematic Literary Exploration – Organizing language lessons around classical and contemporary literature, allowing students to engage deeply with texts.
- Creative Writing Inspired by Literature – Encouraging students to write their own stories based on themes from literary texts.
- Dramatization and Performance – Using storytelling, role-playing, and sketch performances to internalize language through interactive learning (UNESCO, 2016).

Expected Outcomes

- Improved language fluency – Exposure to literature enhances students' ability to use language expressively and confidently.
- Stronger writing skills – Analyzing well-crafted narratives improves students' ability to structure their own texts.
- Higher engagement and motivation – Literature fosters a lifelong love for reading and storytelling.

E. Conclusion: Transforming First-Language Instruction in SJKC

To optimize first-language learning outcomes in SJKC, the curriculum must move beyond mechanical literacy drills and vocabulary-based instruction. A holistic, literature-integrated approach ensures that students:

- Use language as a tool for thinking, rather than just an academic subject.
- Develop cognitive and communicative abilities through meaningful engagement.
- Experience language through literature, storytelling, and creative writing.

By adopting whole-book reading, interdisciplinary learning, and literature-based pedagogy, SJKC can create an enriching language-learning environment that fosters 21st-century literacy skills.

Integrating Trilingual Education: Strategies for Cohesive Language Learning in Malaysian Primary Schools

A. Introduction

Malaysia's SJKC adopt a trilingual education model, where students learn Chinese (L1), Malay (L2), and English (L3) simultaneously. While multilingual education is beneficial for cognitive flexibility, cross-cultural communication, and linguistic diversity, its implementation in SJKC requires careful planning to avoid overburdening students and ensure each language serves its intended purpose.

The main challenge in Malaysia's SJKC model is ensuring that students achieve proficiency in all three languages without compromising cognitive development. Current approaches often treat all three languages equally in terms of instructional intensity, leading to cognitive overload, rote memorization, and passive language learning. This paper explores effective strategies to integrated trilingual education by:

1. Clearly differentiating first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) learning approaches to prevent cognitive overload.
2. Utilizing L1 as the primary tool for cognitive and academic development, while treating L2/L3 as additional communication skills.
3. Integrating second-language learning into first-language activities to provide authentic multilingual exposure.
4. Moving beyond grammar-focused instruction to emphasize functional, real-life language use.
5. Leveraging AI and digital tools to support multilingual learning.
6. Implementing flexible language immersion programs, multilingual projects, and alternative assessments to ensure an effective trilingual learning experience.

B. Differentiating First-Language (L1) and Second-Language (L2/L3) Learning Approaches

A clear distinction between first-language instruction and second-language acquisition is essential to prevent cognitive overload among students (Gill, 2014). L1 (Chinese) should serve as the cognitive tool for deep learning, while L2 (Malay) and L3 (English) should focus on functional communication skills.

B1: The Role of First Language (L1) in Cognitive Development

- L1 is the foundation for literacy and higher-order thinking skills (Cummins, 2000; UNESCO, 2016).
- Students think and process information most effectively in their strongest language.
- Deep literacy in L1 enhances cross-linguistic skills, making second-language learning easier (OECD, 2018).

RECOMMENDATION:

- Prioritize whole-book reading and literature-based learning to enhance comprehension and writing skills.
- Integrate problem-solving and creative thinking activities in Chinese, ensuring that L1 is used for conceptual learning rather than rote memorization.

B2: The Role of Second and Third Languages (L2/L3) in Multilingual Competency

- Malay and English should be taught with a communicative approach, focusing on oral fluency and functional usage rather than memorization.
- Grammar-heavy instruction should be minimized to avoid passive learning.
- Exposure to real-life situations through storytelling, role-playing, and project-based learning helps students acquire L2 and L3 naturally.

RECOMMENDATION:

- Use L2/L3 for interactive and social contexts, such as public speaking, debates, and drama.
- Incorporate bilingual or trilingual tasks, such as translating stories, creating multilingual podcasts, and engaging in cross-language discussions.

C. Integrating Second Languages into Multilingual Learning Activities

Trilingual education should not treat languages as isolated subjects but rather integrate them into meaningful contexts. Studies have shown that multilingual activities enhance fluency, motivation, and cognitive flexibility (Cummins, 2001; Krashen, 2004).

C1 Thematic Multilingual Learning

- Organizing lessons around a central theme, where students explore a topic across all three languages.
- Example: A unit on "Environment" could include:
 - Reading an environmental report in Chinese (L1).
 - Learning scientific terms in English (L3).
 - Discussing climate change policies in Malay (L2).

C2 Dual-Language and Multilingual Projects

- Students work on projects in multiple languages to encourage cross-linguistic transfer (García & Wei, 2014).
- Example Activities:
 - Bilingual Storytelling → Read a book in one language, summarize it in another, present it orally in the third.
 - History & Heritage Projects → Research in Chinese, write in Malay, present in English.

C3 Cross-Linguistic Teaching

- Teachers help students recognize linguistic connections between languages, making learning more intuitive.
- Example:
 - Word Origins & Similarities → Identifying common roots in Malay, English, and Chinese words.
 - Grammar Comparisons → Highlighting similarities in sentence structures across languages.

D. Practical Second-Language Instruction: Moving Beyond Grammar Drills

Current Issue:

- Malay and English instruction remains grammar-centric, focusing on writing accuracy rather than communicative competence.
- Students struggle to use second languages effectively in real-world situations.

RECOMMENDATION:

- Conversational Practice Over Rote Learning → Prioritize oral communication, listening, and real-world interaction.
- Real-Life Application → Language learning should involve ordering food, giving directions, conducting interviews rather than memorizing dialogues.
- Experiential Learning → Engage students in simulations, role-playing, and interactive activities.

E. Leveraging AI and Digital Tools for Language Exposure

Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be used to enhance exposure to multiple languages without increasing academic pressure (OECD, 2018).

How AI Can Support Trilingual Education

- Instant translation software (Google Translate, DeepL) → Helps students quickly grasp unknown words.
- AI-driven chatbots & speech recognition → Provides interactive speaking and listening practice.
- Multilingual audiobooks & subtitles → Improves pronunciation and sentence structure comprehension.

RECOMMENDATION:

- Introduce AI-assisted storytelling and translation activities.
- Encourage students to use AI tools for independent language exploration.

F. Conclusion

To optimize trilingual education in SJKC schools, the following key principles should be implemented:

- Use L1 for deep cognitive and literacy development.
- Focus L2/L3 on real-world language acquisition rather than memorization.
- Incorporate multilingual activities and projects for natural language transfer.
- Utilize AI and technology for language exposure.
- Adopt flexible immersion programs and alternative assessments to support multilingual growth.

By implementing these strategies, SJKC schools can effectively balance trilingual education, ensuring high linguistic proficiency, cognitive growth, and practical multilingual competence.

CONCLUSION

This paper critically evaluates the effectiveness of first-language (L1) instruction, pedagogical approaches, and trilingual education strategies in Malaysia's Chinese National-Type Schools (SJKC). While Malaysia's multilingual education framework inherently aligns with Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) principles, findings indicate significant misalignment in the actual implementation of L1 instruction. Instead of treating Mandarin as a cognitive tool for literacy and higher-order thinking development, instructional approaches in SJKC mirror second-language (L2) methodologies, prioritizing rote memorization, vocabulary accumulation, and mechanical literacy over expressive communication and conceptual learning.

A fundamental issue lies in the fragmentation of language learning, where reading, writing, and speaking are taught in isolation rather than as an integrated process. The curriculum's overemphasis on vocabulary recognition, rigid stroke-order enforcement in writing, and text simplification undermine students' ability to engage with literature critically or develop creative linguistic expression. These findings reveal that SJKC students are not fully benefiting from the cognitive and linguistic advantages expected from first-language education. Instead, the L2-oriented instructional approach limits their cognitive development and hinders the acquisition of the 4Cs: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity.

To enhance multilingual education in SJKC, this paper proposes three core educational reforms:

1. Adopting a holistic first-language pedagogy that integrates Mandarin into various disciplines, ensuring language is a tool for knowledge acquisition rather than a rigid academic subject.
2. Implementing whole-book reading approaches to move beyond textbook-based vocabulary drills, fostering deep literacy engagement, literary appreciation, and analytical skills.
3. Integrating literature into language instruction, reinforcing authentic engagement with texts, creative writing, and interactive storytelling, instead of reducing reading to vocabulary accumulation.

In addition, effective trilingual education requires a clear distinction between first-language (L1) and second/third-language (L2/L3) instruction. Mandarin should serve as the foundation for deep literacy development, while Malay and English should be taught through contextualized, functional, and communicative methods rather than grammar-heavy instruction. Authentic multilingual exposure through thematic projects, real-life interactions, and AI-supported learning can further enhance multilingual competency without cognitive overload.

In conclusion, while Malaysia's SJKC provides a unique model of multilingual education, the findings emphasize the urgent need for pedagogical reform to align with best practices in first-language instruction. A literature-rich, student-centered, and interdisciplinary approach to language teaching is necessary to ensure that students not only acquire multiple languages effectively but also develop cognitive flexibility, creativity, and critical thinking skills. By refining curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and language policies, Malaysia can strengthen its multilingual education system, preparing students to thrive in a competitive, linguistically diverse world.

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