

Refugee Children's Perspectives on Language Policy and Well-Being at Alternative Learning Centres in Malaysia

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Abstract

Language is a primary barrier to education for refugee and asylum-seeking children attending Alternative Learning Centres (ALCs) in Malaysia. This study examines children's perspectives on the language policy of an ALC in Kuala Lumpur that emphasizes English for resettlement. Utilizing participatory methods with ten ethnic Chin refugee children (aged 11–16) and supplementary teacher interviews, the research revealed that punitive restrictions on L1 use shaped classroom participation and well-being. The school's English-only policy contributed to the internalization of monolingual ideologies, causing stress and fear of punishment among the children. For newly arrived learners, these factors potentially led to disengagement. The findings also highlight a misalignment between resettlement-focused school policy and the reality of protracted transit. Many children were born in Malaysia and expressed a desire to use their L1 alongside an interest in learning local languages, particularly Malay. The paper argues for a shift toward flexible multilingual approaches. By allowing children to leverage their L1, ALCs can support academic engagement and L1 maintenance without requiring additional resources, ultimately fostering harmonious bilingualism and enhancing well-being.

Keywords: Alternative Learning Centres, Chin Refugee Children, Malaysia, Participatory Research, School Language Policy, Well-Being

1. Introduction

Thirteen-year-old John (pseudonym) fled Myanmar in search of asylum in Malaysia. Living with his extended family in a small apartment in suburban Kuala Lumpur, he began attending a community-based school for displaced children. Placed in a Year 5 classroom, he struggled to understand lessons taught in English, including science and mathematics, despite receiving pull-out English support for three months. Unable to follow classroom instruction, John copied his classmates' work or the teacher's writing on the board without understanding. At times, he drew pictures in his workbook instead of completing assigned tasks. His teachers could not speak his language, so they had trouble communicating with him. School language policy limited peer support, as students were required to speak English in class, which John hardly understood. As a result, he remained quiet and withdrawn, rarely engaging with peers and making minimal academic progress throughout the school year. John's experience illustrates how school language policy can become a barrier to learning for newly arrived refugee and asylum-seeking children with limited English proficiency. Their silent struggles with language and learning receive little scholarly attention and their voices are seldom heard. This paper employs participatory methods to foreground the school experiences of children like John. It aims to examine school language policy and explore how it shapes refugee and asylum-seeking children's class participation and language-related well-being.

2. Refugee Education in Malaysia

2.1 Refugee Education in Transit Countries

Nearly three quarters of the world's forcibly displaced population are hosted in neighbouring low- and middle-income countries as of the end of 2024 (UNHCR, 2025a). These transit countries often become de facto permanent homes as resettlement programs in Western countries become increasingly restricted, such as in the United States (Presidential Determination No. 2025-13, 2025). Children under 18 account for approximately 42% of the global displaced population, making refugee education a critical issue for both policy and research (UNHCR, 2023). Although schooling can provide a sense of normalcy and a pathway to a more secure future, nearly half of refugee and asylum-seeking children lack access to education. Those who do gain access often spend their entire schooling in exile, unable to return home or resettle elsewhere. While the UNHCR advocates for the integration of displaced children into national schools to improve access, retention, quality, and sustainability, such opportunities remain limited in countries with non-inclusion policies. Refugee-only schools

remain the primary option for displaced children in nations such as Malaysia, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Sudan (Dryden-Petersen et al., 2019).

2.2 Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children's Access to Education in Malaysia

Malaysia is an illustrative example of a transit country where access to education remains highly constrained for refugee and asylum-seeking children. As of October 2025, it hosts 211,360 UNHCR-registered refugees and asylum-seekers, nearly one-third of whom (64,801; 30.7%) are under 18 (UNHCR, 2025b). Most originate from Myanmar (189,760; 89.8%), with the Rohingya (124,123; 58.7%) and the Chin (32,800; 15.5%) forming the largest ethnic groups. Malaysia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2015) and treats refugees and asylum-seekers the same as undocumented migrants under the Immigration Act 1959/63. Consequently, they lack guaranteed access to education, employment, or healthcare and face the risk of detention and deportation (Loganathan et al., 2022). Although Malaysia has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), its reservations to Article 28(1)(a) effectively restrict displaced and other non-citizen children from accessing public education (Loganathan et al., 2022). As a result, they must rely primarily on informal education.

2.3 Learning in Alternative Learning Centres

Alternative Learning Centres (ALCs) provide an educational pathway for displaced children in Malaysia. There are 133 UNHCR-affiliated ALCs in Peninsular Malaysia (UNHCR, 2025c). While not all ALCs are affiliated with UNHCR, those that are must meet minimum standards, including maintaining a pupil–teacher ratio of 30:1 or lower, submitting annual data and attendance records and providing a defined curriculum and safe facilities (UNHCR, 2025d). Refugee education in Malaysia is largely aimed at preparing young people for resettlement (Dryden-Petersen et al., 2019). English is the medium of instruction in many ALCs (Loganathan et al., 2023), while the teaching of Malay, the national language, is often seen as less relevant to their future prospects. Schools may offer international curricula, such as the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), aligning with children's anticipated resettlement trajectories (Abu Bakar & Subramaniam, 2025; Loganathan et al., 2022).

Despite these aims, ALCs operate under significant structural constraints. Many are under-resourced, lacking facilities commonly found in public schools, such as proper classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and sports fields (Letchamanan, 2013). They are often housed in converted flats or houses, where limited space results in overcrowded classrooms

with students of varying abilities learning together (Letchamanan, 2013; O'Neal et al., 2018). High noise levels hinder concentration and complicate classroom management (Abu Bakar & Subramaniam, 2025; Letchamanan, 2013; Zainal et al., 2025). Such environments negatively affect children's well-being, contributing to internalizing behaviours like apathy and lack of motivation, and externalizing behaviours such as physical aggression, alongside difficulty paying attention (O'Neal et al., 2018). Overaged learners are common, often due to disrupted educational trajectories or limited English proficiency, which impedes learning progression (Cowling & Andersen, 2021; Zainal et al., 2025).

ALCs also face issues with teacher recruitment and retention, which are further exacerbated by challenging working conditions. Teachers are typically refugees themselves and may have little or no formal training. Despite limited compensation, they assist students and their families with health, legal and financial issues (Mendenhall & Henderson, 2024). High workload and emotional demands contribute to low teacher retention, while limited funding, safety risks, and difficulty securing adequate premises and basic amenities place ALCs at a constant risk of closure (Cowling et al., 2025). Despite these constraints, children can benefit from an ALC education through supportive relationships with teachers and peers, parental involvement, and their own resilience (Cowling et al., 2025). While structural challenges facing ALCs are well documented, the impact of ALC language policies on children remains underexplored, representing a significant gap in the current literature and a critical area for further investigation.

3. Language Learning and Well-Being of Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children

3.1 Starting School in a New Language

Starting school is a major milestone. When it involves acquiring a second language (L2), the transition can be daunting as children struggle to communicate (De Houwer, 2025). They often experience a silent period during which they use non-verbal communication such as gestures and facial expressions to express themselves (Kan et al., 2025). They may also attempt to use their first language (L1) with teachers or peers but often abandon these efforts when they realize it is not understood (Saville-Troike, 1987). Difficulties in communication can cause emotional and behavioral challenges that manifest as internalizing and externalizing behaviours (Kan et al., 2025). Limited L2 proficiency hinders children's ability to form peer relationships and increases their vulnerability to bullying (von Grünigen et al., 2012). Seven-year-old Takuya,

described in Nakamura (2024), struggled in an English-medium school due to his limited English proficiency. He often hid under his desk and occasionally exhibited aggressive behaviour toward his teachers and peers. At this stage, he was experiencing conflictive bilingualism, in which the acquisition of two or more languages negatively impacted his well-being (De Houwer, 2020). Only as his English improved did he establish friendships and achieve better grades, transitioning to harmonious bilingualism, where language learning enhanced his well-being.

Language-related challenges are magnified for displaced children, whose precarious life trajectories precipitate well-being difficulties that impact their L2 acquisition (Lin et al., 2025; Paradis et al., 2022). Children entering school may speak only their L1 while their teachers use only English, creating a language mismatch that results in an intimidating learning environment. As the Threshold Hypothesis posits, children are unlikely to thrive without sufficient support in the language of instruction (Cummins, 2000). At very low levels of proficiency, they are at risk of falling progressively further behind peers in literacy development and overall academic performance. Research in Kenya shows that language barriers lead to poor literacy outcomes and low school persistence among refugee children (Piper et al., 2020). Likewise, newly arrived children in Malaysian ALCs are often overaged learners, studying below grade level due to difficulties grasping academic content (Cowling & Andersen, 2021).

3.2 The Impact of Monolingual School Language Policy

Language policies implemented in refugee schools may exacerbate children's language-related challenges. A monolingual school policy that restricts L1 use further compounds L2 learning difficulties. Children may face punitive measures for not speaking the designated school language, which is typically English. For instance, South Sudanese refugee children in Uganda have reportedly been caned for speaking languages other than English (Reddick & Chopra, 2021). Local Ugandan children also experienced various forms of punishment, such as being slapped, forced to clean latrines, or required to write apology letters to their principal for violating the English-only rule (Milligan et al., 2024). Such practices instil a fear of speaking and epistemically exclude children who cannot understand or communicate in English, negatively affecting their well-being. Teachers at Malaysian ALCs may insist on an English-only policy, based on the belief that this best prepares students for resettlement (Cowling & Andersen, 2021). However, this overlooks research showing that L1 and L2 literacy skills are

interdependent (Cummins, 2000). Using the L1 as a scaffold supports the development of a common underlying academic proficiency, thereby enhancing learning.

Monolingual school policies that strictly enforce the L2 also hinder L1 development, often leading children to view their L1 as an impediment rather than an asset (Van Gorp & Verheyen, 2024). Such policies conflict with Article 9 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms the rights of children to preserve their language and culture (United Nations, 1989). For refugee and asylum-seeking children, the L1 provides a vital connection to their homeland and helps them navigate the trauma of displacement (Reddick & Chopra, 2021). Non-refugee research shows that L1 use in school promotes well-being, helping children feel happier, calmer, and more in control (Van Gorp & Verheyen, 2024). Conversely, restrictive policies can reinforce negative attitudes toward the L1, accelerating language loss. Integrating the L1 as a supportive tool in the classroom thus stands to enhance the well-being of displaced children while facilitating future repatriation.

3.3 Translanguaging and Linguistically Inclusive Pedagogies

Linguistically inclusive school policies and pedagogies are pivotal to promoting both social justice and children's well-being in educational settings. Translanguaging provides a framework that recognizes children's full linguistic repertoires and the dynamic ways they use language to think, communicate, and learn (García & Wei, 2014). Implementing such pedagogy can effectively counter dominant monolingual approaches and positively influence teachers and students (Menken & Sánchez, 2019). Even in predominantly monolingual classrooms, allowing children to use their preferred languages supports a range of socio-cognitive functions, including content learning and classroom management (Jordens et al., 2020). Specifically, functional multilingual learning develops academic concepts through multiple linguistic pathways, reinforcing both L1 and L2 skills (Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014). For resettled refugees, Cox (2023) underscores that a collaborative, multilingual approach to language learning is not only beneficial but ethically essential. This ethical imperative should also extend to those in transit countries, ensuring they access linguistically responsive and inclusive education.

4. The Present Study

Research on refugee education has largely focused on learners in resettlement countries, despite transit countries hosting the majority of the world's displaced population. Within the limited

body of research in Malaysia, existing studies often relied on desk reviews and interviews with ALC directors, principals, and teachers, with little direct engagement with the children themselves (see Abu Bakar & Subramaniam, 2025, for a review). Specifically, children under age 12 remain significantly underexplored within this limited body of literature. Moreover, while language is a documented barrier to learning (Cowling & Andersen, 2021), it remains under-researched; a notable exception is Zainal et al. (2025), who explored refugee youths' collaborative English writing practices. The present study addresses these gaps in the research by examining refugee children's perspectives on school language policy, defined as the set of norms governing the medium of instruction and the verbal interactions occurring within the classroom and broader school environment.

Adopting a well-being lens is critical as displaced children in transit contexts remain a highly vulnerable group. Participatory methods are therefore used to amplify refugee children's voices and address power imbalances, aligning with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which establishes the right of children to express their views freely in all matters affecting them (United Nations, 1989). The use of participatory methods such as writing, drawing, and acting provides an ethically sensitive framework that minimizes potential distress to vulnerable children (Roberts, 2017). By offering alternatives to verbal language, these methods allow refugee and asylum-seeking children to share their experiences at their own pace and comfort, safely capturing their diverse perspectives while fostering agency (Lee, 2023). This study addresses two research questions:

- (i) What language policy is enacted at the ALC?
- (ii) How do refugee children perceive this language policy, and in what ways does it shape their classroom participation and well-being?

5. Methodology

5.1 School and Participants

As part of a larger project on the language learning of refugee children in Malaysia, this research is an ethnographically informed qualitative study conducted at an ALC in suburban Kuala Lumpur. Established by the Chin community two decades ago, the school serves 186 students. The majority of the students are ethnic Chin from Hakha, the capital of Chin State in western Myanmar, and its surrounding areas. The school operates ten classes from preschool to Year 7, with a curriculum in mathematics, science, and English delivered by nine full-time teachers and volunteers. As a community-based school, Chin language is also taught as a core

subject, offered in two classes per week (four hours total). The school also offers non-core subjects such as Computer and Art.

Ten Chin students (aged 11 to 16, with a mean age of 12.9; three boys and seven girls) from the Year 5 class participated in the study. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to protect their identities. While some are already adolescents, they are collectively referred to as 'children' for simplicity. Older children were selected because participatory techniques are more effective and require less scaffolding with this age group (Crivello et al., 2009). Six participants were born in Malaysia. One arrived in early childhood, while three arrived as adolescents within the past two years. All hold UNHCR identity cards confirming their refugee status, including those born locally, who obtained refugee status through their parents (UNHCR, n.d.). The children speak Chin as their L1 and began learning English as their L2 between the ages of 3 and 8.

5.2 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

This research builds on my research experience with bilingual children and my volunteer experience at a refugee kindergarten. As a Malaysian mother, educator, and researcher, I am committed to advancing social justice for refugee children through research that directly benefits them. A two-week observation period before the commencement of research allowed me to become familiar with the children and gauge their level of English proficiency. During the participatory research period, I maintained a reflexive stance by observing the children's engagement with each activity (see Table 1) and adapting the participatory method for the next. My sustained engagement as a volunteer teacher over a twelve-month period fostered deep rapport and trust with teachers and students, allowing for close observation of how school language policy translates into everyday practices. It also enabled me to confirm and clarify findings with the children following the activities, ensuring that the data remained grounded in their perspectives.

5.3 Data Generation

The study received approval from the researcher's Institutional Review Board (Approval No. 2024-44). Parents received an English letter outlining the study, participants' rights, and confidentiality, followed by an explanation in Chin from the principal before providing written consent. The study was also introduced to the children at the start of the research using simple, age-appropriate language. They participated in a series of workshops titled *My World of Languages* in May and June 2025, which combined learning about bilingualism with data

generation. Each two-hour session introduced relevant concepts (e.g., linguistic repertoire) to support children in reflecting on their language experiences. Ten participatory activities were implemented in English across the workshops; however, only the five relevant to the present study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participatory Activities

Activity	Details
A. The Story of My Languages	Children’s language histories were documented using a structured table for up to four languages (A–D). For each, children reported their age of onset of exposure, learning duration, acquisition contexts (e.g., home, school, community), and key interlocutors (e.g., parents, teachers, peers). This format enabled a systematic understanding of the children’s language acquisition trajectories.
B. What My Languages Mean to Me	Children evaluated their languages across dimensions of preference, perceived naturalness, and perceived importance. Data was generated using a graphic organizer (T-chart) with visual cues (emojis) to facilitate comprehension and engagement across proficiency levels. For example, the children completed the prompt, ‘[Language] is most important to me because [Reason],’ providing insights into their language attitudes and affective orientations.
C. How Good Am I at My Languages?	Children’s self-perceived language proficiency was elicited through two structured rating tasks: (1) oral proficiency (speaking and understanding) and (2) literacy (reading and writing). Participants evaluated their abilities across up to four languages (A–D) using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “very good” to “not at all.” To ensure comprehension across proficiency levels, each point included functional descriptors and visual scaffolding (emojis). Children were also invited to provide reasons for their ratings. This activity captured their self-perceived proficiency across different skill areas.
D. A Happy Student/ A Not So Happy Student	Adapted from Crivello et al. (2009), this activity was originally designed to explore well-being among marginalized and vulnerable children in India. The activity is appropriate for refugee children, as it provides a safe, structured way to articulate their perspectives. Children were asked to imagine a group of 100 students and distinguish between those who appeared “happy” versus “not so happy.” Using a graphic organizer, they illustrated and described these groups and provided reasons for their perceived well-being. This task offers insight into the factors children associate with a positive or negative school experience.
E. What I Like and Don’t Like About My School	This original activity, conducted at the end of the six-week workshop series, was informed by the children’s responses to Activity D. It was designed to capture their perceptions of school policies and their lived school experiences. Participants completed a school reflection graphic organizer, documenting their likes, dislikes, and suggestions for improvement. To encourage candid and honest responses, the activity was made entirely anonymous.

Before each activity, the researcher explained its objective and reminded the children to participate only to the extent they felt comfortable. Oral consent was provided at the beginning of each session, and written consent was given at the end by checking a box. All activities used simple, child-friendly English tailored to the children’s language abilities. Follow-up questions were asked to clarify responses after the workshops. To supplement the child-generated data,

semi-structured English interviews were conducted with the principal and three full-time teachers (two Malaysians and one ethnic Chin). These audio-recorded sessions lasted 40–50 minutes and explored three key areas: the teachers' roles, the school's language policies, and the specific challenges faced by both teachers and students.

5.4 Data Analysis

The children's responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data familiarization involved manual transcription, repeated reading, and analytic note-taking, after which initial codes were assigned to individual responses. Codes were then collated into potential themes and iteratively reviewed and refined, allowing patterns and relationships to emerge through repeated engagement with the data. Themes were then reviewed for coherence with the codes and the broader dataset, and illustrative examples were selected to highlight key aspects of each theme. Two main themes emerged for this paper: (1) English proficiency influences children's well-being and classroom participation, and (2) tension between English-only policies and children's preference for flexible multilingual practices. These themes, along with several others, are discussed in the results section below.

6. Results

6.1 English-Only School Policy with Limited Flexibility

Drawing on teacher interviews, this section examines the ALC's language policy and how it was enacted in everyday school practices. When asked about the school's educational goals, the principal stated:

“Our motto is to make the refugee kid speak and write English so that when they go to a different country, they can continue their learning based on their age.”

The school placed a strong emphasis on preparing students for resettlement, a pattern also noted in previous research (Cowling & Andersen, 2021; Dryden-Petersen et al., 2019). Chin refugees and asylum seekers often view their stay in Malaysia as temporary, albeit frequently prolonged (Hoffstaedter, 2014). Consequently, the school prioritized the learning of English, as students were likely to resettle in English-speaking countries. Little attention was given to Malay, Malaysia's official language. While the principal acknowledged the practical value of Malay,

he admitted that the school lacked the resources to teach it. However, the school was one of the few ALCs that offers a structured and progressive Chin language curriculum. Children took Chin lessons twice a week, enabling them to continue developing their L1 and deepen their understanding of their homeland. Nevertheless, the emphasis on resettlement contributed to the adoption of an English-only policy for all subjects except Chin. As the principal explained:

“We heard a lot from the parents that their kids do not speak English, so we set these rules. If you are Year 1 above, you have to speak English except for the Chin period. So, if students speak Chin during the English class, they have to pay 50 cents.”

Thus, the ALC’s English-only policy included punitive measures, where students were fined for not speaking English. Exceptions applied to preschoolers and recently arrived students, and teachers could use other languages when the content was challenging. While the policy was generally accepted, its implementation varied slightly depending on the teacher and grade. For instance, the English teacher emphasized strict enforcement:

“There should be absolutely no language except English. Because I think when I was in (Malaysian) school, we could only speak English or Malay. We couldn't speak Tamil or Chinese in school, right? Unless you're outside. But in class, you will get penalized for it, unless the teacher doesn't notice.”

Her response reflected a strong English-only orientation, framing punitive enforcement as both necessary and legitimate based on her personal experience of Malaysian public education. This comparison with Malaysian schools suggests an underlying assumption that such a policy should be followed in ALCs, thereby reinforcing the perceived validity of the English-only policy. In contrast, the science teacher remarked:

“If the (non-Chin) volunteers are teaching them, it has to be in English. Chin teachers use Chin sometimes. So, it's not a hard-and-fast rule. What we want to insist is that, during their free time, when the students are talking to each other, they should speak in English to make themselves familiar with the language.”

Her comments revealed a more flexible, context-sensitive approach, allowing for strategic use

of Chin depending on the teacher and instructional context. While still oriented toward promoting English use, she interpreted the policy as adaptable rather than absolute, placing particular emphasis on encouraging English use between children to build fluency. Thus, although the school operated under a single language policy, its enactment varied slightly in practice, shaped by teachers' differing ideological orientations and interpretations.

Despite these variations, the policy itself is grounded in a shared assumption that enforcing English use enhances proficiency. Cowling and Andersen (2021) similarly observed this, suggesting that such beliefs may be widespread in ALCs. However, research provides limited support for this assumption (Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014). On the contrary, a reliance on coercive measures rather than pedagogical support can have unintended consequences. As Milligan et al. (2024) note, such policies can discourage children from speaking, potentially leading to forms of epistemic exclusion. From a rights-based perspective, these language restrictions also raise concerns regarding children's well-being, which are explored in the following sections.

6.2 Learning English with Anxiety

The children, including those born in Malaysia, considered themselves highly proficient in Chin. All rated their L1 speaking and listening as "very good," while eight rated their reading and writing in Chin as "very good" and the remaining two as "good." In contrast, they considered their English proficiency to be lower than their Chin. Seven children rated their English speaking and listening as "good" and two as "very good," while eight rated their English reading and writing as "good" and one as "very good." A recently arrived student rated all skills as "okay." Even fluent children found English challenging, often experiencing anxiety and frustration. When asked how he felt while learning English, MIE stated:

"I feel mad because I always mix up my grammar".

ENA commented:

"I feel it is hard and feel bad about myself with my grammar."

BEK explained:

"I feel uneasy. It is kinda hard but I manage to learn it."

Similarly, LIL remarked:

“Very happy sometimes, but sometimes not happy.”

Recently arrived SET shared:

“I feel like it’s hard for me.”

While challenges such as learning grammar are typical in L2 acquisition, they were arguably more profound for refugee children given their socioemotional vulnerabilities. Learning English was closely intertwined with feelings of frustration, self-doubt, and unease. This stressful process was further exacerbated by English-only policies that restrict access to familiar linguistic resources and potentially hinder the effective understanding of academic concepts.

6.3 English Proficiency Affecting Class Participation

Analysis of child-generated worksheet data indicated the dominant use of English in classroom interactions. Fluent speakers experienced little difficulty interacting with their peers in English. ENA explained:

“All my friends know English, so I am more comfortable using English.”

Similarly, LIV noted:

“I talk to my friend in English because we both can’t speak Chin in class.”

English was also seen as necessary for learning, e.g., when seeking help from teachers. Children spoke Chin only to their teacher in one-to-one settings or outside the classroom. BOR explained:

“I asked some questions (to the teacher) in English. Sometimes, like Sports Day, we talk in Chin.”

Less fluent children struggled to participate. SET shared:

“I don't know what they say. I only know a little bit.”

Similarly, APY noted:

“I can't speak very well.”

These findings suggest that English functioned not only as the dominant medium of peer interaction, but also as the primary means of participating in classroom learning. While more proficient students could engage with relative ease, less fluent children, particularly recent arrivals, faced barriers to both peer interaction and instructional engagement. As a result, an English-only policy contributed to inequality in class participation, creating divisions between children with shared refugee backgrounds.

6.4 Language as a Primary Factor Affecting Well-Being

By identifying “happy” and “not-so-happy” students within a hypothetical group of 100 peers (Activity D in Table 1), the children articulated a significant link between language, peer interaction, and well-being. Eight out of ten described a happy student as smart and popular. For example, ENA explained:

“A happy student has many friends, jokes a lot, gets good grades, and loves to learn.”

In contrast, eight out of ten students portrayed a “not-so-happy” student as silent and withdrawn due to language-related difficulties. For example, MIE reflected:

“A not- so-happy student never talks, has bad grades, doesn't have any friend, never tries to make friends, bad at English, speaks other language.”

The children noted that fluent English speakers engaged confidently with peers and teachers, while those with limited proficiency struggled academically and socially, often leading to isolation. Their observations were likely influenced by their classmate John, who was introduced at the beginning of this paper. John spoke Burmese but neither English nor

Chin, making it difficult for him to communicate with others and understand lessons. These responses illustrate how English proficiency shapes social positioning and wellbeing. John's situation serves as a concrete example through which children linked limited linguistic ability with social isolation and academic difficulty. In this way, children not only recognized but also reproduced a hierarchy associating high English proficiency with competence, belonging, and positive emotions, while marginalizing those with limited skills. Such perceptions suggest that language-related inequalities were not only experienced but internalized, shaping children's sense of self and overall wellbeing.

6.5 Children's Perspectives on Language Policy and Practices

Collected via anonymous worksheets, children's responses to the question "What do you dislike about school?" revealed their candid views on the school's language policy. Many expressed frustration with strict teachers and rules, particularly those regulating language use. Although Chin was permitted during Chin class, children felt they could use it only with the teacher and still spoke English with classmates, having internalized the English-only policy from taking other subjects. Writing anonymously, six out of ten children described punitive measures, as exemplified by:

"We have to pay if we accidentally speak our own language. In Chin class, we can't speak Chin except to the teacher."

"The teachers are strict, and the school has many rules to follow. We also can't speak our language. We have to pay 50 cents every time we speak Chin."

These responses demonstrate that restrictive language policies generated anxiety, stress, and dissatisfaction, negatively affecting children's well-being. Even when teachers did not strictly enforce the policy, the mere prospect of being fined caused considerable stress. For refugee families facing economic hardship, a 50-cent fine (approximately \$0.12 USD) represents a substantial financial burden, as even such small sums are diverted from daily essentials.

When asked "What would make school better?", three children expressed interest in learning Malay and other languages, reflecting curiosity about the linguistic diversity around them. Seven children requested a more flexible approach to language use, calling for "kind

teachers, less punishment, fewer rules” and an end to language-related penalties. As one child wrote:

“When it is Chin class, I hope we can speak in Chin to our friends.”

A follow-up question was asked after this participatory activity, inviting children to reflect on whether the school’s English-only policy supported their English development. Despite the children’s objection to the policy, some were convinced that it was beneficial for their spoken English. TEN remarked:

“I think I could speak English well because if we speak in Chin, we must pay 50 cents, so I don’t want that to happen. That’s why I think I could speak English well.”

TEN’s strict adherence to the English-only policy represents a clear instance of negative reinforcement; his increased proficiency was not driven by an internal desire to speak the language, but by a strategic effort to avoid paying a fine. While the policy successfully compelled language production, it did so by fostering a state of constant vigilance, where “speaking well” functioned as a defensive mechanism against financial loss rather than a milestone of meaningful linguistic development.

Other children indicated that the English-only rule did not contribute significantly to their English development. ENA commented:

“I don’t think I will speak better English because of the school rules. I still use English for important reasons such as talking to people who only understand English, and also in English class. I can still speak English well without these rules. It would be okay if they make this rule in English class only.”

Like several other participants, ENA attributed his English learning to factors independent of the school’s English-only policy, including social media, classroom instruction, and communicative necessity with non-Chin teachers. Rather than viewing the use of Chin in other subjects as a barrier to English proficiency, he recognized that language use is shaped by communicative need and context and therefore suggested restricting the English-only policy to English lessons.

Taken together, these contrasting perspectives reveal a tension between the school’s

language policy and the children's desire for more flexible language use. While punitive enforcement may increase observable English use, it does not necessarily align with children's perceptions of effective language acquisition, which they associate with meaningful exposure, such as engaging with English content online. Importantly, children's responses indicate a continued valuing of their L1 and a preference for a supportive, non-punitive learning environment in which it can be meaningfully integrated. Although they may have limited power to influence school policy, their perspectives point to the need for more flexible language practices that support both linguistic development and well-being.

7. Discussion

The goal of preparing refugee children with English skills for resettlement is increasingly called into question, given protracted stays in transit countries and limited resettlement quotas. That seven of the ten children in this study are Malaysian-born indicates that many young refugees and asylum-seekers will remain in the country well into adulthood. This reality underscores the need to rethink ALC language policies, classroom practices, and curricula to balance resettlement preparation with equipping children for a long-term future in Malaysia. Although tightening resettlement restrictions provides a rationale for change, the children's responses reveal a desire for a curriculum that reflects the multilingual Malaysian environment. Knowledge of Malay would enable them to communicate locally, navigate daily life, and foster a sense of belonging, while optional Burmese classes could support broader communication with other Myanmar nationals. Therefore, the children would benefit from gaining basic communicative proficiency in Malay, Burmese, or both. Although ALCs often lack the resources to expand their curricula, these languages could be introduced through volunteer-led sessions or as extracurricular activities.

More importantly, the emphasis on teaching English for resettlement has contributed to monolingual policies with unintended consequences. While teachers believed that enforcing exclusive English use improves fluency, imposing fines for non-English peer interactions increased the children's stress. In practice, this transformed a pedagogical strategy into a regulatory mechanism that constrained the children's participation. They became highly accustomed to the English-only policy, refraining from using Chin even when it was permitted, such as during Chin class. This indicates that the policy was not only enforced externally but also internalized by the children, shaping language choices even when restrictions were relaxed.

Newly arrived learners particularly struggled to comply with these language restrictions. The children's depiction of a "not-so-happy" student illustrates how limited English proficiency can prevent understanding, participation, and peer engagement. Their accounts align with Milligan et al. (2024), who found that punitive English-only policies exclude children from meaningful education. Consequently, such students often remain silent, increasing their risk of disengagement and dropout. Those who continue attending school may be required to repeat a grade, further delaying their educational trajectories. Indeed, John, introduced at the beginning of this paper and likely the classmate the children depicted as "not-so-happy," left the ALC after one year, having benefited little from instruction. Like Takuya in Nakamura (2024), he experienced conflictive bilingualism, whereby struggling with English compromised his well-being.

John's case illustrates how language barriers can translate into social exclusion and school withdrawal. Strict language policies may therefore exacerbate, rather than resolve, the issues of overage learners and low school persistence in ALCs. This dynamic also reinforces classroom stratification, benefiting fluent speakers while marginalizing those with emerging proficiency. Although not directly observed during the research, such entrenched proficiency-based hierarchies could potentially expose children like John to bullying.

These patterns extend beyond participation to undermine well-being, as exclusion from classroom interaction can lead to feelings of confusion, frustration, and disengagement. In this sense, conflictive and harmonious bilingualism are not merely individual experiences but outcomes of school language policies that produce divergent well-being trajectories. Over time, these experiences may undermine cognitive and socioemotional development, eroding children's sense of competence and belonging. Moreover, an English-only policy can compromise L1 maintenance; with limited usage opportunities, children may fail to develop the proficiency required for potential repatriation (Cowling & Andersen, 2021; Reddick & Chopra, 2021). While the school's literacy-focused Chin program partially mitigates these concerns, language shift remains a risk as children gradually become more accustomed to speaking English with siblings and peers.

These findings point to the need for alternative approaches to building English fluency beyond an English-only policy. English proficiency may be more effectively developed through socially embedded interaction than through prohibition. As the science teacher observed, the presence of fluent peers encouraged less fluent children to use English more actively, showing how fluency develops through meaningful engagement. To align with children's preferences, ALCs could adopt a flexible multilingual approach that incorporates

both the L1 and L2. For instance, collaborative multilingual learning allows children to utilize their full linguistic repertoire in pairs or groups, supporting their understanding and problem-solving in subjects such as science (Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014). This pedagogical strategy facilitates learning without requiring curriculum changes or teacher fluency in Chin, making it a viable and sustainable alternative for under-resourced ALCs. Given the children's pride in their L1 and their desire to utilize it, incorporating the language into learning can also foster positive attitudes toward multilingualism while enhancing engagement and overall well-being.

Although many ALC teachers lack formal training in linguistically and culturally responsive teaching, their Chin-English bilingualism allows them to facilitate collaborative multilingual learning. Even non-Chin-speaking volunteer teachers can adapt their classroom teaching; for example, during my time as a volunteer, I encouraged children to share their linguistic and cultural knowledge by creating cards that showcased Chin idioms with explanations in English. My efforts to include Chin in English lessons and learn the language prompted one child to write on her worksheet that I supported her learning of Chin. This example illustrates how small, intentional multilingual interactions can support inclusive learning and well-being. While these findings are limited to one ALC, they offer valuable insights given the prevalence of monolingual policies in refugee education. Flexible multilingual approaches that draw on both L1 and L2 can support learning and well-being, while remaining practical in under-resourced ALCs. Leveraging the L1 to support L2 also helps children to maintain their linguistic and cultural connections as they prepare for future transitions.

8. Conclusion

Like many other ALCs in Malaysia, the ALC in this study adopted an English-only policy, reflecting a strong emphasis on English for resettlement. However, such policies may be misaligned with the realities of protracted transit, where future resettlement is uncertain. By restricting L1 use and penalizing non-compliance, the school's policy contributed to conflictive bilingualism that affected classroom participation and well-being. These restrictions increased stress, reduced peer engagement, and hindered participation, particularly among children with limited English proficiency. The children in this study perceived such policies as restrictive, expressing a desire to use their L1 without fear of punishment. These findings suggest that rigid English-only approaches can be counterproductive, pointing to the potential value of flexible multilingual approaches in facilitating both learning and well-being. ALC educators should

consider more inclusive, supportive practices that foster harmonious bilingualism and positive educational outcomes. Moving forward, research should continue to examine how language policies, pedagogical practices, and opportunities for participation shape refugee children's learning, well-being, and sense of belonging in informal education settings in Malaysia and other Global South transit countries.

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