Navigating Language Transition in Education: Lived Experiences of Tamil-Medium Students in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study explores the lived experiences of Tamil-medium primary school graduates in Malaysia as they transition to Bahasa Melayu (BM)-medium secondary schools, focusing on linguistic, academic and emotional adjustment. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study collected data through small-group interviews with 20 Form One students and semi-structured interviews with 20 teachers from national secondary and Tamil primary schools. Findings show that students' adjustment to the new medium of instruction (MOI) varied with their prior BM exposure and the linguistic and relational support available during the transition. Although all students progressed directly to Form One, some continued to experience difficulties with academic vocabulary, subject learning and assessment demands in BM. Family preparation, peer support, teacher scaffolding and multilingual classroom practices facilitated adjustment, though the availability and continuity of such support varied across contexts. The study conceptualises the MOI shift as an uneven ecological transition, demonstrating that adjustment to a new instructional language is shaped not by linguistic proficiency alone, but by the interaction of relational, educational, institutional and broader structural conditions. The findings highlight the importance of recognising MOI adjustment as a continuing process beyond formal entry into secondary schooling.

Keywords: Medium of Instruction, Educational Transition, Tamil-medium Education, Ecological Systems Theory, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Introduction

Educational transition is widely recognised as a complex process involving academic, social and emotional adjustment as learners move between stages of schooling (Harris & Nowland, 2020; Jindal-Snape et al., 2019). When this transition also involves a change in the medium of instruction (MOI), learners must adapt not only to new academic expectations but also to unfamiliar linguistic and cultural environments (Gill, 2013; Pfenninger & Lendl, 2017; Poon & Lau, 2016). These challenges are particularly significant in multilingual societies such as Malaysia, where language and schooling are closely tied to identity and educational opportunity.

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multilingual nation comprising Malay, Chinese and Indian communities, alongside diverse indigenous communities. This diversity is reflected in the country's education system, where language has historically been closely connected to schooling and community identity. *Bahasa Melayu* (BM) is the national language and the principal MOI within the national education system, while provisions for mother-tongue education allow Mandarin and Tamil to be used as media of instruction in national-type primary schools (Karunanithi & Sivanadhan,

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2025). Vernacular schooling has consequently served not only an educational function but also an important role in maintaining the linguistic and cultural identities of minority communities (Mukherjee & David, 2011).

At the primary level, students may attend Sekolah Kebangsaan (National Schools; SK), where BM is the MOI, or Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina (Chinese National-Type Schools; SJKC) and Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil (Tamil National-Type Schools; SJKT), where Mandarin and Tamil are used as the primary MOI, respectively. However, national secondary schools use BM as the primary MOI, requiring students progressing from national-type primary schools to undergo an MOI transition. For Tamil-medium students, this transition is particularly significant because no equivalent Tamil-medium secondary pathway exists within the national school system (Bedi, 2024; Mukherjee & David, 2011). The transition from Tamil to BM therefore represents a significant linguistic and educational adjustment.

To support this transition, the Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced Kelas Peralihan (Remove Class), a preparatory programme designed to strengthen BM proficiency before entry into secondary school. However, policy changes and the removal of the Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) have led to an increasing number of students bypassing this transitional support (MOE, 2013; Punniaseelan & Subramaniam, 2022). As a result, many students enter BM-medium secondary classrooms with uneven linguistic preparation.

Existing Malaysian MOI research has largely focused on language policy, proficiency and academic outcomes, particularly in relation to reforms such as the Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English (Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris, PPSMI) policy (Ab Rashid et al., 2017; Mohandhas, 2015; Rahman & Singh, 2021). Limited attention has been paid to how vernacular school students experience the transition to BM-medium secondary education, especially Tamil-medium learners who bypass the Remove Class. Although studies of Chinese-medium learners and multilingual schooling have highlighted issues of identity, belonging and adjustment (Ho, 2018; Ho et al., 2018; Lee & Ting, 2016), the lived experiences of Tamil-medium students remain underexplored.

Responding to this gap, the present study explores how Tamil-medium primary school graduates experience the transition into BM-medium secondary education and how schools attempt to support this process. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST), the study contributes to broader discussions on equitable transition support, multilingual education and language-in-education policy in Malaysia. In the Malaysian education system, Primary 6 refers to the final year of primary schooling, while Form One refers to the first year of secondary schooling. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students from Tamil primary schools experience the shift in the medium of instruction when transitioning from Primary 6 to Form One?

RQ2: How do primary and secondary schools prepare students from Tamil primary schools for the shift in the medium of instruction?

Literature Review

Shift in Medium of Instruction and Its Challenges

Transitions involving a shift in the MOI are widely recognised as complex linguistic, cognitive and emotional processes. International research indicates that students navigating a new MOI without adequate scaffolding may experience difficulties in comprehension, classroom participation, confidence and adjustment (Brock-Utne, 2007; Chan & Walsh, 2024; Sibomana, 2022). In Tanzania, abrupt shifts from Kiswahili to English have been shown to produce persistent "language shock," particularly among learners with limited opportunities to use their home language or access peer

support (Roemer, 2024). In Rwanda, students and teachers rapidly transitioning to English as the MOI rely on vocabulary scaffolding and code-switching, which only partially mitigate learning difficulties (Ndabaga et al., 2023; Sibomana, 2022). Similar findings in Hong Kong show that students navigating English-medium lessons often minimise classroom interaction and rely on memorisation rather than meaningful engagement (Chan & Walsh, 2024). Across South and Southeast Asia, sudden MOI transitions have repeatedly been shown to widen achievement gaps for learners with limited exposure to the target language outside school (Jhingran, 2005).

Malaysia's multilingual context reflects similar dynamics. While students may complete primary schooling in national-type schools with Tamil or Mandarin as the MOI, most transition to BM-medium secondary education (Dumanig et al., 2012; Karunanithi & Sivanadhan, 2025). For Tamil-medium learners, progression to secondary school may therefore involve adjusting to both a new level of schooling and a different instructional language (Bedi, 2024; Punniaseelan & Subramaniam, 2022). Research suggests that although code-switching is widely used in Asian classrooms, it primarily addresses surface-level comprehension gaps and is less effective when teachers and students do not share the same home language (Afitska et al., 2013; Hamdan, 2023). Studies also indicate that Tamil-medium students may encounter challenges in developing and applying BM for academic learning after transitioning to a BM-medium environment (David & McLellan, 2014; Ramasamy, 2025).

Within the Malaysian education system, the Remove Class has historically functioned as a transitional mechanism intended to strengthen students' BM readiness before progression to Form One (Raman, 2022). Students who meet the stipulated BM requirement may, however, progress directly into Form One and bypass this transitional year. For these students, the move from Tamil-medium primary education to BM-medium secondary education occurs alongside the broader primary–secondary school transition. The significance of this direct progression therefore lies not in bypassing the Remove Class itself, but in the simultaneous linguistic, academic and social adjustments associated with entering secondary education through a different MOI.

These interconnected demands suggest that MOI transition cannot be understood solely in terms of individual language proficiency. An ecological perspective draws attention to how students experience the shift within their immediate classroom interactions and support (Ndabaga et al., 2023), connections between their prior and receiving educational contexts, institutional structures, and the broader language-in-education environment in which transitions between Tamil- and BM-medium schooling occur (Bedi, 2024). EST therefore provides a useful basis for examining how conditions across students' educational environments may interact in shaping their experiences of MOI transition.

Taken together, the literature establishes that a shift in MOI can introduce additional linguistic and academic demands during educational transition. However, the primary–secondary transition and the MOI transition are often examined as related but distinct educational processes. For Tamil-medium students who progress directly into BM-medium Form One, these transitions occur concurrently, creating a context in which adjustment to secondary schooling cannot be easily separated from adjustment to a new instructional language.

Medium of Instruction Policy in Malaysia

Malaysia's MOI policies have long been shaped by its multiethnic context and post-independence emphasis on national unity (Gill, 2013). The National Language Act 1967 established BM as the national language, a position reinforced by the Education Act 1996, which establishes BM as the principal MOI within the national education system (MOE, 1996). While national-type primary schools may use Tamil or Mandarin as the MOI, students continuing into national secondary schools encounter a shift to BM-medium learning upon entry to Form One. For Tamil-medium pupils, this shift is particularly significant because, unlike Chinese learners who have the option of continuing through Chinese Independent Secondary Schools, no equivalent Tamil-medium secondary pathway exists (Bedi, 2024; Raman, 2022). For Tamil-medium pupils entering national secondary schools,

the primary–secondary transition therefore coincides with a substantial change in the linguistic environment of formal learning.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013–2025 acknowledges disparities in language readiness, noting that national-type schools allocate fewer instructional hours to BM during early primary years (MOE, 2013). Although BM instructional time aligns with national schools by Year Six, research has identified continuing challenges in aspects of BM proficiency among Tamil-medium pupils (Muthusamy et al., 2024; Vasuthevan & Subramaniam, 2025). The 2019 UPSR, which was the final administration of the examination before its abolition was announced in 2021, showed Tamil school pupils performing below national averages in BM, with only 40.11% achieving satisfactory proficiency (Muthusamy et al., 2024). Earlier research similarly identified limited exposure to BM and language-related learning challenges as factors associated with pupils' educational experiences (Arumugam, 2008). Following the abolition of UPSR, BM readiness has increasingly been assessed through school-based mechanisms, including the Language Literacy Detection Test (*Ujian Pengesanan Literasi Bahasa Melayu, UPLBM)*, placing greater attention on how readiness for progression into BM-medium secondary education is determined (Leong, 2022).

Recent results from the Malaysian Certificate of Education (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*, SPM), the national examination taken at the end of secondary schooling, indicate the strongest national performance since 2013, with improved national average grades and 94% of candidates qualifying for certification (The Vibes, 2025). However, publicly reported SPM statistics remain aggregate and do not provide BM performance specifically for students transitioning from different primary-school MOIs, limiting what can be inferred about longer-term outcomes for Tamil-medium learners (The Vibes, 2025). Policy discussions have also introduced BM proficiency thresholds for Year Six pupils in Chinese and Tamil schools, reflecting continued policy attention to BM readiness before progression into secondary education (Leong, 2022).

Although the MEB 2013–2025 calls for targeted support for vernacular-to-BM transitions (MOE, 2013), questions remain regarding how linguistic readiness and transition support are addressed as students move between different instructional languages. Research on BM learning among Tamil-school pupils has identified continuing linguistic challenges that may be relevant to their preparation for BM-medium learning (Punniaseelan & Subramaniam, 2022). Policy analyses of Malaysia's multilingual education system also draw attention to tensions between national language objectives and the linguistic realities of learners educated through different primary-school MOIs (Renganathan & Kral, 2018). Through Bronfenbrenner's EST, language-in-education policies can be situated within the macrosystem, while their implementation may shape institutional arrangements and the immediate educational environments in which students experience MOI transition (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This perspective situates students' linguistic adjustment within the broader policy and institutional conditions surrounding their transition rather than treating it solely as an individual proficiency issue.

This policy context provides an important foundation for examining how Tamil-medium pupils experience the transition to BM-medium secondary education and how broader language-in-education structures intersect with their experiences of adjustment.

Supportive Strategies for Navigating Medium of Instruction Shift

Research across multilingual education systems has identified strategies to support learners adjusting to a new instructional language. When preparation for the MOI shift is limited, difficulties with comprehension and classroom participation may increase reliance on peers and other forms of informal support (Clegg & Simpson, 2016; Heugh et al., 2010). In Malaysia, BM proficiency remains important for educational progression (Hashim, 2009; Muthusamy et al., 2024; Nahar, 2020), while research on Tamil-school learners continues to identify challenges in developing the BM proficiency required for academic learning (Punniaseelan & Subramaniam, 2022).

Studies in multilingual contexts identify several strategies for supporting learners during MOI transitions. Integrating language and subject learning, particularly alongside sustained teacher development, can strengthen students' access to academic content (Dafouz & Gray, 2022; Poon & Lau, 2016). Other forms of scaffolding, including simplified materials, visual aids and accessible explanations, can support comprehension and participation when students are learning through a less familiar MOI (Gibbons, 2015; Milligan et al., 2016). Together, these approaches highlight the importance of making academic content linguistically accessible while students develop greater proficiency in the instructional language.

More recently, translanguaging has emerged as an approach that enables learners to draw strategically on their broader linguistic repertoires during learning (Tai & Wei, 2020; Wei, 2018). Rather than treating languages as entirely separate resources, translanguaging can support comprehension, participation and meaning-making. In Tamil-to-BM transitions, this could involve the strategic use of Tamil for clarification or expression while students progressively develop their capacity to learn through BM. However, the application of translanguaging within Malaysian educational contexts remains an emerging area of research (Rajendram, 2021; Too, 2023).

The effectiveness of these strategies also depends on the educational conditions in which they are implemented. Malaysian research points to continuing questions surrounding the linguistic preparation and support available to learners moving between different language environments (Punniaseelan & Subramaniam, 2022; Raman, 2022). Teacher capacity is particularly relevant because scaffolding, multilingual clarification and responsive language support depend partly on teachers' ability to recognise and respond to learners' linguistic needs. These considerations occur within Malaysia's broader multilingual education system, where language policy and educational structures shape patterns of language use and language shift (David & McLellan, 2014; Hashim, 2009). Support for MOI transition therefore involves not only particular classroom strategies, but also the institutional and pedagogical conditions that enable them to be used effectively. The interaction between individual adjustment and support within the receiving environment can further shape students' experiences of educational transition (Harris & Nowland, 2020; Jindal-Snape et al., 2019).

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that adjustment to a new MOI can be supported through linguistic scaffolding, multilingual classroom practices and responsive educational environments. However, the lived experiences of Tamil-medium pupils who progress directly into BM-medium Form One without the transitional Remove Class remain under-examined, particularly in relation to how they experience and navigate support during the simultaneous school-level and MOI transition.

Theoretical Framework: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's EST provides a useful framework for examining how Tamil-medium students experience the transition to BM-medium secondary schooling. EST enables MOI transition to be examined in relation to the multiple ecological contexts surrounding students' educational experiences.

EST conceptualises human development as occurring through interconnected ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). The microsystem refers to immediate environments such as classrooms, teachers and peer relationships. The mesosystem captures interactions between these environments, including home–school relationships. The exosystem includes institutional structures that indirectly influence learners, such as curriculum expectations and transitional support mechanisms. The macrosystem encompasses broader cultural, linguistic and educational policies shaping schooling experiences. The chronosystem considers change and development over time; however, it was not emphasised in the present study because participants' transition experiences were examined within a defined period rather than longitudinally.

In this study, EST is used as a complementary interpretive lens for considering students' experiences across these ecological contexts. It provides a framework for examining how experiences

associated with MOI transition may be situated within immediate learning environments, connections between educational and home contexts, institutional structures and the broader language-in-education environment. Rather than assuming in advance which ecological factors shape students' adjustment, the framework provides a means of interpreting the contexts within which their reported experiences occur.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how Tamil primary school pupils in Malaysia experienced the transition from Tamil-medium instruction to BM as the MOI in national secondary schools. IPA is underpinned by phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic commitments. Its phenomenological orientation enables attention to participants' lived experiences, while its hermeneutic orientation recognises the double interpretative process through which participants make sense of their experiences and researchers subsequently interpret that sense-making. Its idiographic commitment emphasises detailed engagement with individual accounts (Rajendran & Rajeswari, 2026; Smith et al., 2009). IPA was selected because the study sought not only to identify challenges associated with the shift in MOI, but also to understand how students made sense of its linguistic, academic, relational and identity-related dimensions. This emphasis on depth and meaning-making produces context-specific findings rather than statistically generalisable claims (Rajendran & Rajeswari, 2026). The interpretative nature of IPA also requires reflexive awareness of the researcher's role, particularly in multilingual research where interpretation across languages adds another layer to the meaning-making process (Ai, 2024).

The study followed these core principles of IPA while adapting their application to the research context. Participants were purposively selected based on their direct experience of the MOI transition, and the interviews were designed to elicit detailed accounts of these experiences. Analysis involved close engagement with particular accounts before identifying broader patterns across participants, allowing interpretations to develop from the data rather than from predetermined theoretical categories. However, the study adapted the conventional IPA preference for individual interviews by using small-group interviews. This supported collective recall and shared meaning-making but may have limited the depth of some individual accounts and influenced how experiences were expressed within the group. Thus, the study was guided by the core commitments of IPA rather than following a conventional IPA design in all respects.

Bronfenbrenner's EST was used as a complementary analytical lens. While IPA guided the methodological approach and the initial interpretation of participants' lived experiences, EST was used subsequently to situate these experiences within their broader ecological contexts. EST was not used to predetermine the initial codes or themes; rather, it was introduced after patterns had been identified in participants' accounts. In MOI transition contexts, microsystem experiences such as classroom interactions and peer relationships shape how pupils encounter the new language environment, while mesosystem connections such as home-school interactions influence how families and schools support the transition. Exosystem factors, including placement decisions and the availability of BM support, indirectly affect readiness and adjustment, while macrosystem structures such as national language policy establish the compulsory shift from Tamil-medium to BM-medium education at Form One.

Using EST allowed pupil narratives to be interpreted not only at a personal level but also within the broader institutional and policy conditions shaping their transition. Although the chronosystem was acknowledged, it was not emphasised because the study was not longitudinal. Thus, IPA and EST served distinct but complementary functions: IPA remained central to understanding how pupils made sense of their lived experiences, while EST was applied at the later interpretative stage to contextualise these experiences across ecological systems. The combination of IPA and EST enabled

the study to examine how pupils made sense of their experiences while situating those interpretations within the systems that supported or constrained them.

Selection of Participants

This study employed purposive sampling involving 40 participants across seven schools: four national secondary schools and three Tamil primary schools. The participating schools were selected based on their willingness to facilitate the participation of eligible students and educators in the study. Sampling began at the secondary level, where 20 Form One pupils, all aged 13 years, who had recently completed Tamil-medium primary schooling were identified. The sample comprised seven boys and 13 girls. All 20 pupils had transitioned directly into Form One without attending Remove Class. In accordance with the formal progression requirement, they had passed BM in Year Six and therefore did not require placement in Remove Class. Pupils who met these criteria and were willing to participate were identified with the assistance of teachers at the participating secondary schools. Their proximity to the transition enabled detailed reflection on their experiences.

Using a reverse-tracking approach, these pupils were then traced back to the Tamil primary schools they had attended. Twenty educators were purposively recruited from the participating schools, comprising 11 from Tamil primary schools and nine from national secondary schools. The primary-school participants included teachers of BM, Tamil, Science and Mathematics, as well as Heads of BM Departments, while the secondary-school participants comprised BM, Science and Mathematics teachers. Their teaching experience ranged from three to 30 years. Educators were selected based on their direct involvement in teaching the pupils and their experience teaching core subjects in which BM proficiency was particularly relevant. Teachers and school leaders were recruited to provide insight into pupils' preparedness and institutional responses to the transition. This design enabled triangulation between pupils' lived experiences and educators' perspectives.

Although socioeconomic background was not a selection criterion, the sample reflected the demographic composition of Tamil-medium schools, with most pupils from B40 (Bottom 40%) households, referring to the lower-income segment of Malaysian households (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023), and having varying levels of exposure to BM or English. The final sample of 20 pupils and 20 educators aligns with IPA recommendations for smaller, information-rich samples that support detailed idiographic analysis while identifying patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Collection Methodologies

Data collection was designed to capture both pupils' lived experiences and institutional perspectives on the MOI transition through two complementary interview methods.

For RQ1, small-group interviews were conducted with the 20 Form One students. Although IPA commonly uses individual interviews, group discussions were selected because they encouraged collective recall, peer validation and co-construction of meaning, enabling students to surface both shared and contrasting experiences of linguistic, academic and social adjustment.

For RQ2, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 teachers and school leaders from the same schools. These interviews explored institutional practices, expectations and perceived challenges in supporting pupils' MOI transition. Individual interviews allowed educators to speak openly about school policies, instructional constraints and professional judgments that might not emerge in group settings.

All interviews were conducted in quiet school spaces and in Tamil or BM, according to participants' preferences, to ensure privacy and comfort. With informed consent, sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary. All interviews were transcribed and translated by the lead researcher, who is proficient in Tamil, BM and English and has a Tamil-medium educational background. To check translation accuracy, a sample of translated transcripts was independently reviewed by Tamil and BM teachers who were not participants in the study. Where

words or expressions lacked a direct English equivalent, the original term was retained alongside the closest contextual English interpretation to preserve its intended meaning.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Taylor's University, and research permissions were granted by the Selangor State Education Department and the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD). As data collection spanned six months, EPRD approval was obtained twice to cover the period. Permission was also obtained from the leadership of each participating school.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with written parental consent for student participants. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and research data were securely stored, with access restricted to the researcher.

Student group interviews were conducted in secluded classrooms to ensure privacy. Students were informed, including through the consent documentation, not to share group discussions outside the interview. However, complete confidentiality between participants could not be guaranteed due to the nature of group interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative, idiographic process consistent with IPA, guided by the analytical procedures outlined by Smith et al. (2009). After transcription and translation where necessary, each participant's transcript was read repeatedly to support close engagement with the account. During these readings, initial notes and codes were recorded to capture significant linguistic, experiential and contextual features within each participant's narrative. These initial interpretations were then examined for connections and organised into emerging experiential themes. Analysis was conducted participant by participant, with each account considered on its own terms before patterns were examined across participants (Smith et al., 2009).

The initial codes and emerging themes were revisited and refined throughout the analytical process. Codes and themes were documented in Word and Excel, and analytical matrices were developed to compare patterns across participants. These matrices were used to identify both shared patterns and differences across participants' accounts. These comparisons informed the development and refinement of the final themes, while maintaining clear links to the original participant accounts and supporting extracts.

An audit trail was maintained through coded transcripts, code-to-theme tables, analytical matrices and successive records of theme development. These materials documented the progression from individual transcripts and initial interpretations to emerging and final themes, thereby providing transparency in the analytical decision-making process.

Findings

Experiencing the Medium of Instruction Shift

Students described varied experiences of transitioning from Tamil-medium primary schooling to BM-medium secondary education. Although participants shared similar educational pathways, their experiences differed according to their prior exposure to BM and the support available before and during the transition. While some students entered secondary school with greater linguistic preparation and support, others described limited preparation and greater difficulty adjusting to BM-medium learning.

Early Expectations and Preparation for Secondary School

Students entered secondary school with differing expectations about the shift from Tamil to BM as the MOI. For many, anticipation of the transition was accompanied by concerns about whether they would understand academic content in BM and cope with the demands of secondary schooling. These concerns were often discussed within students' immediate support systems before the transition. Reva, for example, recalled repeatedly raising specific concerns with her family:

> *"I ask them about:*
> 1. *What if I did not understand the language and subjects taught in BM?*
> 2. *What if I failed my BM in primary school and transitioned to Remove instead of Form One?" (Reva)*

For Reva, the anticipated MOI shift created both linguistic and academic uncertainty, while ongoing conversations with her parents provided reassurance before the transition.

For some students, family preparation combined emotional reassurance with practical guidance. Veena described frequent conversations with her mother during Primary 6 that built confidence and were accompanied by practical preparation:

> *"I had many talks with my mother about learning in BM during primary 6. She would share the things that she knows. She gave me a lot of advice and told me to be confident since I am not very weak in BM." (Veena)*

Her mother also encouraged her to seek free tuition and familiarise herself with Form One content, which Veena retrospectively associated with an easier adjustment to secondary school.

Preparation was also provided by Tamil primary schools, although the forms of support differed across students. Nearly half of the students described their primary-school teachers, particularly BM teachers, as contributing to their preparation for the new MOI. Karun, for example, recalled:

> *"My BM teacher did prepare me. She gave a lot of advice on how the situation in secondary school would be when using BM and told me to adapt to the situation there. Her advice was very helpful." (Karun)*

Preparation also took more practical forms. Gita, who recalled nervousness about her BM proficiency, responded to her teacher's description of secondary-school expectations by reading BM comic books and watching BM cartoons, practices she later associated with her ability to learn through BM.

Anticipatory anxiety was not universal. Maara considered himself sufficiently proficient in BM and reported little concern about the MOI shift, although he still followed his mother's advice to watch BM videos, which he felt expanded his vocabulary and supported subsequent BM-medium learning.

Importantly, the presence of parental advice did not necessarily mean that students felt adequately prepared. Charu, for example, recalled receiving advice from her parents only once or twice and questioned its usefulness:

> *"They just mentioned how everything in secondary school will be in BM but what is the point of that advice? I did not feel like that advice benefited me in any way because I already knew everything will be in BM at secondary school. It didn't help me to prepare for secondary school." (Charu)*

Charu's account shows that preparation depended not simply on whether families discussed the transition, but also on students' perceptions of the frequency, specificity and usefulness of that support.

Taken together, students' accounts show considerable variation in how they approached the impending MOI shift. While some entered secondary school having received sustained emotional reassurance, practical preparation or targeted language exposure from families and primary-school teachers, others experienced more limited preparation, and a small number did not anticipate the transition with the same degree of concern. Preparation was therefore experienced not as a uniform form of support, but as differing combinations of reassurance, practical guidance, language exposure and students' own existing confidence in BM.

Peer Relationships and Dependency

Peer relationships became an important means through which students managed difficulties understanding lessons conducted in BM. Although these students qualified for direct entry into Form One, several still relied on classmates to translate unfamiliar vocabulary, explain lesson content and clarify classroom instructions. Shiva and Raja both described peer support as integral to making sense of BM-medium learning:

> *"I usually will translate BM into Tamil to understand the lesson or instructions and when I do not understand something, I will get my friends to translate for me instead of using a dictionary." (Shiva)*

> *"Me asking friends is how I understand the learnings in BM and also the instructions in BM. I depend on a lot of friends too for translations and explanations." (Raja)*

Their accounts show that direct entry into Form One did not necessarily equate to independent academic functioning in BM; for some students, peers operated as an immediate linguistic bridge to classroom content.

Peer support also extended beyond Tamil-speaking friendships. Rina described drawing on classmates from different ethnic backgrounds:

> *"I am also seated in a mixed group of peers. So I will usually also ask my Malay friends if they can explain better for me. I do not just depend on my Tamil speaking friends." (Rina)*

Rekha similarly sought clarification from classmates across ethnic groups, particularly in mixed seating arrangements. Thus, access to linguistic support was not necessarily dependent on a shared home language or ethnicity.

Conversely, students who initially lacked accessible peer support described greater difficulty navigating BM-medium learning. Lalli, who entered secondary school without friends from her Tamil primary school, connected this absence with her difficulty learning academic subjects through BM:

> *"There were no friends from my Tamil primary school who came to this secondary school. Only after a while did I manage to make new friends. So until then I really had a tough time trying to learn all the subjects in BM and moving to a new school from my primary school." (Lalli)*

Lalli's experience highlights how the simultaneous loss of familiar peer networks and the shift to BM-medium learning could compound the difficulty of entering secondary school.

Rekha reported a similar initial experience. Although there were other Indian students in her Form One classroom, she was the only student from her Primary 6 class and described being afraid of having to communicate in BM among unfamiliar classmates:

> *"I was very scared because I had to speak in BM. In class, there were only about 11 Indian students. The majority were Malay students. I was very sad because I was the only student from my Primary 6 class who went to my current Form One class. No other friends went to the same class as me. So even though they were Indian students, all of them were new to me." (Rekha)*

Rekha's experience further distinguishes ethnic familiarity from relational familiarity: the presence of other Indian students did not immediately reproduce the security of established friendships. As new relationships developed, however, she began drawing on classmates across ethnic backgrounds for support with BM-medium learning.

Overall, peer relationships functioned as informal linguistic and academic resources during the MOI shift, but their value depended on the accessibility and familiarity of those relationships. Students with readily available peer support drew on classmates for translation and explanation, whereas those entering without established networks described greater initial difficulty. Over time, these networks could expand beyond familiar Tamil-speaking peers , making newly formed cross-ethnic relationships another source of support for BM-medium learning.

Interactions with Secondary-School Teachers

Students' interactions with secondary-school teachers shaped how they sought support when experiencing difficulties with BM-medium learning. While some students felt comfortable approaching teachers for clarification, others became hesitant after interactions they perceived as dismissive or intimidating. Avni, for example, described feeling embarrassed when asking for simpler explanations:

> *"Some teachers get very upset when I ask simple explanations. If the teacher were to say, 'Oh, you do not even know this or understand this?' then I feel embarrassed, and after that, I will rarely approach that teacher." (Avni)*

For Avni, a perceived dismissive response transformed a request for linguistic clarification into an experience of embarrassment, which subsequently discouraged her from seeking help from that teacher.

This reluctance could also be specific to individual teachers rather than reflecting students' relationships with teachers generally. Although Veera described himself as comfortable with most teachers, an early interaction made him afraid to approach his BM teacher:

> *"No, I am not scared of the teachers. But I am scared of my BM teacher because she has been strict since day 1. I was so scared to speak to her after she scolded me for not even understanding a simple thing and asking her a lot of questions." (Veera)*

In contrast, some teachers made clarification more accessible by strategically using Tamil. Karun and Veena described how individual teachers used Tamil to clarify BM-medium content when needed:

> *"Even though my Maths teacher refuses to speak in Tamil to me, my Sejarah [History] and Geography teachers speak in Tamil with me. Whenever I approach them to ask doubts, they are willing to explain in Tamil." (Karun)*

"For example, I have a Maths teacher who is okay with speaking in Tamil. The teaching will be done in Malay but when she gives exercises then I will approach her personally so that I can clarify any doubts in Tamil. So it was very helpful when the teachers are willing to do that." (Veena)

In these accounts, Tamil did not replace BM as the MOI but instead functioned as a supplementary linguistic resource. Importantly, access to this support varied across teachers and subjects, meaning that students could encounter markedly different language practices within the same school.

Teacher support did not always resolve comprehension difficulties. Viha and Reva described turning to peers when uncertainty remained after teachers' explanations, indicating that support during the MOI transition often operated through overlapping rather than isolated sources.

Overall, teacher support was experienced as relational and uneven rather than uniformly available. Particular interactions could discourage further help-seeking, while approachable teachers and the strategic use of Tamil made BM-medium content more accessible. Students therefore navigated support selectively across teachers, subjects and peers, revealing that adjustment depended not simply on the availability of teachers but on how accessible and responsive students experienced that support to be.

Language Challenges and Academic Confidence

For some students, communicative familiarity with BM did not translate into confidence in the academic language required for secondary-school learning. Urvi explained:

"It's tough. Even though I am okay with BM it's difficult for me to understand their vocabularies... they use new words that I have never heard before." (Urvi)

The distinction between conversational and academic BM was also evident in how students experienced familiar subject content. For Rekha, encountering previously learned subjects through BM made that knowledge feel unfamiliar:

"I am struggling to learn Maths, Science and Sejarah [History] in BM... Now we open the textbook and everything is in BM. So almost everything is new learning for me. I am starting from the beginning." (Rekha)

These difficulties extended into assessment. Rekha described understanding teacher explanations but struggling to interpret examination questions, while Urvi became confused when familiar concepts were presented in differently worded questions. Classroom comprehension therefore did not necessarily translate into confidence when students had to independently interpret academic questions in BM.

However, the MOI shift did not account for every academic difficulty. Urvi acknowledged that Mathematics had already been challenging when taught in Tamil:

"I was already struggling with Maths when I learnt in Tamil. So now I'm learning it in BM and trying to remember the formulas. It's tough." (Urvi)

For her, the MOI shift added a linguistic demand to an existing subject-related difficulty.

Despite differing levels of prior exposure to BM and other languages, several students continued to experience Tamil as the easier language for academic learning. Mugi, who had previously encountered core subjects in BM through tuition, explained, "Tamil is easier to learn subjects in... I still think learning subjects in Tamil is a lot easier for me" (Mugi). Urvi similarly associated Tamil

with stronger academic performance. These accounts associated Tamil primarily with familiarity, comprehension and perceived academic competence rather than with explicitly articulated cultural identity tensions.

Overall, students' accounts distinguished general BM proficiency from the academic language demands of BM-medium learning. Difficulties centred on unfamiliar vocabulary, interpreting assessment questions and confidence in academic performance, although these challenges were not attributable to the MOI shift alone. Where students preferred Tamil, this was expressed primarily through familiarity, comprehension and perceived academic competence rather than through explicit identity conflict.

School Supports Across the Transition to Bahasa Melayu as Medium of Instruction

Teachers across both Tamil primary schools and national secondary schools described a range of strategies used to support students transitioning into BM-medium education. Some practices were intentionally implemented to prepare students for BM-medium learning, while others emerged as informal responses to the linguistic difficulties students encountered after transition. Teachers from Tamil primary schools are identified as PT, while secondary school teachers are identified as ST in the findings below.

Linguistic Scaffolding and Classroom Language Practices

Teachers described linguistic support as beginning before students entered secondary school and continuing, although less consistently, after the MOI shift. Tamil primary-school teachers reported initiating conversations about the transition because they perceived students as having limited awareness of what learning academic subjects through BM would involve. PT4 explained:

> *"I always inform my students of the importance of learning and mastering the BM Language. I have informed them numerous times to make them understand the fact that here you are learning BM as a language subject but in secondary you will be learning academic subjects using BM as the MOI." (PT4)*

These discussions reframed BM from a language subject into the anticipated language of academic learning, making preparation for the MOI shift an explicit part of some teachers' practices.

Within primary-school classrooms, teachers differed in how they balanced BM exposure with immediate comprehension. Several described code-switching to Tamil as necessary when students struggled to understand instructions or lesson content. PT10, the Head of the BM Department at one of the participating primary schools, explained:

> *"My teachers cannot fully teach in BM. I advise them to usually translate the lesson in Tamil as they deem fit to ensure the teachers are supporting the students' language understanding in every BM lesson... Of course you cannot conduct 100% or 70% of a BM lesson in Tamil and only the remaining 30% in BM. We are conducting 70% of the class in BM." (PT10)*

In contrast, PT9 deliberately minimised teacher-led code-switching and aimed to conduct more than 90% of BM lessons in BM, preferring students to provide Tamil meanings when clarification was necessary. These contrasting practices reflected different approaches to linguistic preparation: while some teachers prioritised comprehension through multilingual scaffolding, others emphasised sustained BM exposure and reduced reliance on Tamil.

Advance exposure to subject-specific terminology represented another form of preparation. PT3 described systematically introducing BM equivalents during Tamil-medium Science lessons:

"As you know, Science is taught in Tamil in our school. But I do want the students to learn the basic scientific knowledge in BM. So everytime I say a science term in Tamil, I will go through it in BM. This is a repetitive process in the hope that the more students listen to these terms in BM, the more they will remember them, making it easier to learn in Form one later on." (PT3)

A similar anticipatory approach was reported by PT7, who introduced Mathematics concepts and chapter names in Tamil, BM and English from Year 4. Unlike code-switching, used primarily for immediate comprehension, these practices familiarised students in advance with terminology they would later encounter through a different MOI. This was also reflected in students' accounts, with Veera, Rina and Rekha describing prior exposure to multilingual Mathematics terminology as helpful when they encountered the subject through BM in Form One.

At secondary-school level, linguistic scaffolding was less uniformly available. Some teachers encouraged greater use of BM during lessons, while others provided multilingual clarification where their linguistic resources allowed. ST15, for example, used English to clarify mathematical terminology where she considered it more accessible to students. Thus, post-transition linguistic support varied according to individual teachers' linguistic resources and instructional practices.

Overall, linguistic preparation did not take a uniform form. Teachers used different combinations of sustained BM exposure, multilingual clarification and advance exposure to academic terminology, reflecting different attempts to balance students' immediate comprehension with preparation for greater independence in BM-medium learning.

Collaborative and Peer-Supported Learning

Teachers used grouping and peer support to facilitate students' participation in BM-medium learning. Some secondary-school teachers deliberately grouped former Tamil primary-school students with peers more proficient in BM. ST5 explained:

"I used a mixed-race grouping method but I will ensure there is one SK Indian student [an Indian student from a National School] with the SJK T students [students from Tamil National-Type schools] because I want those from SK to help those from SJK T. As time goes by, I think there are some improvements in these students' language proficiency because they are forced to speak in BM." (ST5)

This use of more BM-proficient peers as linguistic support was also evident in ST6's classroom:

"I will mix the SJK T students [students from Tamil National-Type Schools] with them and also will ensure to mix some Malay students with them. So that there is at least one person to explain the instructions to them. That way the students can at least do some work in the class and meet some of their objectives." (ST6)

However, teachers differed in how they viewed mixed-ability grouping. ST8 found that students experiencing greater difficulty could become passive when grouped with stronger classmates:

"Even though I like to use the grouping strategy where we let the highly able students work with poor students, in my experience, those poor ables are still unable to perform. These students just become passengers or passive learners while the remaining teammates do what is needed." (ST8)

ST8 therefore preferred similar-ability grouping, challenging the assumption that placing less proficient students with stronger peers necessarily increased participation. While some teachers viewed stronger peers as linguistic and academic resources, ST8 perceived mixed-ability grouping as potentially reinforcing passivity among students already experiencing difficulty.

Grouping was not confined to secondary school. PT4 reported using both mixed- and similar-ability groupings at primary level depending on the task, indicating that peer-supported learning operated across the transition, although its organisation varied according to teachers' perceptions of students' proficiency and participation.

Overall, peer-supported learning provided additional opportunities for linguistic clarification and classroom participation, but its perceived effectiveness depended on how groups were organised. Rather than functioning as a uniform transition strategy, grouping was adapted according to teachers' judgments about students' proficiency, participation and potential dependence on stronger peers.

School-Based Transition and Language Support

Beyond classroom-based strategies, teachers described several organised initiatives to strengthen students' preparation for BM-medium secondary education. At primary-school level, these included vocabulary-development activities and programmes that provided early exposure to secondary-school content. PT2 described the Kamus Bergerak (Moving Dictionary), in which students encountered BM vocabulary alongside visual and multilingual cues:

> *"Since mine are older students, our Kamus Bergerak [Moving Dictionary] includes a lot of verbs like Menjinjing [to carry something by hand] and Menjunjung [to carry something on the head]. Each tag will contain a word with an image attached to help the students better imagine the word. The tag will also have the English and Tamil translation of the BM word." (PT2)*

The initiative extended language preparation beyond regular classroom instruction by combining repeated exposure to BM vocabulary with visual and multilingual scaffolds.

Eight primary-school teachers also described a former transition programme in which Year 6 students were introduced to selected Form One content after completing the primary syllabus. The programme was intended to familiarise students with secondary-school content and terminology before the MOI shift. PT3 recalled:

> *"It was good for the students. Students used to write the concept and scientific terminologies in BM followed by Tamil. At least, it will be easier for them to revise as they look at what they have written." (PT3)*

Student accounts similarly reflected the perceived value of structured transition exposure, with Viha describing an activity introducing pupils to the secondary-school environment as *"very useful."* However, teachers reported that the Form One preparation programme had subsequently been discontinued following changes to the assessment calendar and curriculum schedule, thereby reducing the time previously available for transition preparation.

At secondary-school level, targeted support appeared more limited. ST10 described additional BM classes in which students received vocabulary modules and additional language practice:

> *"I know my students' BM teacher is giving them some modules to improve their vocabulary in BM. They will call these students to the library to have extra classes. I can now see a slight improvement." (ST10)*

Additional language support was therefore available to some students after transition, although teacher accounts indicated fewer targeted initiatives at secondary-school level than at primary-school level.

Overall, organised school support ranged from vocabulary development and advance exposure to secondary-school content to additional BM instruction after transition. However, continuity across the transition was uneven: some structured primary-school preparation had been discontinued, while targeted support at secondary level appeared more limited.

Structural Constraints on Transition Support

Teachers also described structural and contextual factors that limited the consistency with which transition support could be provided. At primary-school level, these accounts often concerned students' opportunities to reinforce BM learning beyond the classroom. Importantly, these were teachers' perceptions of students' home circumstances rather than independently verified conditions. PT7, for example, perceived irregular attendance as affecting continuity of learning:

> *"It is the parents who hinder their children from attending school. Based on what I hear from students, parents tell their child it's okay to skip school to attend events." (PT7)*

Teachers also perceived limited BM exposure and family circumstances as constraining language development beyond school. PT7 reported that some parents did not encourage BM use at home, while PT4 perceived work demands among some lower-income families as limiting opportunities for academic support. Collectively, these accounts indicate that primary-school teachers viewed preparation for the MOI shift as extending beyond what could be achieved within school hours.

> *"I cannot afford to go slow or teach slowly for these students... There is no win-win situation here. If I were to focus only on these students, the rest will be left out and if I were to focus on the other students, these students who are going through a shift in MOI... will be left out." (ST2)*

ST2's account captures the tension between providing additional support to students experiencing the MOI shift and maintaining the instructional pace required for the wider class. ST4 described a similar constraint in Mathematics, where pressure to complete the syllabus limited the scope for additional transition support.

For some teachers, these pressures resulted in practices that prioritised task completion over comprehension. ST8 explained:

> *"Due to curriculum demands and time constraints, sometimes I have no choice but to get these students to copy the answers or what is written on the board without any understanding. So at the end of the lesson, all they have done is copy." (ST8)*

ST10 reported a similar practice, asking students who could not keep pace with BM-medium lessons to copy notes or answers to provide evidence for school-based assessment. Together, these accounts show how curriculum, assessment and time pressures could shift classroom priorities from comprehension to task completion.

Overall, teachers portrayed transition support as constrained by factors operating both within and beyond the classroom. Primary-school teachers perceived attendance, home-language exposure and family circumstances as shaping students' preparation, while secondary-school teachers emphasised curriculum pace, class size and assessment requirements. Consequently, the support available during the MOI transition often depended on what individual teachers and schools could accommodate within existing institutional demands, rather than on a sustained transition framework..

Discussion

The findings suggest that the shift in MOI extended beyond language adjustment to involve broader academic, emotional and social negotiation. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's EST, the study shows that students' transition experiences were shaped by interconnected influences across classroom relationships, home–school interactions, institutional practices and wider policy structures. Rather than reflecting language proficiency alone, the transition emerged as an uneven ecological process, with access to support varying across contexts and influencing students' adjustment to BM-medium secondary education.

Microsystem Influences: Immediate Relationships, Language Experiences, and Classroom Adjustment

At the microsystem level, students' adjustment to the shift in MOI was shaped by their immediate relationships and classroom interactions. Family members, peers and teachers influenced how students anticipated and responded to the linguistic and academic demands of BM-medium secondary schooling. Curson et al. (2019) similarly identified family and friendship support as central to pupils' experiences of the primary-to-secondary transition. This study extends that understanding by showing that, when the school transition coincides with a change in MOI, the form of support matters alongside its availability. Sustained conversations, practical preparation and exposure to BM were experienced as more useful than general advice about the impending language shift. Readiness for BM-medium schooling was therefore not solely an individual linguistic attribute but was partly produced through the support available within students' immediate environments.

Peers also assumed a specifically linguistic and academic role during the transition. Previous research has associated peer support with more positive adjustment during the primary-to-secondary transition (Virtanen et al., 2020). In this study, peers helped students interpret vocabulary, instructions and subject content, extending their role beyond social reassurance. Such support was not confined to Tamil-speaking friendships; some students drew on Malay and other classmates to access BM-medium learning. Teachers similarly attempted to formalise peer support through mixed-proficiency grouping, although some observed that weaker students could become passive alongside stronger peers. This accords with Tajabadi et al. (2023), who found that collaborative interactions produced stronger outcomes than dominant–passive pairings. These findings suggest that the value of peer support during an MOI transition lies not simply in access to more proficient classmates, but in whether peer interaction enables active linguistic and academic participation rather than dependence.

Teacher support involved both relational and pedagogical dimensions. Students' willingness to seek clarification was influenced by their interactions with individual teachers, indicating that the availability of support did not necessarily mean that students felt able to access it. This is consistent with broader evidence linking supportive teacher relationships with students' adjustment and well-being (Aldrup et al., 2018). Teacher relationships also intersected with language practices. Students valued multilingual clarification when BM explanations were insufficient, while teachers differed in how they balanced Tamil support with sustained BM exposure. Strategic code-switching and translanguaging have been shown to facilitate comprehension and engagement during a shift from mother-tongue instruction to another MOI (Pillay, 2025), although excessive use may reduce target-language exposure and reinforce linguistic dependence (Oyedele et al., 2022). The findings therefore position multilingual clarification as a negotiated form of support: Tamil could provide temporary access to difficult BM-medium content, while sustained BM exposure remained important for developing greater independence in the new MOI.

The findings further distinguish competence in BM as a language from preparedness to learn academic subjects through BM. Although all participants had qualified for direct entry into Form One, some continued to experience difficulty with subject-specific vocabulary, examination questions and

familiar concepts presented through BM. This resonates with Cummins' (2000) distinction between conversational proficiency and the more cognitively demanding language required for academic learning. Soto-Corominas et al. (2020) similarly found persistent differences across dimensions of oral language proficiency among adolescent second-language learners despite several years of schooling. In the present context, meeting the BM requirement for progression into Form One did not necessarily indicate readiness to interpret, learn and be assessed on disciplinary knowledge through BM. This distinction suggests that eligibility for direct transition and academic-language readiness should not be treated as equivalent.

Students' preference for Tamil further reinforces the importance of distinguishing linguistic familiarity from identity-based interpretation: participants primarily associated Tamil with comprehension and perceived academic competence rather than explicitly articulating the MOI shift as an identity conflict. Overall, the microsystem findings demonstrate that immediate relationships shaped the transition not only through emotional support but through access to linguistic explanation, academic clarification and opportunities to participate in BM-medium learning.

Mesosystem Influences: Continuity and Connections Across Learning Contexts

At the mesosystem level, students' transition was shaped by the degree of continuity across the immediate contexts surrounding their learning. The findings suggest uneven alignment between students' language experiences at home and the linguistic demands of secondary schooling. Families differed in how they prepared students for BM-medium education, and students entered secondary school with varying opportunities to use BM beyond school. Research on MOI transitions similarly indicates that differences between learners' existing linguistic resources and the language of schooling can affect learning across the transition (Daly et al., 2023). In the present study, this suggests that MOI adjustment cannot be understood solely through the support available within home or school separately, but through the extent to which students' linguistic experiences across these contexts aligned with the demands of BM-medium learning.

A more pronounced discontinuity occurred between primary and secondary schooling. Primary teachers described deliberate efforts to prepare students through increased BM exposure, introducing subject terminology in multiple languages, and, in some cases, transition-oriented activities. However, comparable linguistic support after entry into secondary school was less systematic and depended more heavily on individual teachers and available school initiatives. Discontinuity between primary and secondary settings is well established in transition research (Prendergast et al., 2019), while Pfenninger and Lendl (2017) specifically demonstrate the importance of continuity in language input and pedagogy across this transition. The present findings extend this issue to an MOI shift: preparation before transition did not necessarily connect with sustained linguistic scaffolding after transition. Thus, students were navigating not only a change in educational setting but also a potential discontinuity between how their linguistic needs were anticipated before transition and how they were supported after it.

Connections between peer relationships and classroom practices provided another form of mesosystem support. Students' informal reliance on classmates for linguistic and academic clarification was, in some classrooms, reinforced by teachers' deliberate use of mixed-proficiency grouping. Teacher and peer support have been shown to make complementary contributions to adolescents' engagement and school adjustment (Kiefer et al., 2015). However, the present findings show that connecting these forms of support was not inherently beneficial; teacher-organised peer support could facilitate participation, but could also reinforce passivity when students became dependent on more proficient classmates. The mesosystem therefore appears consequential not merely because multiple sources of support are present, but because of how effectively they connect across students' learning contexts. Overall, the findings suggest that successful adjustment to an MOI transition depends partly on continuity across home, primary-school and secondary-school experiences, rather than on isolated support within any single setting.

Exosystem Influences: Institutional Conditions Shaping Transition Support

At the exosystem level, teachers' capacity to support students through the MOI transition was shaped by institutional conditions beyond individual classroom interactions. Curriculum demands, class size and limited instructional time constrained opportunities for sustained linguistic support and, in some cases, shifted classroom priorities towards task completion rather than comprehension. The relationship between class size and opportunities for individualised teacher attention is well established (Blatchford et al., 2002). In the present study, these constraints were particularly significant because students adjusting to BM-medium instruction sometimes required additional explanation of vocabulary, instructions and subject content. Support for the MOI transition therefore depended not only on teachers' willingness or pedagogical choices, but also on the conditions that enabled them to respond to students' linguistic needs.

Institutional conditions also affected the sustainability of transition support. School-level initiatives demonstrated recognition of students' language and transition needs, yet some could not be sustained alongside assessment, curriculum and scheduling demands. Mowat (2019) similarly identified organisational and resource constraints as barriers to implementing and sustaining primary-secondary transition support. The present findings show how such pressures can affect support for an MOI transition specifically: institutional recognition of students' needs did not necessarily translate into sustained provision when transition initiatives competed with other school priorities. Consequently, recognition of transition needs at school level did not necessarily produce sustained institutional support, leaving provision more dependent on individual classroom practices.

The availability of linguistic support also varied according to local capacity. Secondary-school support depended partly on teachers' linguistic resources and the initiatives available within particular schools, resulting in uneven opportunities for additional BM or multilingual assistance. Cunningham (2012) similarly reported substantial variation in provision for bilingual learners across schools, linked to differences in resources, funding and teacher preparation. While the present study does not establish the same institutional mechanisms, it demonstrates that students undergoing the same formal MOI transition did not necessarily encounter equivalent forms of support. From an ecological perspective, the exosystem therefore shaped transition indirectly by enabling or constraining what schools and teachers could provide, making institutional capacity an important condition of students' access to sustained linguistic support.

Macrosystem Influences: Language Policy and Expectations of Linguistic Readiness

At the macrosystem level, the MOI transition reflects the wider organisation of language and schooling in Malaysia. Tamil-medium education is available at the national-type primary level, whereas public secondary education operates through the national language (Renganathan & Kral, 2018). Remove Class is formally positioned within this structure as a one-year transitional class for pupils from primary schools where the MOI is not the national language, with BM achievement used to determine progression into Form One. The participants in this study had met the relevant BM requirement and progressed directly to Form One, yet some continued to experience difficulty learning subject content through BM. This suggests an important distinction between meeting a language-based progression criterion and being fully prepared for the academic-language demands of BM-medium secondary schooling.

This distinction is relevant to how linguistic readiness is conceptualised within transition structures. Language proficiency measures may not capture all the language demands of academic learning; in the Malaysian context, Wan Osman (2025) similarly found that standardised language proficiency accounted for only part of the variation in university students' academic reading performance. Although the educational level and language context differ from those of the present study, the broader distinction remains pertinent: demonstrated proficiency in a language does not necessarily encompass the disciplinary language required for academic learning. The present findings

therefore do not question the value of BM proficiency as a progression criterion, but indicate that meeting this criterion does not necessarily eliminate the need for linguistic scaffolding when BM becomes the medium through which subject terminology, disciplinary knowledge and assessment tasks are encountered.

The macrosystem findings therefore locate students' experiences within a structural transition between two established language environments rather than solely within individual language proficiency. For Tamil-medium primary-school pupils progressing directly to national secondary schooling, progression involves a dual transition: a change in educational level alongside a change in the language through which much of the curriculum is accessed. Recognising this dual transition is important because successful progression into Form One does not necessarily mark the completion of linguistic adjustment, particularly as students encounter the academic uses of BM as the new MOI.

Integrating the Ecological Systems: The MOI Shift as an Uneven Ecological Transition

Taken together, the findings show that the transition from Tamil-medium primary education to BM-medium secondary schooling cannot be understood solely as an individual process of language adjustment. Students' experiences emerged through interactions across ecological levels, with immediate relationships, continuity across learning contexts, institutional capacity, and the wider organisation of language in schooling collectively shaping the support available during the transition. The uneven alignment of these influences produced correspondingly uneven experiences of adjustment.

The key contribution of this study is to conceptualise the MOI shift as an uneven ecological transition. Students' capacity to navigate BM-medium learning depended not only on their linguistic preparedness but also on whether support across immediate relationships, educational contexts and institutional conditions aligned during the transition. The unevenness of the transition thus lay not simply in differences between individual learners, but in differences in the support structures surrounding them. This shifts attention from locating transition difficulty primarily within the learner towards understanding how multiple ecological systems collectively enable or constrain adjustment to a new MOI.

Implications

The findings suggest that transition support for students moving from Tamil-medium primary education to BM-medium secondary schooling should extend into the early stages of secondary education. Students who qualify for direct progression to Form One may still benefit from support with academic BM, particularly in subject-specific terminology and assessment demands. Transition planning should therefore consider linguistic adjustment as a continuing process rather than one completed at school entry.

At classroom level, strategic multilingual clarification and carefully structured peer support may provide useful scaffolds as students develop greater independence in BM. At school level, stronger coordination between Tamil primary schools and receiving secondary schools could improve continuity in language preparation and enable secondary teachers to build on support provided before transition. More broadly, recognising MOI transition as an ecological process highlights the need for transition practices that consider students' prior linguistic experiences alongside the classroom and institutional conditions shaping their adjustment. Support should address not only students' entry into BM-medium secondary schooling but also their continued capacity to learn through BM after entry.

Limitations

Several methodological limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The study was situated within seven schools in Selangor and involved a purposively defined group of students who transitioned directly from Tamil-medium primary education to Form One, alongside educators from the participating schools. Consistent with the idiographic orientation of IPA, the study prioriti sed contextual depth over statistical generalisability; consequently, the findings should be understood as contextually situated, and their transferability to other Malaysian educational settings requires consideration of local linguistic and institutional conditions. Student data were generated through small-group interviews, which supported shared reflection on transition experiences but may also have shaped individual disclosure through group dynamics. In addition, the study captured participants' experiences within a defined period rather than longitudinally, limiting examination of the chronosystem dimension of EST, particularly how students' linguistic, academic and relational adjustment may evolve over time. Future longitudinal and multi-context research could build on these findings by examining how MOI transition experiences and support develop across different stages and educational settings.

Conclusion

This study advances understanding of medium-of-instruction (MOI) transition by demonstrating that a change in MOI involves more than a shift in the language of instruction. For Tamil-medium primary school graduates entering BM-medium secondary education, the shift changes the linguistic conditions through which academic content is understood, classroom interaction occurs, and participation in learning is negotiated. When this coincides with the transition to secondary school, students must navigate new academic expectations while learning through a different instructional language. MOI transition should therefore be recognised as a distinct dimension of educational transition rather than treated as an incidental consequence of progression between school levels.

The study further contributes by conceptualising MOI transition as an uneven ecological transition. Students' adjustment to a new MOI is not determined by language proficiency alone, but by how linguistic preparedness interacts with the relational, educational, institutional and structural conditions surrounding the transition. This helps explain why formal eligibility to progress directly into Form One did not necessarily correspond with readiness to access academic learning through BM. More importantly, it shifts the analytical focus from perceived linguistic deficits within individual learners towards the conditions that enable or constrain their adjustment to a new instructional language.

This understanding has broader relevance for multilingual education systems in which students move between instructional languages across stages of schooling. Access to the next level of education does not, by itself, ensure access to learning when the language through which that learning occurs also changes. Recognising MOI as an integral dimension of educational transition therefore provides a more nuanced basis for understanding linguistic readiness and the continued support students may require after entering a new educational setting.

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Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

Generative AI (ChatGPT) was used for language refinement and editorial support during manuscript preparation. All intellectual content, interpretation, analysis and final writing decisions remain the responsibility of the authors.

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