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BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE: MODERN APPROACHES TO MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

This study examines the challenges and potential solutions in mother tongue education in Malaysia, focusing on Dr. Huang Xian Bing's innovative ideas and practices. Through literature review and case study analysis, the research explores the current landscape of mother tongue education in Malaysia, highlighting the overlooked role of children's literature. The study reveals that Dr. Huang has introduced novel approaches, particularly through promoting children's literature and reforming teaching methodologies. Key findings indicate that emphasizing children's literature, reforming teaching methods, and strengthening connections between mother tongue and real-life experiences are crucial for improving education quality. These insights align with international trends while reflecting Malaysia's unique multilingual context. This research offers valuable recommendations for policymakers and practitioners, contributing new perspectives on mother tongue education in multilingual societies.

Keywords:

Mother Tongue Education, Children's Literature, Reading Instruction, Multilingual Education

Introduction

In an era of globalization, mother tongue education faces both unprecedented challenges and transformative opportunities. *Mother tongue* refers to the first language one learns as a baby—the language one grows up knowing, often called the native language. It is the language through which a child first comprehends the world, beginning with the voice of their mother even before

birth and continuing throughout life. As Nishanthi (2020) notes, the mother tongue is deeply appreciated for its role in shaping individual thought and emotion, and it serves as a powerful tool for advancing learning. Learning in school becomes more meaningful and effective when rooted in the mother tongue, which provides cognitive clarity and emotional resonance.

Recognizing this, UNESCO (2022) emphasizes the importance of protecting and strengthening mother tongues and indigenous languages as essential to promoting sustainable, diverse, and inclusive development. However, in multilingual countries, balancing the learning needs of other languages while protecting and developing the mother tongue has become a complex issue.

Malaysia, with its multicultural and multilingual landscape, presents a typical and representative case for mother tongue education policies and practices. Recent years have seen mother tongue education in Malaysia facing numerous challenges, including marginalization of mother tongues, diminishing value placed on mother tongues (Albury, 2017), limited time and effectiveness of mother tongue teaching (Li et al., 2016), and inadequate teacher training and resources for mother tongue education (Malakolunthu & Rengasamy, 2012).

In this context, the ideas and practices of educational scholar Dr. Huang Xian Bing (Wong Sien Biang) offer new perspectives for the development of mother tongue education in Malaysia. By exploring Dr. Huang's educational philosophy and practices, this study aims to provide valuable insights for the development of mother tongue education in Malaysia and other multilingual countries.

Literature Review

This review examines the current state of research on mother tongue education, with a particular focus on multilingual contexts and the integration of children's literature in language education. The literature is organized into three main themes: international perspectives on mother tongue education, the role of children's literature in language learning, and the specific context of mother tongue education in Malaysia.

International Perspectives on Mother Tongue Education

Recent international research on mother tongue education has primarily focused on two core areas: the protection of minority language rights and the role of mother tongue in second language acquisition.

Minority language education has been a significant concern, with studies examining its development, challenges, and potential solutions (De Jesus, 2021; Mandayata et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023; Semilla et al., 2023; Wakat et al., 2023). These studies underscore the importance of minority language education and provide a theoretical basis for policy-making. The role of mother tongue in second language acquisition has been well-established since Cummins' (1979) seminal work on linguistic interdependence. Subsequent studies have reinforced the importance of mother tongue proficiency for second language learning (Winskel, 2020). These findings have significant implications for bilingual education and foreign language teaching strategies.

In terms of teaching methodologies, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) have shown effectiveness in mother tongue instruction (Butler, 2015). Moreover, explicit teaching of metacognitive strategies has been found to enhance language learners' reading skills (Rajasagaran & Ismail, 2022). In multilingual settings, translanguaging has emerged as an innovative teaching strategy that can enhance students' metalinguistic awareness and promote both content and language learning (Wei, 2017).

Children's Literature in Mother Tongue Education

The integration of children's literature into mother tongue education has gained traction globally, with research indicating positive outcomes for language skills, reading engagement, and overall literacy.

In Finland, known for its successful education system, the practice of integrating children's literature into mother tongue teaching is widespread. Aerila and Merisuo-Storm (2016) found that peer reading of children's literature benefited both older and younger students, emphasizing the central role of literature in language education. Similarly, the "Power of Reading" project in the UK has demonstrated the effectiveness of using children's literature in strengthening literacy teaching (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2023).

In Canada, efforts to support indigenous literacy through children's literature are evident. The "Strong Nations" publishing house in British Columbia, for example, publishes children's books in indigenous languages, contributing to language retention efforts (Strong Nations, 2020).

In China, scholars have conducted in-depth research on mother tongue teaching since 2000. Li (2006) proposed that language ability primarily relies on language practice rather than language knowledge, contributing to the innovation of language teaching concepts. Zhu (2015, 2020) introduced a "constructivist" view of language and explored teaching methods for different genres in children's literature, providing teachers with rich pedagogical examples.

Mother Tongue Education in Malaysia

Compared to international trends, mother tongue education research in Malaysia is relatively underdeveloped. Current research primarily focuses on the protection of Chinese schools (Cao, 2015) and the learning of other ethnic languages, such as studies on Malay students learning Chinese (Ling et al., 2019; Chua et al., 2022; Teoh et al., 2022) or non-Malay students mastering the Malay language (Mahamod, 2021; Othman et al., 2022).

The choice and use of mother tongue face challenges in today's socioeconomic and educational context in Malaysia (Ong, 2021). Jalaluddin (2010) pointed out that the lack of emphasis on literature in language teaching affects the development of the Malay language. This observation aligns with international findings on the importance of literature in language education.

Research on combining children's literature with mother tongue education in Malaysia is limited. Existing studies focus more on the influence of children's literature on youth cultural literacy (Tuan Adnan, 2023) and moral values (Chew & Ishak, 2010), with less attention paid to its impact on improving mother tongue proficiency. Some studies have explored the use of children's literature for special groups, such as hospitalized children (Omar, 2018) and students

with learning difficulties (Nasir & Halim, 2022), but have not fully recognized its universal significance for language development in all children.

This review of literature reveals a significant gap in research on the integration of children's literature and mother tongue education in Malaysia. While international studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach, its application in the Malaysian context remains understudied. This gap underscores the need for further research in this area, particularly in light of Malaysia's unique multilingual and multicultural environment.

Research Objectives

This study aims to: 1. Explore the ideas and practices of educational scholar Dr. Huang Xian Bing in the field of mother tongue education; 2. Provide recommendations for the development of mother tongue education in Malaysia based on research findings.

Research Significance

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the current situation and challenges of mother tongue education in Malaysia, while providing fresh perspectives for research in multilingual contexts. By analyzing the educational ideas and practices of Dr. Huang Xian Bing, the study offers valuable references for policymakers and practitioners seeking to enhance mother tongue instruction and curriculum development in Malaysia. It also addresses a significant research gap concerning the integration of children's literature into mother tongue education—an area with considerable potential for pedagogical innovation (Wu & Teng, 2019).

Academically, the study enriches the global discourse on language education by offering a localized and culturally grounded case study. It contributes to emerging frameworks on literature-based language learning and culturally responsive pedagogy, particularly within Southeast Asian multilingual environments.

Practically, the findings offer concrete strategies for educators, school administrators, and curriculum developers by presenting replicable methods that integrate children's literature with language instruction. These approaches may be adapted in teacher training programs and national school curricula to improve language proficiency and cultural awareness among students.

At the national level, this research supports Malaysia's broader goals of sustaining linguistic diversity, fostering national unity through multicultural understanding, and aligning with UNESCO's education for sustainable development goals. It underscores the role of mother tongue education not only in language acquisition but also in preserving cultural heritage and identity in a rapidly globalizing world.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, combining literature analysis and case study methods to explore Dr. Huang Xian Bing's ideas and practices in the field of mother tongue education in Malaysia. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of the subject matter within its real-world context (Yin, 2009, p.18).

Research Design

The research design is structured in two main parts. Firstly, it involves a **literature analysis**, which entails a comprehensive review of relevant works on mother tongue education. This review pays particular attention to multilingual contexts and emphasizes the integration of children's literature as a pedagogical resource. By analyzing scholarly discourse and existing educational models, this stage aims to establish a theoretical foundation for understanding the complexities and opportunities in multilingual mother tongue education.

Secondly, the study adopts a **case study** approach, focusing on an in-depth examination of Dr. Huang's educational philosophy and teaching practices. Dr. Huang is selected as a representative figure for his innovative contributions to mother tongue education in Malaysia. Through detailed analysis of his work, the research seeks to illustrate how theory and practice can be effectively integrated to promote language development and cultural identity in multilingual settings.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred from December 2023 to December 2024, followed by a detailed thematic analysis from January to March 2025. This study was conducted in Malaysia, with data collected primarily from Malaysian-based sources such as national newspapers, educational platforms, and institutional archives. Data for this study were collected from multiple sources to ensure triangulation and enhance the validity of the findings (Patton, 2002, p.247). These diverse data sources contribute to a comprehensive understanding of Dr. Huang's educational philosophy and practices.

Firstly, published articles authored by Dr. Huang were gathered and analyzed. The published articles analyzed include columns and opinion pieces by Dr. Huang in *Sin Chew Daily*, *Oriental Daily News* and *Bloated · Utilitarian · Centralized--Primary education under pressure*. A total of 23 articles published between 2012 and 2024 were reviewed. These writings offer valuable insights into his views on mother tongue education and his pedagogical recommendations, serving as a primary reflection of his theoretical stance.

Secondly, online course content from the "Faqing Academy" (<https://edu.faqing.org/all-courses/>), an online educational platform established by Dr. Huang, was examined. Since its inception in June 2020, the platform has offered over 100 publicly accessible courses, with a strong focus on mother tongue education as well as language and culture. This content provides concrete examples of how Dr. Huang translates his philosophy into teaching materials and outreach. Among these, a selection of courses personally conducted by Dr. Huang was extracted for focused analysis, enabling a more in-depth understanding of his pedagogical approach in practice.

Table 1: Courses Conducted By Dr. Huang

No.	Course ID on Faqing Academy	Course Title (English Translation)	Date
1	5	The Fun of Speaking Mandarin	02-08-2020
2	6	Forum: How to Use Social Media Creatively	18-08-2020
3	14	The First Half of a Doctoral Journey	15-09-2020
4	33	The Universe of Children's Hearts - Three Lectures on Children's Literature	04-04-2021
5	38	Mother Tongue Education in the Age of AI	09-06-2021
6	67	34 Years of Teaching Affection	01-09-2022
7	82	Why We Insist on Learning Mother Tongue	02-04-2023
8	83	Why We Persist in Learning the Mother Tongue	02-04-2023
9	91	The Fool Who Sows Seeds on Snow	17-10-2023
10	93	Summary of My 35 Years of Teaching Experience	12-11-2023
11	107	How to Teach Classical Chinese in Secondary Schools	04-08-2024
12	115	Looking Back: What I Did in the Past	07-12-2024

Thirdly, public lectures and workshops conducted by Dr. Huang were included in the analysis. Recordings and transcripts of his presentations on mother tongue education and children's literature were reviewed to capture the interactive and practical dimensions of his educational approach.

Finally, organizational documents from the Malaysian Children's Literature Association, which Dr. Huang founded in 2012, were reviewed. These documents offer insights into the institutional and community-level application of his educational principles, highlighting how his ideas are put into practice within a formal organizational context.

Data Analysis

Once the materials were systematically arranged, thematic analysis was carried out through iterative readings and coding from January to March 2025, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and core themes. The collected data were analysed using **thematic analysis** as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its flexibility and effectiveness in identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis followed a systematic process comprising six key steps.

The first step was **familiarization with the data**, which involved thorough reading and re-reading of all collected materials to gain a deep understanding of the content. During this stage, initial impressions and emerging ideas were noted.

Next, **initial coding** was carried out. In this phase, open coding was carried out by labeling recurring ideas, pedagogical strategies, or philosophical principles found in Dr. Huang's work. Examples of initial codes included "children's literature integration," "cultural identity," "top-down teaching model," "critique of second language approach," and "multilingual foundation." These codes served as the foundation for further thematic development.

Following this, the process of **searching for themes** began. The initial codes were sorted and collated into potential themes that captured significant patterns across the dataset. For instance, codes related to pedagogical reforms and classroom practices were grouped under a theme titled "Instructional Innovation," while codes related to emotional development and moral growth were grouped under "Holistic Language Learning."

The fourth step involved **reviewing themes**, where the coherence of each theme was checked against the coded data extracts and the overall dataset. This step ensured that the themes accurately represented the data and contributed meaningfully to the research focus.

In the fifth step, **defining and naming themes**, each theme was refined to clearly delineate its scope and content. Definitions and labels were carefully crafted to capture the essence of each theme.

Finally, the analysis culminated in **producing the report**, which involved selecting vivid and illustrative data extracts, conducting a detailed analysis of these extracts, and relating the findings back to the research questions and existing literature. This stage brought together the insights developed throughout the process to form a coherent and meaningful narrative.

Research Findings

Dr. Huang Xian Bing's philosophy on mother tongue education demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental aspects of language education. Born in 1963 in Taiping, Perak, Dr. Huang's academic journey includes an honors bachelor's degree (1987) and a master's degree (1998) from the University of Malaya, followed by a doctoral degree from the Department of Chinese at Nanjing University in 2005.

In 2012, Dr. Huang founded the Malaysian Children's Literature Association, serving as its president for a decade. During his tenure, he made significant contributions to the promotion of children's literature, organizing over a hundred in-class reading teaching seminars and co-organizing extracurricular reading camps for children. His efforts extended to actively promoting life education and leading open classes in language teaching (Huang, 2019b, May 25).

Dr. Huang has articulated his profound insights and advocacy for mother tongue education in Malaysia through various platforms, including newspaper articles and his online educational initiative, Faqing Academy. Established in June 2020, Faqing Academy has offered nearly 100 courses to the public, with a particular focus on mother tongue education (Huang, 2023a).

Through these online courses, Dr. Huang has consistently emphasized the critical importance of mother tongue education and children's literature reading. His commitment to these principles is evident in a series of lectures, including: "The Universe of Children's Hearts - Three Lectures on Children's Literature" (Huang, 2021, April 4-18), "Mother Tongue Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence" (Huang, 2021, May 31-June 11), "Why We Insist on Learning Mother Tongue" (Huang, 2023a, April 2-16), "The Fool Who Sows Seeds on Snow" (Huang, 2023b, October 17), and "Summary of My 35 Years of Teaching Experience" (Huang, 2023c, November 12-26).

These courses reflect Dr. Huang's unwavering dedication to mother tongue education and his belief in its fundamental role in child development and cultural preservation. Building upon the insights drawn from his educational programs and public initiatives, a deeper thematic analysis was conducted to uncover the core principles and practical dimensions of Dr. Huang's approach. The analysis of Dr. Huang's educational philosophy and practices revealed several key themes in mother tongue education. These findings are presented in two main categories: Dr. Huang's educational philosophy and his practical implementations.

Dr. Huang's Mother Tongue Education Philosophy

Dr. Huang's philosophy on mother tongue education is built upon several interrelated principles that reflect both pedagogical innovation and deep cultural awareness.

Firstly, he advocates a **holistic approach to language education**, asserting that mother tongue education should not be confined to language mechanics alone but should also encompass cultural education. According to Dr. Huang (2023a), the mother tongue serves as a vital link to one's cultural roots and identity. This view aligns closely with UNESCO's (2003) position, which emphasizes the mother tongue as an essential element of quality education, especially in multilingual contexts.

Secondly, Dr. Huang views **language as a bridge to the world**. He posits that learning one's mother tongue is a two-way process: it enables individuals to understand the world and also allows the world to understand them (Huang, 2022). This dual function resonates with UNESCO's (2003) emphasis on both "teaching the mother tongue" and "teaching through the mother tongue" (p. 14). Moreover, MacKenzie (2009) and Nishanthi (2020) affirm that using the mother tongue supports critical thinking, cognitive development, and emotional expression. Dr. Huang particularly stresses the central role of reading, especially of literary works, as a means to cultivate these capacities for understanding and self-expression.

Thirdly, Dr. Huang calls for a **reform of traditional teaching methods** in Malaysia. He critiques current practices for resembling second language instruction, a legacy he attributes to colonial influence (Huang, 2022). Dr. Huang argues that mother tongue education should have distinct goals and methods, focusing on expression, appreciation of literature, and holistic development. Drawing from the UK's educational guidelines (Department for Education, 2013a, 2013b), he suggests a **top-down teaching model** that begins with comprehension of full texts and progressively moves toward smaller linguistic units—from text to paragraph, paragraph to sentence, sentence to word, and word to character (Huang, 2019). This model aligns with reader-centered theories that prioritize meaning-making and contextual understanding (Goodman, 2014; Lian, 2023).

A fourth key component of Dr. Huang's philosophy is the **integration of children's literature** into mother tongue education. He strongly supports the use of literary texts designed for children as an engaging and developmentally appropriate means to enhance language skills and emotional intelligence (Huang, 2024, January 7). This approach is consistent with Zhu's (2015) findings on the value of children's literature in fostering both linguistic ability and deeper psychological insight.

Lastly, Dr. Huang advocates for a **multilingual education framework grounded in mother tongue proficiency**. He argues that a strong foundation in the mother tongue facilitates more effective learning of additional languages and academic subjects (Huang, 2022, July 31). This position is supported by international research, including the Global Education Monitoring Report (2016), which affirms the positive impact of mother tongue-based multilingual education. Further, Ciges and Torralba García (2021) highlight how such an approach promotes inclusive curricula and enriches cross-cultural understanding in diverse educational environments.

Through these five principles, Dr. Huang presents a comprehensive and culturally grounded vision for mother tongue education, one that integrates linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning.

Dr. Huang's Practices and Their Impact

Dr. Huang has not only developed innovative theoretical concepts for mother tongue education but has also actively translated his philosophy into a range of impactful practical initiatives.

One of his most significant contributions is the **establishment of the Malaysian Children's Literature Association (MCLA)** (<https://msiachild.org/>) in 2012. This organization was founded as a platform to promote children's literature and cultivate a reading culture among young learners (Huang, 2018, August 18). Through MCLA, Dr. Huang has provided structural support for integrating literature into language education, thereby reinforcing the role of children's literature in mother tongue instruction.

Building on this foundation, Dr. Huang has spearheaded a wide array of **nationwide educational activities**. These include children's literature workshops, reading camps, public open classes on reading instruction, and teacher training camps. By 2020, these initiatives had reached over 14,000 students and 7,000 teachers across Malaysia (Navigation in Education, 2020, April 28). Such activities not only reflect the scope of Dr. Huang's outreach efforts but also demonstrate the scalability of his educational model.

Dr. Huang has also contributed to **curriculum development** in Malaysian higher education. His advocacy led to the formal incorporation of children's literature as a **compulsory course** in teacher training programs (Huang, 2022, July 17). This institutional change marks a significant step toward embedding literature-based pedagogies in the professional formation of future educators.

In addition, Dr. Huang has played a key role in fostering **international collaboration** in the field of children's literature and reading education. As early as 2009, he invited Chinese experts to Malaysia to share best practices in reading instruction, eventually introducing the "open class" model of pedagogy. In 2012, he launched a national teacher training tour titled "Open

Classes for Reading Instruction,” overseeing the planning, execution, and promotion of this initiative. Since then, he has brought several renowned international experts—including Professors Zhu Ziqiang, Fang Weiping, Lin Wenbao, and Mei Zihan, as well as Mr. Nian Hong, Ms. Liu Xuyuan, and Ms. Xu Dongmei—to Malaysia to conduct lectures and workshops (Guoshi, 2014a, 2014b, 2019). These collaborations have enriched local educational practices with diverse global perspectives and innovative methodologies.

Collectively, these initiatives have had a **significant impact** on the landscape of mother tongue education in Malaysia. Dr. Huang’s integration of children’s literature and reform-oriented teaching methods has contributed to heightened student interest in reading and has encouraged a shift away from traditional, rote-based instructional approaches.

The findings of this study are consistent with international scholarship emphasizing the educational value of children’s literature (Zucker et al., 2013; Wang, 2023). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that while Dr. Huang’s approach is promising, further **empirical research** is necessary to assess its broader applicability and effectiveness across Malaysia’s diverse educational contexts.

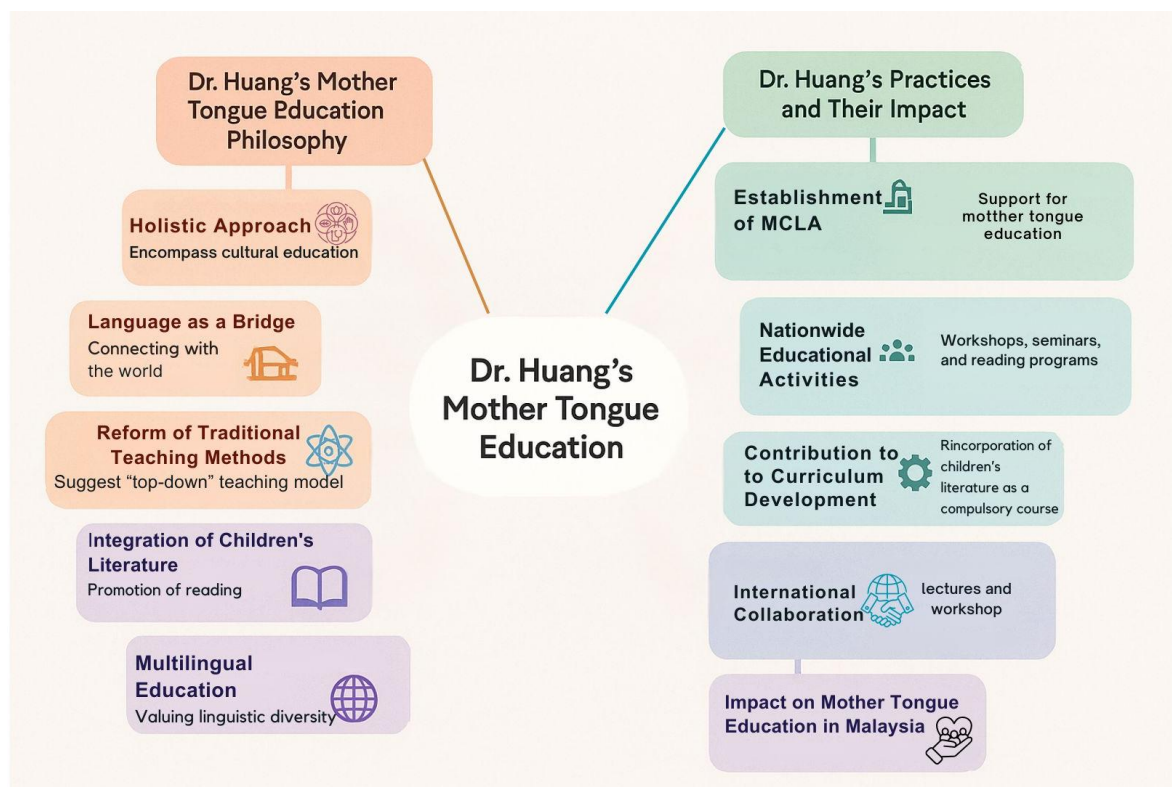


Figure 1: Infographic of Dr. Huang Philosophy and Practices

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has illuminated the challenges facing mother tongue education in Malaysia and potential solutions through an analysis of current research and Dr. Huang Xian Bing’s educational concepts and practices. The findings underscore the importance of emphasizing children’s literature, reforming teaching methodologies, and strengthening the connection between mother tongue and real-life experiences as key factors in enhancing the quality of

mother tongue education. These insights align with international research trends while reflecting the unique linguistic landscape of Malaysia.

While Dr. Huang's approach offers innovative solutions, it is not without limitations. Primarily, the scope of his concept promotion has been largely confined to Chinese language education, which, while reflective of Malaysia's linguistic diversity, may limit the broader application of his ideas across other mother tongue education contexts. This limitation echoes Hashim's (2009) assertion that Malaysia's language education policy requires greater inclusivity and balance to address the needs of its diverse ethnic groups.

Moreover, there is a notable lack of systematic empirical research supporting Dr. Huang's concepts. Despite their apparent success in practice, the absence of rigorous empirical validation may hinder the wider adoption and application of his methods. This gap underscores the need for more evidence-based research in Malaysian language education to guide policy-making and pedagogical practices.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to guide future policy and practice in Malaysian mother tongue education.

Firstly, educators are encouraged to adopt innovative pedagogical approaches that leverage diverse learning resources, particularly children's literature. Dr. Huang's educational practices serve as a valuable model for integrating children's literature into the mother tongue curriculum—an approach that not only supports language acquisition but also nurtures students' emotional and moral development (Pulimeno et al., 2020). Moreover, incorporating interactive, student-centered teaching methods may significantly enhance learning outcomes (Melesse & Jirata, 2016; Al-Amrat, 2024). Malaysia could also draw inspiration from successful international models, such as Taiwan's systematic integration of children's literature into its mother tongue education, which demonstrates the potential for thoughtful curricular innovation (Chen et al., 2014).

Secondly, enhancing teacher training is essential to improving the overall quality of mother tongue instruction. As noted by Wu and Li (2023), professional development plays a pivotal role in strengthening language education. It is recommended that Malaysia's education departments and institutions of higher learning collaborate to develop robust teacher training programs focused on both pedagogical skills and cultural literacy. Dr. Huang's initiatives—such as organizing teacher training camps and promoting international expert exchanges—offer a replicable model for broadening teachers' perspectives and professional competencies.

Thirdly, there is a need to expand research on mother tongue education in Malaysia. Future studies should employ more diverse research methodologies to collect comprehensive data and uncover nuanced insights. Longitudinal studies, in particular, would be beneficial in evaluating the long-term impact of various instructional practices and policies. Interdisciplinary research that combines perspectives from education, linguistics, and psychology could further enrich the theoretical foundation of mother tongue education (Wei, 2017; Rajasagarar & Ismail, 2022).

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the present study, which relied primarily on literature analysis and a single case study. To deepen understanding, future research should consider mixed-method approaches and multiple case studies that reflect Malaysia's rich and complex linguistic diversity.

In conclusion, the study has fulfilled its objectives by identifying the core principles of Dr. Huang's approach to mother tongue education and translating them into actionable insights and policy-oriented recommendations. Advancing mother tongue education in Malaysia will require sustained collaboration among policymakers, educators, and researchers. By thoughtfully synthesizing international best practices with the unique realities of the Malaysian context, the country has the potential to develop a more inclusive, effective, and culturally responsive mother tongue education system—one that both preserves linguistic heritage and equips students for success in a globalized world.

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