

COLONIAL LEGACY AND THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE: A DUAL FAILURE OF PEDAGOGY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MALAYSIA'S ENGLISH LITERATURE CURRICULUM

(Legasi Kolonial dan Ilusi Pilihan: Kegagalan Berganda Pedagogi dan Pembinaan Identiti Nasional dalam Kurikulum Kesusasteraan Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia)

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Makalah ini telah melalui proses penilaian sulit berganda (*This article has undergone a double-blind peer review process*)

Abstract

The policy of integrating a literature component into the secondary school English syllabus in Malaysia was an initiative made to improve language proficiency and promote a cohesive national identity. However, almost two decades after its implementation, a systematic synthesis of empirical studies (2012–2023) reveals that the curriculum has undergone a profound crisis, characterised by a dual failure. First, it has systematically neglected consistent and extensive student preference for culturally-specific and relatable texts, resulting in a pedagogical

disconnect that has led to disengagement and rote learning. Second, and more critical, is the curriculum's evolution towards an imperialistic corpus of Western literary classics, which has actively undermined the goal of nation building by marginalising local narratives. This article argues that these failures are by no means coincidental, but a symptom of "colonial legacy" in educational policy, in which the former colonial's cultural foundation is unconsciously prioritised. Through a postcolonial theoretical lens, the analysis finds that the curriculum functions as a platform of cultural alienation. This article concludes that gradual changes are insufficient; it demands a radical transformation through decolonisation in the selection of texts and pedagogy in order to align the curriculum with the voices of the stakeholders and the imperatives of a post-colonial national identity.

Keywords: Decolonisation, national identity, English literature curriculum, colonial legacy, Malaysia, postcolonial theory, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), student perceptions

Abstrak

Penggabungan komponen sastera ke dalam sukatan pelajaran bahasa Inggeris sekolah menengah di Malaysia merupakan satu inisiatif dasar yang bertujuan untuk meningkatkan kemahiran bahasa dan memupuk identiti nasional yang padu. Walau bagaimanapun, beberapa dekad selepas pelaksanaannya, satu sintesis sistematik penyelidikan empirikal (2012–2023) mendedahkan kurikulum yang berada dalam krisis yang mendalam, yang dicirikan oleh kegagalan dua kali ganda. Pertama, pelaksanaannya secara sistematik mengabaikan pilihan pelajar yang konsisten dan meluas untuk teks yang bersifat budaya dan boleh dikaitkan, mewujudkan pemutusan pedagogi yang ketara yang membawa kepada kurang pelibatan dan pergantungan kepada hafalan. Kedua, dan lebih kritikal lagi, evolusi kurikulum ke arah korpus imperialistik karya klasik Barat secara aktif menjejaskan matlamat pembinaan negara dengan meminggirkan naratif tempatan. Kertas kerja ini berhujah bahawa kegagalan ini bukanlah secara kebetulan tetapi merupakan gejala "legasi kolonial" yang berterusan dalam dasar pendidikan, yang mana modal budaya bekas penjajah secara tidak sedar diutamakan. Dengan menggunakan lensa teori pascakolonial, analisis ini berpendapat bahawa kurikulum berfungsi sebagai tapak pengasingan budaya. Makalah ini menyimpulkan bahawa perubahan secara berperingkat adalah tidak mencukupi, dan disaraskan pembaharuan pendekolonisasian secara radikal terhadap pemilihan teks dan pedagogi untuk menyelaraskan kurikulum dengan suara pihak berkepentingan dan keperluan identiti nasional pascakolonial.

Kata kunci: Dekolonisasi, identiti nasional, kurikulum sastera Inggeris, legasi kolonial, Malaysia, pascakolonial, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), tanggapan pelajar

INTRODUCTION

The history of English Literature as a formal subject in the secondary school education system in Malaysia is a story of high hopes, long struggle, and a final demise. It was formally introduced in 2000 as a critically important policy change by the Ministry of Education. This initiative was part of a wider agenda of the English language syllabus, and had two complementary and mutually reinforcing aims: to develop students' proficiency in English by reading authentic and rich texts; and to build a sense of national identity among the nation's multi-ethnic youth by reading about universal themes and, ostensibly, local stories (Ministry of Education, 2000). The policy envisioned that literature could be used as a tool to develop critical thinking, cultural awareness, and empathy in relation to the philosophy of education that was set by the national government and subsequently reinforced in the National Education Blueprint (2013–2025), which focused on national unity through education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012).

On the one hand, this policy was set within a broader framework, where literature is acknowledged as playing a central role in the pursuit of holistic education, and is seen not only as a means to develop language skills, but also to develop an empathetic and critical sense that is crucial for democratic citizenship (Nussbaum, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1995). On the other hand, from the beginning there has been an inherent conflict in the Malaysian version of this ideal. The selection of literary works has been an important arena where other battles for cultural valuation and national identity took place. Although this curriculum has undergone a slow but steady shift towards a Western literary canon despite Malaysia's rich and diverse literary tradition of postcolonialism, Phillips (1950) identified an underlying "cultural cringe" in the sense that some cultural products are inferior to those of the West and this culture of inferiority is internalised by the children. This problem is still common in many post-colonial societies, as noted by Huggan (2001). This has led to a polarisation between the nation building rhetoric of the policy, and the sense of cultural alienation that is felt in the classroom.

The literature component has been a part of the English language paper for more than 10 years in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education, or SPM). However, the component's path has been beset with problems from the beginning. Teachers reported being neither well trained in nor having resources available for teaching all the prescribed texts (Omar, 2017). Meanwhile, students regularly found the prescribed texts to be too culturally alien and the language within them to be too complex (Isa & Mahmud, 2012), especially since the texts mainly comprised 19th century European novels or Shakespearean sonnets. The eventual phase out of the component in 2021 was not a new policy development, but rather the result of a long-standing crisis (Yee et al., 2023). This article claims that this is not simply pedagogical, but a "colonial legacy" where the knowledge

systems of the West were given priority whereas the perspectives of the locals were silenced in order to create an “illusion of choice” that ultimately worked against the ends of the education system.

In 2024, news reports revealed a troubling reality that many in the Malaysian education community had long suspected but seldom voiced. English Literature, once considered a pillar of liberal education, now found itself on the brink of disappearance from Malaysian schools. The numbers tell a stark story. In 2022, only 65 STPM candidates sat for the “Literature in English” paper, a dramatic decline from 95 candidates in 2012. A drop from 95 to 65 might seem modest statistically, yet for those who care about the humanities, this trajectory signalled something far more serious than a statistical anomaly. The subject was quietly fading, and the silence surrounding its decline was perhaps more disturbing than the numbers themselves (Ong, 2024).

Examination halls, however, represent only one dimension of the crisis. Malaysia’s performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 reading domain revealed a deeper, more systemic failure. Fewer than half of Malaysian students, less than 50%, managed to attain even the minimum level of reading proficiency (OECD, 2023). Behind this statistic lies a generation of young people who may never acquire the reading skills necessary to navigate contemporary life, let alone appreciate the intellectual and emotional depth of literature. Sharifah Aishah Osman, who heads the English Department at Universiti Malaya, has repeatedly described this as a “wake-up call” for the nation. She has urged policymakers and educators to confront the education system’s weaknesses and actively cultivate a reading culture among Malaysian children. Her frustration, expressed in multiple public forums, reflects the growing anxiety among academics who have watched the situation deteriorate over the years (The Star, 2024).

These developments compel those concerned with education to ask uncomfortable questions, such as why literature is being systematically marginalised, and what does this decline signify about Malaysian society’s relationship with the humanities. It is not enough to point to declining enrolment figures or poor test scores as isolated phenomena. A more probing inquiry is needed. One must ask whether the literary texts students are required to read bear any meaningful connection to their lived realities. One must question whether the pedagogical approaches used, assuming literature is taught at all, serve any genuine educational purpose or merely fulfil bureaucratic requirements. Each statistic represents a student who may never experience the transformative power of reading, a teacher who has lost faith in the system, and a society that is gradually eroding its own cultural foundation.

To comprehend the current predicament, one must trace the historical trajectory of educational policy in Malaysia. The period between 1950 and 1970 was particularly consequential. During those two decades, Malaysia was forging its identity as an independent nation and education became a central arena for nation-building efforts. The government faced an extraordinarily difficult challenge: the construction

of a unified national identity from a population comprising numerous linguistic, ethnic, and cultural communities. The solution adopted was a bilingual education system designed, at least in theory, to promote national unity while accommodating diversity (Sua, 2013).

The Alliance government's compromise involved a multilingual primary school system and a gradual transition towards a Malay-medium secondary school system. On the surface, this appeared to be a pragmatic middle ground. The Malay language would serve as a unifying force, a common thread binding together Malaysia's diverse communities. Yet this idealistic vision masked an uncomfortable truth: English was never truly displaced. It continued to exercise considerable influence in elite institutions, the business sector, and government. The Malay language was assigned a symbolic role in nation building, but English retained practical dominance. This arrangement established a linguistic hierarchy that, as many scholars have observed, has persisted well into the present (Sua, 2013).

In contemporary Malaysia, this hierarchy manifests in multiple ways. English remains the language of instruction in prestigious private schools and universities. Parents who can afford to send their children to English-medium schools do so, perceiving English proficiency as essential for social mobility. Even in government schools, an implicit bias towards English persists as the language of success and advancement. Kashif and Ab Rahman (2025) have demonstrated that this pattern is not uniquely Malaysian; it represents a broader post-colonial phenomenon affecting numerous former colonies. English dominates elite education and digital platforms, reinforcing class divisions and marginalising indigenous languages. The literature curriculum reflects this larger dynamic with remarkable clarity. It stands at the intersection of two competing forces: the aspiration to forge a uniquely Malaysian identity and the unconscious gravitation towards the colonial past. This tension is enacted daily in classrooms across the country.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING LITERATURE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

It is important to recognise the potential benefits that a well-designed literature curriculum can offer before examining the specific weaknesses of the Malaysian case. It is evident that literature has not only much more value in secondary education than just enhancing language skills, but it can also build a well-rounded, empathetic citizen with critical thinking.

Literature is considered to be a critical tool and is known worldwide to stimulate cognitive development and critical thinking. The analysis, inference, and evaluation of complex narratives, character motivations, and symbolic language are transferable skills that will be useful in all academic disciplines and necessary to interact in an ever-changing world (Applebee, 1993; Langer, 2011). Literature plays a central role

in the Finnish education system, which is consistently ranked among the best in the world, especially in the development of students' skills to interpret complex texts and express complex arguments (Sahlberg, 2015).

In addition, literature is a means of developing empathy and intercultural awareness. Students gain a better understanding of human diversity and commonality by engaging with characters of other backgrounds, time periods, and cultures. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1997) suggests that the ability to imagine is a critical democratic citizenship-pruning skill, assisting us to imagine another person's point of view. This is especially important in multicultural societies where literature may be used to connect two or more ethnic and social groups in ways that promote social cohesion, which is actively encouraged in the Canadian educational system where diverse literary voices are included to mirror and celebrate the Canadian multicultural identity (Gamble & Yates, 2008).

Last but not least, literature offers an unprecedented context for examining moral issues and personal development. Adolescent students are in a very sensitive developmental period in the formation of their own values and self-perception. Literary texts provide them with difficult moral dilemmas and a place for reflection and problem-solving in an ethical context. This exploration helps students develop personal and social identity as they come to know where they fit into the world (Rosenblatt, 1995). This deep impact of literature is emphasised in the German educational tradition of *Bildung*, or character formation in relation to literature (Nussbaum, 2010).

In theory, the first Malaysian policy that introduced literature was commendable and in line with the best practice in the world. The findings indicate that rather than the educational value of literature, the real problem is in the implementation of the curriculum, and as a result of these, the component has come to its end.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Local Context: The Malaysian Dilemma

The Malaysian context is characterised by an ambivalence between policy intentions and actual results and a curriculum that is out of alignment with its stakeholders. A few studies, such as that of Isa and Mahmud (2012), have found that there was a fundamental gap, as students' preference for culturally and contextually attuned texts were not adequately met by a curriculum that was focused on foreign texts. The theme of lack of relevance as a cause of student disengagement has been replicated in subsequent studies (Othman et al., 2015; Yee et al., 2023), which also reported that the difficulty of the prescribed texts; such as *The Railway Children* and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*; in terms of both language and culture was a challenge for students.

One pivotal moment in the scholarship occurred with the study of Thoo et al. (2017), which followed the history of how the curriculum's text selection developed.

They found that in the early 2000s, there was a conscious move away from local texts to an “imperialised corpus” of Western classics, as evidenced in the current Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (Standard Secondary School Curriculum or KSSM) cycle. They posited that this change could be a step towards undermining the national goal of forming a new identity. This is in line with Pandian’s (2004) earlier observation that Malaysian youth were at risk of losing touch with their literary heritage due to an overreliance on Western texts, which could prove to be “cultural erosion.” Pedagogical problems exacerbate this systemic problem. The findings of Omar (2017) and Ukat and Ismail (2022) further indicated that the teachers’ preparation to teach literature with special attention to culturally alien texts is poor and therefore they rely heavily on rote memorisation and commercial study guides, which can be described as the “guidebook culture” that stifles the enjoyment of literature.

Lim’s (2018) study provides a valuable historical perspective on the complex process of localising English literature in Malaysia. Drawing on Goodson and Marsh’s framework of subject development, Lim traced how a subject once simply designated as “English” was eventually reconceptualised as “Literature in English” in 1998. This rebranding appeared, at least superficially, to represent progress toward localisation, an effort to render literature more relevant to Malaysian students. Yet a closer examination of Lim’s analysis reveals a far less coherent narrative. The implementation of localisation was fragmented, and various constituencies within and beyond the education system held divergent views about the rationale for localisation (Lim, 2018).

Lim’s study exposes a troubling picture of disagreement and confusion. Teachers, curriculum designers, examiners, and parents held conflicting assumptions about the purpose of literature in Malaysian schools. While some viewed it primarily as an instrument for language acquisition, there are those who considered it a vehicle for moral education, and others who believed its value lay in fostering national identity. In the absence of a shared vision, the journey was inevitably chaotic. When stakeholders cannot agree on fundamental purposes, the curriculum that emerges tries to accommodate everyone’s expectations yet ultimately satisfies no one (Lim, 2018).

The incoherence that Lim documented is not accidental. The Malaysian Examinations Council may have made gestures towards localisation, but these efforts were half-hearted and poorly conceptualised. Without a clear understanding of why localisation mattered or what it was intended to achieve, their efforts were destined to fail. This explains why Thoo et al. (2017) identified an “imperialised corpus” dominating the syllabus. They were not simply criticising poor textbook choices. Rather, they were identifying a symptom of a much deeper malaise: an educational community that cannot agree on the fundamental purposes of literature education.

The challenges confronting Malaysian teachers extend beyond inadequate resources to include fundamental issues of confidence and professional preparation. Rashid et al.’s (2023) study confirmed what many educators have long expressed

in private conversations. Teachers told the researchers that they understood the importance of teaching critical thinking and were aware of curriculum expectations. They even believed they possessed the necessary knowledge. Yet when faced with the reality of classroom instruction, they faltered. They lacked the confidence to execute what they knew they should be doing (Rashid et al., 2023).

One teacher's admission reveals the depth of the problem: "I am not confident to guide students to think and read critically." Another acknowledged, "I'm not confident to teach the skill because I haven't practiced it in class." These are not expressions of laziness or indifference; they are honest assessments from dedicated professionals who have been failed by the system. They neither received adequate training nor were equipped with the pedagogical tools necessary to make literature meaningful. As one teacher stated, "I didn't know how to pursue the literature and so on...these are things that were never really taught to us during our teacher training." This statement encapsulates the frustration of educators who want to inspire their students, but have been left to develop their own approaches with minimal institutional support (Rashid et al., 2023).

The constraints of time compound these challenges. Teachers have only one lesson per week for literature instruction. One lesson per week is manifestly insufficient for developing critical thinking, exploring complex themes, and engaging students in substantive discussion. Teachers revealed that they felt compelled to merely cover the material, mainly by working through themes, plots, and characters, rather than explore any meaningful depth. One teacher admitted, "I am not very confident because it will take a lot of time to be able to engage the students to think critically" (Rashid et al., 2023). The default response, which is reliance on study guides and rote memorisation, becomes the only practical option. Omar (2017) found that a staggering 93.3% of teachers relied on commercial study guides. When teachers are overwhelmed, undertrained, and pressed for time, they do what they must to survive. This is not teaching in any meaningful sense; it is merely going through prescribed motions.

To understand why the literature curriculum remains so deeply influenced by Western traditions, one must examine the broader role of language in Malaysian education. This is not a recent development. It traces back to the 1950s and 1960s when the post-colonial government struggled to build a nation from diverse ethnic and linguistic communities. The solution, a bilingual system, was intended to promote unity while respecting diversity. Yet in practice, this system entrenched English as the language of privilege and power. Malay was assigned a symbolic role as the national language, but English remained the key that opened doors to elite institutions and lucrative careers (Sua, 2013).

This linguistic hierarchy continues to shape contemporary Malaysian society. Wealthy families send their children to English-medium schools. National examinations place disproportionate weight on English proficiency. Students who struggle with English often perceive themselves as being condemned to

second-class status. Kashif and Ab Rahman (2025) compellingly expressed about how this hierarchy reinforces class divisions and marginalises indigenous knowledge systems. When one language is consistently valued above others, the message about which cultures and traditions matter is unmistakable.

The literature curriculum embodies this dynamic with particular clarity. By privileging Western canonical texts, including Shakespeare, Dickens, and Verne, the curriculum implicitly communicates that Western literary traditions are superior to local ones. This is not merely a pedagogical failure; it constitutes a form of epistemic injustice. Students are systematically taught that their own stories, cultures, and experiences are unworthy of serious academic attention. How can students be expected to engage meaningfully with literature when the curriculum consistently renders them invisible? This is the tragedy of the colonial legacy in Malaysian education.

Global Context: Echoes of a Colonial Legacy

The problems found in Malaysia are not unique, but are endemic to a larger global phenomenon that can be explained in a postcolonial perspective. In many former colonies, “colonial legacy” can be seen in its educational systems. Similarly, in other Commonwealth countries, such as India (Pathak, 2016) and Nigeria (Adeyemi, 2020), these problems have been reported, with the Western literary canon continuing to be privileged even after independence. This is often described by Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) as “colonisation of the mind.”

The decolonisation of the curriculum is a movement that has come to fruition globally and is a challenge to the epistemic authority of the West. The need for other types of knowledge systems is highlighted by scholars such as Santos (2014), who proposed the “ecology of knowledges.” A number of studies after movements, including the #RhodesMustFall campaign in South Africa (Jansen, 2019) and the “Why Is My Curriculum White?” campaign in the UK (Bhambra, Gebrial, & Nişancıoğlu, 2018), emphasise the significant pedagogical and social advantages of incorporating marginalised voices and local knowledge systems. Such international studies offer a good basis for analysing the Malaysian situation not as a failure of any kind, but as a reflection of a general post-colonial reality that educational policy continues to be “however unconsciously” bound up in the cultural valuations inherited from the colonial era (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002).

Decolonisation is frequently misconstrued as a historical event that concluded with political independence. Jamiran, Faiz, and Sari (2024), however, argued persuasively that decolonisation is fundamentally a project of the mind. It entails dismantling the beliefs and assumptions that colonialism implanted in societies. These beliefs do not simply vanish when colonisers depart. They persist, often across generations, and shape how people understand themselves, their cultures, and their place in the world (Jamiran et al., 2024).

In education, this legacy manifests as a curriculum that continues to treat Western knowledge as the gold standard. Students are taught that Shakespeare represents the pinnacle of literary achievement while local authors are consigned to the margins. Generations of Malaysians have grown up internalising the belief that their own stories are not worthy of serious study. Jamiran et al. (2024) framed this as a problem of “epistemic justice.” The issue is not merely one of fairness; it concerns whether particular ways of knowing and understanding the world are systematically devalued. In Malaysia, as in many other post-colonial societies, non-Western knowledge systems are persistently marginalised.

This is why the movement for a decolonised curriculum carries such urgency. The objective is not to reject Western traditions entirely, but to create space for local voices, local stories, and local ways of thinking. Jamiran et al. (2024) clarified that decolonisation requires more than adjusting a few textbooks. It demands a fundamental rethinking of how education, power, and knowledge are conceptualised. This rethinking must occur not only in schools, but also in universities, media, and the broader society. This is the work that must be undertaken to build a just and inclusive society.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted a qualitative research design, conducting a systematic integrative review of scholarly literature published between 2012 and 2023. Most of the sources were peer-reviewed journal articles retrieved from academic databases, such as Google Scholar, ERIC, and MyCite, with the following keywords: “Malaysian English literature curriculum,” “student perceptions,” “national identity,” and “text selection.” The analysis focused on the qualitative and quantitative results of these studies, consolidating the ideas, contradictory views, and developing trends in the curriculum’s implementation and effects. The theme of student disengagement and their desire for culturally relevant texts is one that emerged from across the reviewed studies, as is the issue of teacher challenges and the need for rote memorisation, and the marginalisation of local stories in preference to the Western canon. These themes have been developed from the qualitative data and statistical results presented in the quantitative studies, and can be used to get a comprehensive picture of the curriculum’s shortcomings.

The analysis was done in a postcolonial theoretical perspective, in particular the concept of colonial hangover (Ashcroft et al., 2002). This theory looks at the long-term effects of colonialism on the social, cultural, and psychological aspects of society that remain after political independence. In this educational context, it is the ongoing respect for the knowledge, canon, and culture of the old colonising power. This can be understood as a kind of unconsciously acknowledged cultural hierarchy in favour of Western literary works that stifles the growth of an authentic and self-defined national identity.

Paulo Freire's work provides a powerful analytical lens for examining the Malaysian literature classroom. Freire (1972) introduced the concept of "banking" education, and his ideas resonate strongly with the Malaysian context. In the traditional educational model, teachers "deposit" knowledge into students, who are treated as passive recipients. Students are expected to receive this knowledge, memorise it, and reproduce it in examinations. They are not encouraged to question, analyse, or think independently. This model treats students as objects rather than active participants in their own learning (Freire, 1972).

Omar's (2017) description of Malaysian literature classrooms illustrates Freire's "banking" model vividly. Teachers rely on study guides, while students memorise answers. A remarkable 93.3% of teachers use commercial guides. Students are not being taught to appreciate literature; they are being taught to pass examinations. They are not being helped to find meaning in stories; they are being trained to perform formulaic tasks. When literature is reduced to a collection of facts to be memorised, its transformative potential is entirely lost.

Freire argued that education should be liberating. He contended that authentic education should help students develop "conscientisation," a critical awareness of the world and their position within it. This is not merely about accumulating facts; it concerns understanding power, injustice, and the possibilities for change. Hashim and Chin (2018) have demonstrated how Freire's ideas can be applied in the Malaysian context to foster civic awareness among students. When literature is taught as a means of exploring identity, culture, and democracy, it becomes more than reading comprehension. It becomes a way of preparing young people for engaged citizenship. This is what literature education should aspire to. This is what has been lost.

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of reviewed literature reveals three dominant and interconnected themes that explain the curriculum's failure.

The Ignored Student Voice: A Call for Relevance

The findings of various studies are quite similar in that the Malaysian students prefer to read literature with themes that are familiar to them, such as adventure, mystery, family, and adolescent problems (Isa & Mahmud, 2012; Yee et al., 2023). Students make text choices that are "contextual and culturally bound" (Isa & Mahmud, 2012, p. 80). However, the curriculum has, over the years, become more oriented towards foreign canonical works. Thoo et al. (2017) noted that in the lower secondary KSSM cycle, students were predominantly studying books such as *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and there was little or no Malaysian literature. This presents an "illusion of choice" in that although there is a literature element, it is very much out of the learner's comfort zone.

The Systemic Undermining of Teachers

The second problem encountered was that teachers have low competence in teaching skills, especially in teaching literature (Omar, 2017). This was exacerbated by the challenge of teaching culturally and linguistically remote text. The teachers' use of study guides, which were found to focus on recalling answers to the questions, was as high as 93.3%. This contradicted the goals of the curriculum, which was aimed to achieve critical thinking and an appreciation of literature, as observed by Omar (2017).

Rashid et al.'s (2023) study gave voice to the teachers' experiences of struggle and disappointment. These teachers were not abstract research subjects, but real individuals trying their best yet feeling increasingly inadequate. One teacher confessed, "I am not confident to guide students to think and read critically." Another stated, "I'm not confident to teach the skill because I haven't practiced it in class." Such a sense of inadequacy is tangible. Standing before a classroom day after day, knowing what one ought to be doing but lacking the confidence to do so, is profoundly demoralising (Rashid et al., 2023).

One teacher's comment was particularly striking: "I didn't know how to pursue the literature and so on...these are things that were never really taught to us during our teacher training." This is not an admission of personal failure, but an indictment of the system. Teachers enter the classroom without the tools they need. They are expected to teach critical thinking, but no one has shown them the method. They are expected to make literature relevant, but have never received the necessary preparation. However, when things go wrong, they are held responsible for systemic failures (Rashid et al., 2023).

Time constraints present another formidable obstacle. Teachers have only one lesson per week for literature, which is grossly inadequate for developing critical thinking, exploring complex themes, and engaging students in meaningful discussion. In Rashid et al.'s (2023) study, teachers revealed that they felt compelled to cover the material, to work through themes, plots, and characters, and then move on. They understood they were not doing justice to the subject, but they lacked the time to do more. One teacher explained, "I am not very confident because it will take a lot of time to be able to engage the students to think critically." This is not an excuse, but a reflection of genuine constraint. Under such conditions, the path of least resistance becomes the only viable option. It is easier to rely on a study guide and teach memorisation simply to get through the lesson. However, ease is not a measure of quality. This is the tragedy of the system: it has made it easy for teachers to do the bare minimum while making it nearly impossible for them to do what they aspire, which is to inspire their students.

The Erosion of National Identity

This systematic change of local texts into foreign texts was contrary to the national policy of cultivating a common Malaysian identity. Thoo et al. (2017) suggested

that the “imperialised corpus” in the syllabus actually prevented the creation of a national identity. The curriculum also failed to sufficiently address the need to foster inter-ethnic understanding and a sense of common destiny through the use of literature in a multi-ethnic country, allowing implied devaluation of local stories and instilling a cultural hierarchy in favour of the West.

The erosion of national identity through the literature curriculum has consequences that extend well beyond the classroom. Sharifah Aishah Osman has spoken passionately about a persistent misconception in Malaysian society: that studying literature has little practical value beyond language enhancement. She insisted that this view is fundamentally mistaken. This misconception persists due to how the subject is typically taught in Malaysian public schools, which is as little more than reading comprehension exercises (The Star, 2024). When literature is reduced to comprehension drills, it loses its capacity to develop critical thinking, empathy, and cultural awareness. The challenge is not simply to include more literature, but to transform how it is taught so that students can engage with it as meaningful intellectual and emotional exploration.

Priyadarsini Tinagharan, a lecturer at Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology, offered an even sharper observation. In an interview with *The Star*, she explained that Malaysia is simply not a reading society: “The general populace does not appreciate and value literature simply because there isn’t much exposure to quality literary works.” Her assessment is severe but difficult to dispute. Students cannot be expected to love literature if a culture that values reading has not been cultivated. In many Malaysian households, books are not a priority because reading is neither modelled by parents nor celebrated in communities. Society then inadvertently expresses surprise when students struggle with reading comprehension and fail to connect with literature (The Star, 2024).

This suggests that the problem extends well beyond the curriculum. Better texts must be chosen. Teachers must be better trained. However, the root cause, which is a culture that does not value reading, must also be addressed. This is not something that can be remedied quickly. It requires a shift in attitudes, a reordering of priorities, and sustained efforts from parents, schools, communities, and policymakers. Children need to see that reading is not merely a school activity, but a lifelong practice that opens doors to new worlds and new ways of thinking. Until that happens, curriculum reforms alone will not suffice.

Discussion

The results clearly demonstrate a lack of deeper understanding of the pedagogical and cultural roles of literature. Rather than a serendipitous deficiency, the lack of students’ needs in the curriculum is a sign of a larger systemic problem that can be clearly seen through a postcolonial lens. This gap is reflected in the findings of students’ preferences for culturally relevant texts across several studies (Isa & Mahmud,

2012; Othman et al., 2015; Yee et al., 2023) as well as in the curriculum documents and analysis of text selections (Thoo et al., 2017).

The colonial hangover theory (Ashcroft et al., 2002) offers an explanatory framework for the Malaysian curriculum policy and curriculum maker's tendency to return to the Western canon. This can be read as a residual, unspoken perception of Western literature being higher in quality, prestige, and rigor than local and regional literature, which is seen as more parochial and less challenging (Thoo et al., 2017). This embedded cultural hierarchy is a typical aspect of the postcolonial condition because the epistemological world of the coloniser remains influential on the institutions of newly independent nations (wa Thiong'o, 1986).

The framework suggests that the Malaysian curriculum can be seen as a locus of cultural alienation. Hence, cultural alienation is seen as the psychological and emotional distance felt by students when what is taught in school is not culturally relevant, and neither reflect nor validate their lived experiences, heritage, and identity. The students become disenchanted with their required reading because there is no connection with their daily life in a multicultural and modern country such as Malaysia. Moreover, the content of some of these texts, such as *The Swiss Family Robinson*, connects to very different cultural backgrounds (Othman et al., 2015; Yee et al., 2023). This isolation directly inhibits the potential of literature, including empathy and critical thinking, since students have difficulty understanding simple story and language (Applebee, 1993). In turn, teachers are disempowered in their professional skills. When they are forced to read a syllabus for which they are not trained, and they are unfamiliar with the given texts, they opt for the easy solution of rote memorisation (Omar, 2017). This gives rise to "pedagogy of despair" (Jansen, 2019, p. 45) as literary exploration is replaced by the mechanical rehearsal of examination answers. In the end, the country itself becomes disempowered from a key instrument of national self-determination. Thoo et al. (2017) harshly concluded that the curriculum actively works against fostering a collective national identity by failing to establish literature, as theorised by Anderson (2006), as a basis for an "imagined community" comprising shared stories.

This multi-layered alienation, then, should be understood as the inevitable, and sadly fatal, culmination of the decision to stop offering the SPM Literature component. It was a solution that aimed to cure the symptom of low engagement and perceived ineffectiveness, by barring the subject from the high stakes of the examination arena, instead of facing the pathological need for a decolonisation of its content and intent (Adeyemi, 2020). This action can send a message that it is literature, rather than its specific colonial form, that is the issue. It neglects the subject altogether and reinforces the narrow instrumentalist approach to education that focuses on functional language, rather than on the development of critical, empathetic citizens (Nussbaum, 2010). The irony is that Literature was used to help achieve

the government's goals, namely unity and critical thinking, but the structure of the curriculum was such that it could not possibly accomplish these goals.

Lim's (2018) study reveals that the localisation of English literature in Malaysia was contested and fragmented from the outset. Some stakeholders viewed literature primarily as a tool for language learning, while some considered it as a vehicle for moral education, and others believed it should serve nation-building purposes. However, since no consensus existed on its fundamental purpose, the curriculum emerged as an unsatisfactory compromise that failed to meet anyone's expectations fully (Lim, 2018).

This fragmentation should not be understood as accidental. It is symptomatic of the colonial legacy. Malaysian education is caught between two competing impulses: the aspiration for a genuinely Malaysian curriculum and the unconscious gravitation towards the Western canon, which generations have been conditioned to regard as superior. This is not a matter of rational choice; it reflects a deep-seated cultural bias inherited from the colonial past. There is widespread recognition that more local literature should be taught. There is understanding that students would benefit from seeing themselves reflected in the texts they read. Yet when decisions are made, the default is to opt for what feels safe and familiar: Shakespeare, Dickens, and Verne. This is the path of least resistance, the path that requires the least critical self-examination (Lim, 2018).

The Western canon, however, is neither the only way to teach literature nor even necessarily the best way. There are rich literary traditions in Malaysia and Southeast Asia that deserve serious academic attention. These traditions will continue to be overlooked as long as Malaysian education remains trapped in a colonial mindset. The absence of a shared understanding of what literature should achieve leaves the curriculum vulnerable to the default position of valorising the Western canon, simply because it is established and prestigious. Nevertheless, established and prestigious are not synonymous with relevant and meaningful. Malaysian students deserve a curriculum that speaks to their realities.

Kashif and Ab Rahman's (2025) study on the colonial roots of education in Pakistan and Malaysia sheds additional light on these dynamics. It demonstrates that colonial legacies have entrenched linguistic hierarchies and sustained social inequalities. English continues to dominate as the language of instruction in elite institutions and digital education platforms (Kashif & Ab Rahman, 2025). According to them, this dominance reinforces class divisions and marginalises indigenous languages. Perhaps most troubling is their finding that digital education, often celebrated as a democratising force, actually reproduces colonial language ideologies and epistemic hierarchies (Kashif & Ab Rahman, 2025).

This finding has significant implications for the literature curriculum. Even as Malaysia embraces digital education and incorporates more technology into classrooms, the underlying framework still privileges English and Western knowledge over local

languages and traditions. Unless these hierarchies are addressed, technological innovation will merely apply a fresh veneer to an obsolete structure. A fundamental rethinking of how knowledge is valued and whose voices are amplified is essential.

This is not merely an educational concern; it is a question of justice. Malaysian students deserve to see themselves and their cultures reflected in what they study, rather than being continually told that the most valuable knowledge comes from elsewhere. The colonial structures of knowledge valuation must be dismantled. Local and indigenous narratives must be centred. This is the work that must be done if Malaysian education is to truly serve the needs of the nation and its people.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The English Literature component in the SPM, from its inception to its closure, is a cautionary tale. The evidence suggests that the curriculum was poorly conceived, in that it neglected its primary stakeholder (students), it had a negative effect on those who would implement it (teachers), and it did not serve the national interest. The decision to remove it from the SPM is highly revealing. The postcolonial analysis indicates that it is not literature per se that caused the problem, but the design of the curriculum itself, which can be traced back to colonial legacy.

Hence, it is recommended that any future endeavour aimed to popularise literature in Malaysian schools must first begin with a radical transformation to decolonise the subject.

1. Decolonise the Reading List: The core of any future reading list should comprise Malaysian and Southeast Asian literature. Decolonisation of the reading list is an intentional and systematic process to include local, indigenous, and regional stories that do not marginalise and ignore the cultural heritage, lived experiences, and identities of Malaysian students. This includes stepping from the inclusion of one or two local texts to a fundamental shift towards the use of local literature as the basis for the curriculum. The works of authors such as Lloyd Fernando, Shirley Lim, and K. S. Maniam should be at the heart of the syllabus. This would support the students' cultural backgrounds and create a sense of Malaysian identity, as well as prove that Malaysian literature is as worthy of serious academic study as Western classics. This "ecology of knowledges," as Santos (2014) puts it, is necessary in post-colonial education systems for the creation of epistemic justice.

2. Implement a Pedagogically Sound Sequence: A pedagogically sound sequence is a well-structured curriculum that gradually develops students' confidence and competence. This means: starting with easily accessible local texts in lower secondary school that students can connect with, thus building basic skills in literary appreciation and engagement; progressively introducing regional Southeast Asian

literature in the upper secondary as complementary reading and not required reading so as to widen students' perspective on culture; and only using foreign literary canonical works in upper secondary to compare and contrast texts, but not as core texts. This is a sequential approach, in line with the concept of Vygotsky (1978) on zone of proximal development, which is to ensure that students will not be overwhelmed by the linguistic and cultural barriers before they have acquired enough literary competence. This sequence would also enable teachers to effectively scaffold the teaching of content to students, starting with an easier context to a more challenging one.

3. Redefine Teacher Training: Professional development needs to be directed towards the development of pedagogical content knowledge for teaching literature for the purpose of critical thinking and cultural exploration in the Malaysian context. This involves providing teachers with training in culturally responsive pedagogy, in teaching local texts, and in how to have meaningful conversations about identity, culture, and nationhood. Teacher preparation programmes should also incorporate sections on postcolonial theory and decolonising pedagogies that equip teachers with an understanding and a critique of the colonial past that is embedded within curriculum and pedagogy.

One of the most urgent lessons from this study is that teachers should not be blamed for problems they did not create. The lack of confidence documented by Rashid et al. (2023) reflects systemic failure, not personal inadequacy. Teachers have been sent into classrooms without adequate training, support, or resources, only for society to then inadvertently express surprise when they resort to study guides and rote memorisation. The solution is not to assign blame, but to invest meaningfully in teachers (Rashid et al., 2023).

This investment must take concrete forms. Practical, hands-on training that moves beyond theory must be provided. Teachers need to learn how to design lessons that integrate critical thinking with literature appreciation. They need to understand how to manage time constraints so that content can be covered without sacrificing depth. They need to develop skills for engaging students in meaningful dialogue about texts, rather than simply lecturing at them. This cannot be accomplished in a one-day workshop. It requires sustained professional development that gives teachers the time and space to practice these skills in conducive environments.

Teacher training programmes must move beyond theoretical instruction to provide practical, practice-based opportunities for teachers to experiment with culturally responsive pedagogies and decolonised approaches to literature instruction. Teachers need concrete examples of what these approaches look like in practice. They need opportunities to apply them in their own classrooms and receive constructive feedback. They need to learn from one another, sharing successes and failures in a culture of collaboration rather than competition. Only then will they develop the confidence they need to transform their literature classrooms.

4. Suggest Participatory Curriculum Development: The process of curriculum text selection should involve all parties (students, teachers, parents, and community). This participatory method would ensure that the curriculum does not neglect the voices and needs of its main users, and would foster ownership and commitment to the literature programme. Lim's (2018) study indicated that the lack of a shared understanding among stakeholders was a key factor in the incoherence of localisation efforts. A participatory approach would help build this shared understanding, ensuring that the rationale for localisation is widely supported and clearly articulated.

5. Formulate a Malaysian Literary Canon for Education: The Ministry of Education should collaborate with the National Institute of Translation and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in creating a selection of Malaysian literary works appropriate for secondary education with representation of the multi-ethnic nature of the Malaysian literary heritage. This canon needs to be monitored and revised periodically to bring in modern voices and new writers.

6. Literature Across the Curriculum: The use of literature should be extended to other disciplines through interdisciplinary approaches that explore themes of identity, citizenship, and national values in relation to literature, history, civics, and moral education. This would demonstrate that literature is relevant beyond language learning and integral to education as a whole. An interdisciplinary approach would also help address the challenge of fostering a reading culture. As Priyadarsini Tinagharan observed, fostering a reading culture is essential for Malaysia to improve its reading scores and develop a society that values literary engagement (The Star, 2024). When students encounter literature across multiple subjects, they should come to see it as something that matters, not merely as an examination requirement.

7. Address Systemic Linguistic Hierarchies: Any effort to transform the literature curriculum must be accompanied by a broader examination of the linguistic hierarchies embedded in Malaysia's education system. As Kashif and Ab Rahman (2025) pointed out, the dominance of English in elite institutions and digital platforms reinforces class divisions and marginalises indigenous knowledge systems (Kashif & Ab Rahman, 2025). A truly decolonised literature curriculum cannot exist in isolation. It must be part of a larger project of epistemic justice that challenges these hierarchies and values all of Malaysia's linguistic and cultural traditions equitably. This means rethinking not only what is taught, but how knowledge itself is valued in Malaysian society.

The dissolution of the SPM literature component should not be the last word on literature in the schools of Malaysia. Rather, it is a springboard to a brave new perspective that moves Malaysian narratives to the centre of learning, and brings literature to its true purpose as a vehicle for language learning and a pillar of national

identity. Malaysia need not have an enduring colonial legacy as long as the policy decisions are taken with purpose, knowledge, and courage to create an education system that embodies its post-colonial aspirations.

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Mohammad Talha Mohamed Idris: Conceptualisation, literature review, design of study, analysis, and writing and preparing of this manuscript; Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi: Interpretation of results, preparing final manuscript, revising and approving the final manuscript, concept and design of the study.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This study is a review of published literature; no primary data were collected. All sources cited are publicly available through academic databases. Requests for further information may be directed to the corresponding author.

DECLARATIONS

The author declares no conflicts of interest. As this study involves no human participants, ethical approval was not required. The manuscript is original, unpublished, and not under consideration elsewhere. All sources have been properly cited. The author consents to publication subject to peer review.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

AI tools were used as assistive aids for language refinement, grammar checks and reference formatting. All substantive content, analysis, arguments, and conclusions are the author's original work. All sources have been manually verified. AI was not used to create data or manipulate findings. The author assumes full responsibility for the manuscript's accuracy and integrity.

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