

# LANGUAGE, SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION OF ESL IN MALAYSIA

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## Abstract

In Malaysia, English language education plays a special role as both a tool for global communication and a way to support national development. This paper explores how English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching can be re-envisioned through the combined lenses of sustainability and social responsibility. Using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the discussion shows how classrooms can tackle broader issues like equity in education, intercultural understanding, and moral engagement with global challenges. Instead of focusing only on language skills, this view highlights the importance of language education in developing socially responsible citizens who can think critically and engage actively in a multicultural society. Situated within the reform priorities of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2026 - 2036, this paper argues that language education should align with national aspirations for inclusivity, balanced bilingualism, and future-readiness. The Malaysian context, with its mix of languages and changing educational priorities, is a great place to integrate sustainability into language teaching. This paper contends that by adjusting teaching to include sustainability principles, educators can create new opportunities for curriculum innovation, teacher training, and national policy direction, ultimately making language learning a key driver of personal growth and social progress.

**Keywords:** *English as a Second Language (ESL), Sustainability, Social Responsibility, Malaysia Education Blueprint 2026–2036, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD),*

## INTRODUCTION

Initially, Malaysia depended heavily on the development of the English language for national development and access to the global economy. As a former British colony, Malaysia, along with the English-speaking world, recognised the potential of the English language for economic and educational advancement, and thus for social mobility (Gill, 2014). As English became the second compulsory language of the education system, Malaysia simultaneously built and reinforced domestic systems of international competitiveness, and English became a vehicle along with the education system for bridging the country's multilingual and multicultural communities (Ali, 2018). ESL pedagogy and its educational systems thus began to shape social values and perspectives, alongside the construction of national and individual identities.

Recent educational discourse globally addresses the integration of social responsibility and sustainability into teaching and learning. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations, specifically Goal 4, emphasises the equal opportunity provision of education, along with the promotion of lifelong learning for all (United Nations, 2015). Therefore, the education system in Malaysia must embrace language teaching innovatively, focusing on the building of civic engagement, social sustainability, and intercultural respect (UNESCO, 2020).

Policy initiatives in Malaysia exhibit evidence in this direction. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 - 2025, recently concluded, laid the groundwork for improving English proficiency by implementing initiatives such as English being a compulsory credit qualifying subject in the SPM, teacher upskilling, adapting the national English syllabus to international levels, and school English exposure (Ministry of Education, 2013; British Council Malaysia, 2016). The forthcoming Malaysia Education Blueprint 2026 - 2036 (nicknamed the future education blueprint) advances these initiatives by introducing reforms to bolster the teaching of English, as a second language, in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines, preschool education, and other core formal education levels, while upholding the status of Bahasa Melayu as the national language. The proposed balanced, 50/50 instructional model of Bahasa Melayu and English through certain curriculum will certainly encourage the learning of both. This blueprint will also focus on the principles of accessibility, relevance, and quality (Fadhlina Sidek, 2025; Malay Mail, 2025). This points to the likelihood that the socio-educational policy environment in Malaysia will progressively incorporate English to the value paradigm, which includes social equity and responsibility, as well as sustainability in education.

By extending the principles of critical pedagogy to the integration of sustainability in language education, one begins to envisage education as a tool for empowering learners to alter imbalances and initiate transformative changes in society (Freire, 1970 & 2000). Equally, the frameworks for intercultural communicative competence envisage the ethical and constructive communication potential of language learners and users in pluralistic contexts (Byram, 1997). In the context of Malaysia, where diversity is a strength but also a challenge, classrooms can

be the starting points for developing learners proficient in English and developing learners who are aware of their social responsibilities and developing learners who are globally conscious.

In light of the above, this paper offers a theoretical exploration of the intersection between language, sustainability, and social responsibility in Malaysian pedagogy. It argues that English education can and should contribute to the broader goal of developing socially responsible graduates who can engage critically with local and global issues. This conceptual reframing positions as a driver of sustainable education in Malaysia, opening new avenues for curriculum innovation, teacher training, and policy development.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This part represents an exploration of the major scholarly perspectives that inform the theoretical foundation of this paper. It merges the literature on language education, sustainability, and social responsibility, particularly at their interplay within the context of education in Malaysia. It draws on both global and local studies to demonstrate how the objectives of teaching can expand beyond the acquisition of language to embrace value education in ethical awareness, intercultural empathy, and ecological awareness. These ideas are further situated within the anticipated reform milestones of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2026 - 2036, particularly the integration of social responsibility and principles of sustainability as part of the English language instruction to aid the country's vision of inclusive and future-ready education.

### **Language and Sustainability**

The active role of education in promoting sustainability has been highlighted in the context of UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) initiatives, which seek to empower learners with the competencies, values, and dispositions needed to make a

difference in society and to the environment (UNESCO, 2020). In this context, language education goes beyond an instrument of communication. It allows learners to critically examine global challenges, navigate intercultural relations, and champion sustainable futures (Sterling, 2016).

### **Social Responsibility in Language Education**

Social responsibility in pedagogy is underpinned by critical pedagogy, which emphasizes empowering learners to challenge inequalities and become active citizens (Freire, 2000). Intercultural competence frameworks (Byram, 1997) also stress the ethical dimensions of communication in multilingual societies. In the Malaysian context, this approach aligns with broader national aspirations to produce graduates who are both globally competent and grounded in local values (Ali, 2018).

### **Policy Directions: Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 and 2026–2036**

In the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 - 2025, one of the most significant priorities was the improvement of English language proficiency, which consisted of the alignment of curricula to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), advancement of teacher training, and the initiation of the Roadmap for English Language Education in Malaysia 2015 - 2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013; British Council Malaysia, 2016).

The implementation of the MEB 2026 - 2036 Malaysia Education Blueprint suggests new directions for public policy. Strategies for a more balanced bilingual approach recommend the increased use of both Bahasa Melayu and English during formal instruction (Fadhlina Sidek, 2025). Moreover, the Blueprint places English as a resource for learning about the global economy and 21st-century technology. Along with globalisation, the emphasis placed on inclusivity as a principle of the MEB 2026 - 2036 policy will allow the integration of pedagogy and practice with design and content that fosters social responsibility and sustainability.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theory of this paper is informed by three overlapping areas: Positive Psychology in Education, Critical Pedagogy, and Education for Sustainable Development. These three areas of scholarship assist in constructing a more complete picture of ESL pedagogy and learning in the evolving landscape of education in Malaysia.

### **Critical Pedagogy and Language Education**

The contribution of this study stems primarily from Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy. Education, in Freire's view, goes beyond the simple transference of knowledge; it is an opportunity for empowerment and social change. Hence, in this light, the learning of a language becomes a tool to enable learners to engage critically with their social world, and to contest the inequalities that are associated with the linguistic and cultural hierarchies.

In Malaysia, with English used as a global language and as a marker of social mobility, critical pedagogy encourages educators to think of students and the English language as a means of inclusion and participation rather than exclusion and elitism.

Students are taught to use English to explore and communicate potential solutions to problems of environmental degradation, cultural preservation, and digital inequity. Sustainability topics

resonating with students, and with the MEB 2026 - 2036 draft, influence the Ministry of Education Malaysia to focus on developing citizens with ethics and creativity, and global awareness (2025).

### **Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)**

UNESCO (2020) advocates ESD to promote the integration of cross-curricular education and the installation of principles on responsibility, social justice, and environmental stewardship. This means designing communicative language activities that challenge students with social issues like climate change and inequality, as well as develop their language skills. ESD will promote students' language proficiency, and as more ESD-focused lessons are taught, their consciousness on sustainability will increase.

Project-based activities can include activities like writing advocacy letters, preparing speeches, or performing community interviews focusing on sustainability. These activities simultaneously address the linguistic and the moral aspects of learning, responding to the MEB 2026 - 2036 Framework's advocacy for the inclusion of global competencies, intercultural understanding, and ethical reasoning in the curricula.

ESD education encompasses the principles of systemic thinking, where language is not treated in isolation but as a resource that connects learners to the ecosystem, the culture, and the society (Sterling, 2016).

### **Positive Psychology and Learner Engagement**

Bringing the above principles to education also involves the application of Positive Psychology, particularly the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). When the PERMA model is used, educators are encouraged to build learning spaces that foster self-efficacy, resilience, and purpose, framed within Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement as key elements of well-being and motivation to learn.

Classrooms that integrate positive psychology and education for sustainability foster emotionally safe environments, enabling learners to voice their thoughts on global issues, partake in collaborative learning activities, and construct meaning through language. The connection captures the emotional burden of the learners and their social responsibility, embodying the Blueprint's vision of a holistic learner.

### **Theoretical Synthesis**

Taken together, these three frameworks provide an integrative theoretical foundation that can be reframed as a transformative platform for sustainability and social consciousness.

- Critical pedagogy establishes agency and reflection.
- ESD brings a value-oriented and future-focused dimension.
- Positive psychology cultivates motivation and learner well-being.

Such a synergistic foundation will be directed towards the reform agenda of the MEB 2026 - 2036, which embraces the tenets of holistic education, sustainability, and responsible citizenship.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework illustrates the justification of grounding the study in these ideas, while the conceptual framework demonstrates how these ideas interact specifically within the Malaysian context. It captures the abstract theories and translates them into an operational model that links policy, pedagogy, and learning outcomes.

The conceptual framework comprises several parts:

1. Policy Foundation (MEB 2026 - 2036):

The Blueprint serves as the overarching policy driver with an emphasis on inclusivity, balanced bilingualism, sustainability, and future-readiness. It articulates institutional priorities and national standards for teaching.

2. Pedagogical Mediation:

Guided by the theoretical triad of Critical Pedagogy, ESD, and Positive Psychology, teaching incorporates dialogic, task-based, and values-driven approaches which render the language learning socially meaningful.

3. Teacher Agency and Professional Development:

As reflective practitioners, they mediate and prepare instructional materials that connect language use to various real-world contexts. i.e. the mounting professional learning over the years allows learners to internalise the principles of social sustainability, social responsibility and social accountability.

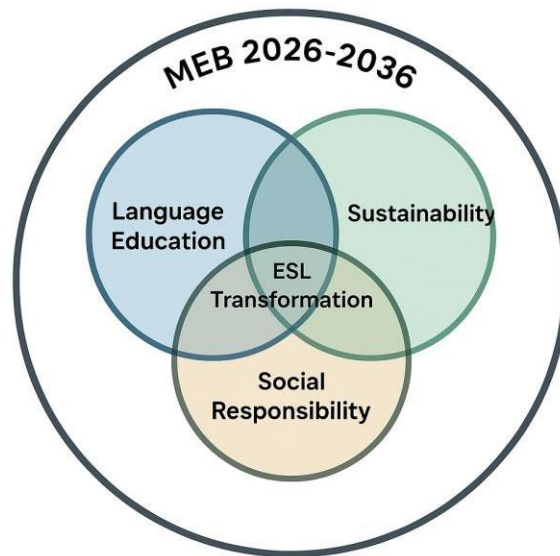
4. Learner Engagement and Empowerment:

Learners gain linguistic proficiency and social conscience. Through collaborative, issue-based tasks, learners use English for advocacy, intercultural communication, and ethical discourse.

5. Expected Outcomes:

The learners are expected to demonstrate the MEB's holistic aspirations. These are learners who are linguistically able, social and global citizens, and who can contribute to the sustainable future of Malaysia.

Figure 1 below illustrates the proposed conceptual framework for this theoretical contextualization. It highlights the intertwined and bidirectional relationship that exists between Language Education, Sustainability, and Social Responsibility in Malaysia.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Malaysian ESL Transformation**

The conceptual framework diagram above portrays the interactive ecosystem of Language Education, Sustainability, and Social Responsibility within the overarching policy context of the MEB 2026 - 2036. Each circle depicts a key area influencing the development of Malaysia pedagogy. These three intersections marked “Transformation” represent the integrative area where language learning equips learners with communicative competence and fosters an understanding of the environment and civic responsibilities. The outer policy circle of the MEB 2026–2036 encircling these elements underscores the principles of inclusiveness, balanced bilingualism, and future readiness. Such interactions structurally demonstrate a systemic perspective: national education policy documents shape the curriculum and teacher practices, and subsequently, learners emerge as proficient language users and socially responsible and sustainability-minded active citizens. The diagram thus underscores the position that genuine reform results from the alignment of innovative pedagogy, moral equity, and a climate of proactive policies that are ethically sustainable.

## **DISCUSSION**

With the upcoming Malaysia Education Blueprint 2026 - 2036, there lies a unique opportunity to incorporate sustainability and social responsibility into teaching and learning. While Malaysia strengthens its bilingual education system and caters to the needs of learners in a fast-evolving global context, the Blueprint's emphasis on inclusiveness, equity, and relevance (Fadhlina Sidek, 2025) highlights the necessity of reconsidering the teaching of English: how it is taught, what is taught, and the rationale behind it. This theoretical work views the incorporation of sustainability into English teaching not as an extra inclusion, but as a reframing of the particular pedagogy as an integrated approach that combines developing an essential skill with a broader social, moral, and ethical purpose.

### **Curriculum Innovation**

Innovative and future-oriented, interdisciplinary and values-based curricula are one of the goals of the MEB 2026 - 2036. This means going beyond the development of learners' linguistic competencies and incorporating the development of critical thinking, passionate and responsible citizenship, and civic and environmental stewardship. English lessons could engage learners to target and explore global issues framed around the SDGs on gender equality, climate action, or social justice and the English language as a tool for communication.

This strategy aligns with UNESCO's (2020) Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) principles by integrating language tasks with themes on sustainability and avoiding the treatment of such themes as 'add-ons'. Students, for instance, can 'learn by doing' through engaging in community campaign simulation debates on sustainability issues. This helps them develop some communicative competence and an understanding of ethics. In this way, under the new Blueprint, innovative curriculum practices can foster transformative learning as described in the literature (e.g., Sterling, 2016), enabling learners to use language for socially significant purposes.

### **Teacher Education and Professional Development**

To achieve its goals, the MEB 2026 - 2036 focuses on preparing teachers. English language teachers need to have both the pedagogical ~~16~~ content knowledge and the principles of sustainability education. Professional development should go beyond training on the language

to include teaching modules on critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000), intercultural citizenship competence (Byram, 1997), and education for global citizenship.

The Blueprint's emphasis on building capacity and teacher professionalism presents an occasion to broaden educators' conceptualisation of teacher education. Teachers can be shown how to construct lessons that foster discussion about social and environmental issues and enable learners to see the impact of language on real-life situations. In this regard, the Malaysian teacher progresses from being merely a "language instructor" to one who facilitates the acquisition of ethical language along with the values of communication and sustainability, as mandated by national policies and global education standards.

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### **Policy Insights**

The MEB 2026 - 2036 emphasises balanced bilingualism at the policy level, aiming for a 50 to 50 use of Bahasa Melayu and English across certain segments of the curriculum. This policy intent values the significance of maintaining a national identity while providing learners with tools for global communication (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2025). In this context, pedagogy serves as a bridge to cross not only the two languages but also the local values and the ideals of global citizenship.

Embedding policies aimed at sustainability and social responsibility demonstrates alignment with Malaysia's commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Under the new Blueprint, the emphasis on accessibility and inclusivity facilitates the development of policies that support context-sensitive materials, teacher upskilling, and multilingual practices in the classroom. Furthermore, policies at the institutional level of higher education may now seek to integrate sustainability competencies into the learning outcomes of English communication courses as part of the nation's education reform initiatives.

## **The Transformative Role of ESL in the Blueprint Era**

The MEB 2026 - 2036 signifies more than an educational policy reform; it marks a change in educational philosophy. Malaysia has the potential to produce linguistically competent, socially conscious, and globally relevant graduates by aligning the teaching of the English language with the principles of sustainability and social responsibility. English, therefore, becomes a subject which not only facilitates the learning of other disciplines, but also a means through which the ethical, critical, and active citizenship of the nation is nurtured.

This theoretical proposition places pedagogy within the overlapping fields of language education, social change, and sustainable development. The achievement of this is contingent on integrated curriculum development, ongoing professional learning for educators, and policies that establish language teaching and learning as a foundational area of development for the nation.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this theoretical paper on Language, Sustainability, and Social Responsibility, I highlighted the expanding scope of English language education within the metamorphoses of education in Malaysia. It is an appropriate time to rethink the role of English continuing beyond the teaching and learning of the language after the final examinations in light of the upcoming Malaysia Education Blueprint 2026 - 2036. English must also be considered an instrument of moral discourse, cross-cultural appreciation, and advocacy for the interconnected pillars of sustainable development.

In this regard, Malaysian educators and policymakers can avoid the instrumentalist paradigm of language learning by embedding teaching within the frameworks and relationships of pedagogy, sustainability, and social responsibility. The proposed paradigm anchored on critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000), intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997), and Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2020) serves to reposition English education within the domain of transformative learning. This, in essence, is the desire of MEB 2026–2036, namely fostering an inclusive, equitable, and relevant educational experience in the lessons and learning outcomes to be globally aware and ready citizens (Fadhlina Sidek, 2025).

Integrating the principles of sustainability into curricula will help develop students who are linguistically competent and able to think critically about environmental, social, and cultural issues. Therefore, transforming teacher education to prepare educators to develop and implement pedagogies that advance civic participation, responsible use of communication, and appreciation of multiculturalism is essential. From the policy perspective, ensuring that the sustained integration of language education aligns with the nation's development objectives will be vital in achieving the aspirations of the Blueprint in practice and not merely in theory.

The intersection of these three fundamental pillars - language, sustainability and social responsibility - should spur fundamental educational reform to and in Malaysia. The positive revisioning of these elements should allow students to develop a second language and build essential social skills.

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