

Bilingualism-Lite: The Language Policy for Taiwan?

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Abstract

Language is complicated, and language policy is probably even more so. Taiwan, a nation at the epicentre of regional geopolitics with a robust economy, is seeing a fundamental shift in many of its public policies. Against this backdrop, the existing language policy—or the lack thereof—is under review. While the *de facto* official language is Mandarin Chinese, there are now more than a dozen national languages. However, in any case, Mandarin Chinese has primarily been the dominant language for the people for more than 70 years now. More recently, in 2018, the then-administration expressed its intent of affording the English language some status in the form of an action plan (*Bilingual 2030 Initiative*) hoping that it will give the productivity of the nation a boost. Unsurprisingly, this decision, however well-intended, was shelled with harsh criticism from many fronts—academia, high school teachers, educators as well as grassroots citizens, whose concerns ranged from inadequate resources to possible degradation of local languages. The two perspectives seem to be at odds with each other with no easy compromise.

Thus, in light of the status quo, I would like to propose a term that would possibly be able to account for all the eccentricities and anomalies that exist in the context of modern-day Taiwan language planning and policy. Under this Initiative,

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the English language would be given a certain status that is expected to contribute to the acquisition and instruction of the language throughout the education system, which will, in turn, bolster the economic prowess of the nation on the global stage. Stopping short of granting the English language official status, the administration is now envisioning a language policy that I would call “bilingualism-lite”—a policy that features some traces of bilingualism but with some key specifics of the nation’s current situation taken into account.

Keywords: Language policy, LPP, bilingualism, bilingualism-lite, Taiwan

I. Introduction

Language, a skill unique to the human species, is a powerful tool, and the ability to speak more than one language has been praised by cognitive psychologists such as Judith Kroll, who labels the multilingual functions of the human brain as “mental athletics” and “mental somersaults.”¹ Yet, at the same time, it is also a loaded tool that often stirs up commotion if not handled properly. What is more, controversy arises whenever language gets entangled with social categories such as politics, race, ethnicity and gender...amongst others, and when this happens, language would no longer simply be a tool of communication; it would suddenly become a symbol of identity or unity. Examples of language-based controversy are many, and they can be seen in places from Québec to Ireland (this includes both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland), and from Australia (a monolingual nation with a *laissez faire* language policy) to Russia (the multiracial and multilingual successor of the Soviet Union). Obviously, language has a social and political dimension to it. While Taiwan has rarely been at the epicentre of language policy and planning (LPP) research, it is, for better or for worse, garnering more and more attention lately. Criticism or praise, what has become of Taiwan’s language policy in the backdrop of what has become of Taiwan as a nation is something that deserves to be explored.

For its part, LPP and actual language use in a particular jurisdiction are often the direct result of factors such as changing demographics, the increase (or decrease) in numbers of an ethnic minority, immigration, or even conquest of territory. Moreover, linguistic pluralism, the systematic use and recognition of more than one language in a polity, could take a number of forms, with bilingualism and multilingualism being two of the most common ones.

¹ Stephen Wade, “Older adults may struggle to learn a new language but classes are a worthwhile exercise”, *The Register Citizen*, Dec. 15, 2025.
<https://www.registercitizen.com/news/world/article/older-adults-may-struggle-to-learn-a-new-language-21243297.php>

While I personally am not quite ready to support full-fledged bilingualism² for Taiwan for now, I do believe that bilingualism should be something that deserves our attention and something worth pursuing for the long term for this country for a number of reasons, which range from access to a globalized information market, a sophisticated higher education apparatus, to greater connectivity with the rest of the world, and onto a stronger labour workforce.³

It is precisely against this backdrop that I am proposing the idea of *bilingualism-lite*.⁴ How I obtained my inspiration perhaps deserves some mention. As Jack M. Sabatino pointed out in his law journal paper on alternative dispute resolution (or “ADR”) and litigation, the premise of a light (or stylized as “lite”) product is that it will be nearly as satisfying as the regular product after which it was patterned and formulated, but with fewer of the original's more burdensome characteristics (Sabatino 1290). In other words, a lite product is supposed to be *nearly* the same thing as the regular—minus some of the elements that the consumer does not appreciate at a particular moment. To put that into perspective for us, with respect to the language situation, a bilingualism-lite policy would be, presumably, a policy that resembles the standard version (ie., bilingualism) but without elements

² As far as this paper is concerned, the terms “bilingualism” and “multilingualism” are to refer to a language situation where English plus one or more local language enjoy some certain status, where the term “local language” refers to the collective of national languages of the Han Chinese people and all indigenous languages as specified in the *National Languages Development Act* of 2019.

³ Notably, while Taiwan is considered bilingual by some (Li and Lee in Bhatia and Ritchie, 743), what most of them mean is actually **diglossia**, which is a situation in which two varieties (Hakka, Minnan, Mandarin or East Min) of the same language (Chinese) are used side by side by the same set of speakers for different situations and in different contexts. Even if one considers a situation in which an indigenous language and Mandarin Chinese are used, it is still not what I am targeting in this paper. I am focusing solely on a language situation that involves the English language.

⁴ The term *light* (or the diminutive of it, “lite”) is a term commonly seen in marketing for the purpose of product differentiation as a response to diversified consumer demands. Typically, a “lite” product, be it a food, drink, cigarette, or software, would be a version that is lower in calories, simpler in features, or contains less of a particular ingredient compared to its standard counterpart. Typical commercial product examples include “Coca-light”, “Pepsi-lite” and “Marlboro-light,” just to name a few. The suffix has also made its way, however subtly, into academia, in an example such as “litigation-lite”, a metaphorical concept to refer to ADR, introduced vis-à-vis litigation, which is a much more costly and cumbersome dispute resolution mechanism. For details, *quod vide* Jack M. Sabatino. 1998. “ADR as “Litigation Lite”: Procedural and Evidentiary Norms Embedded Within Alternative Dispute Resolution”. *Emory Law Journal* 47: 1289-1349.

that the target audience does not need or appreciate (e.g., the amount of educational resources required as well as the extra costs associated with them) at the moment.

II. Current Language Situation of Taiwan

Many people consider Taiwan an ethnically homogeneous country with a relatively homogeneous language map, but, surprisingly, Taiwan has never really had a *de jure* official language. While this seems simple enough, reality tells a very different story, and the language situation in Taiwan is far from straightforward. In fact, it is complex in the sense that it resembles a tapestry of colonialism, authoritarianism, democracy and many other intermingling ideologies. Moreover, the demography of Taiwan is also complex in that while the population comprises mostly ethnic Han Chinese, they are by no means the only ethnic/cultural group. There are, according to the most recent census, a total of 16 indigenous ethnic groups, ranging from the Amis to the Kanakanavu, making up roughly 2.6% of the total population of Taiwan.⁵

While Taiwan was under Japanese colonial rule, the official language was, of course, Japanese, and the mother tongue of the majority of the local populace, Minnan Chinese, was suppressed. Then, at the end of World War Two, Japan having been defeated by the Allies, all of a sudden, the local Han Chinese people found themselves forced to learn a new language, Mandarin, which touched off some resistance and tension with far-reaching effects dragging on to this day.

Then, between 1949 and the early 1990s, when the Kuomintang (or “KMT” for short)⁶ was the unchallenged ruling party, language was largely a sidestepped issue, with all non-Mandarin Chinese dialects and all indigenous languages purposefully marginalized to say the least—thanks to the so-called “Speak Mandarin” campaign.

⁵ <https://www.cip.gov.tw/zh-tw/news/data-list/940F9579765AC6A0/682FB58975DE327E8058FB779C868130-info.html>

⁶ The KMT, or the *Kuomintang*, is a major political party in the Republic of China (Taiwan). It was established by Dr. Sun Yat-sen sometime during the Qing dynasty. In 1949, the KMT had to retreat to Taiwan after it was defeated by the CCP, or the Chinese Communist Party, and it remained the unchallenged ruling party in Taiwanese politics from 1949 until 1987, when the democratization of Taiwan finally began with the lifting of the decades-long martial law.

Then, starting in the 1990s, when political democratization started to kick in, awareness of one's mother tongue (which would be Mandarin, Hakka, Minnan or East Min for Han Chinese people and one of the 10-odd indigenous languages for the indigenous ethnicities) was no longer considered taboo, and the idea of learning one's mother tongue and learning *in* one's mother tongue all of a sudden became something chic and necessary. It was then that a new historical perspective emerged. As a result, a series of language policies were introduced over the three decades since then in the name of human rights and transitional justice. Inasmuch as positive law⁷ is concerned, there are two key pieces of legislation: the Indigenous Languages Development Act (原住民族語言發展法) of 2017 and the *Development of National Languages Act* (國家語言發展法) of 2019. Specifically, Article 3 of the *Development of National Languages Act* provides that the term *national language* shall mean "all natural languages and sign languages used by the different ethnic groups in Taiwan." In addition, equal status is guaranteed for all national languages in Article 4. The other piece of legislation that touches on this subject matter would be the *Indigenous Languages Development Act*, which grants the status of national language to all indigenous languages. Apart from these two laws, language policy has had but a limited presence in the legislation map of Taiwan, and one could be forgiven for assuming that language policy has had to take a backseat to other public policies in Taiwan.

Inasmuch as the importance of the English language is acknowledged, the most common observation would be that most Taiwanese people do realize this, but they differ on how it should be learned and taught. Granted, at a minimum, English should be taught as an important foreign language (presumably as an L2 for some and as an L3 for the rest) without compromising the L1 (and L2, if applicable)—be it Mandarin, Minnan, Hakka or any of the indigenous languages—of any individual.⁸ For its part, English has been part of the core curriculum for

⁷ The legal term *positive law* is simply an umbrella term for all existing laws that are enforceable and created via legally valid procedures, and it includes, amongst others, parliamentary acts and judge-made law.

⁸ A special note would probably be needed here. In Taiwan, people have either one of the Chinese dialects (which may or may not be Mandarin) or one of the indigenous languages as their mother tongue, and when they start going to kindergarten (or any formal educational institution), they will

schoolchildren starting in the third year of elementary school since the early 2000s. Undoubtedly, this policy is rooted in the belief in the “critical age hypothesis,” which assumes that language learning would be easiest at a tender age on the part of the learner, and while there exists a built-in neurological faculty to acquire human language in the human brain, it will nonetheless have to be stimulated by some external force (Fromkin and Rodman 342). Indeed, psycholinguists have shown that language, as a skill, is unique in that no other complex system of knowledge is more easily acquired at a younger age than at an older age (Ibid. 347). Simply put, generally speaking, the earlier the child is exposed to a language—any language, the easier it would be for them to acquire it.

More recently, right out of the blue, the government launched an initiative entitled *Bilingual 2030* (hereinafter referred to as the “Initiative”) in an attempt to diversify the subsistence portfolio of the country by bilingualizing it with the English language. Under this Initiative, there are three pillars—“Bolstering English education”, “Improving English proficiency amongst the general public” and “Enhancing the nation’s competitiveness on the global stage,” as shown in the *Blueprint for Developing Taiwan into a Bilingual Nation by 2030* (hereinafter referred to as the “Blueprint”). Controversy aside, a higher level of English proficiency amongst the citizenry is high on the agenda of the government; it has even become a mantra of national policy, with governments of all levels doing everything they can to promote it. In doing so, the current administration is essentially making a broad statement that being bilingual in Chinese and English would be beneficial and economically advantageous, and now some unexpected effects of the Initiative are starting to surface.

One major focus of the initiative *Bilingual 2030* would be the creation and implementation of EMI courses in higher education. Universities have long been the experimental ground of language policy in their capacity as a venue of bilingual

have Mandarin Chinese as their L2 since most instructions will be conducted in Mandarin. Then later yet, when they reach the third grade, they will be required to learn English as their first foreign language, which would serve as their L3. Thus, to make a long story short, people who speak Mandarin as their native language would have English as their L2, whereas people who speak any other Chinese dialect or one of the indigenous languages as their L1, would have Mandarin as their L2 and then English as their L3.

teaching and learning in the form of ESP, EMI or EAP. Needless to say, LPP will have a significant impact on higher education, especially the sector of higher education that involves local students (non-international). This would be important for higher education because college enrolment rates among local students have been in the decline due to a low birth rate, and educational institutions have been turning to international students for quick relief to the seemingly irreversible shortfall in student enrolment.⁹

III. Current and Potential Shifts in Language Planning and Policy (LPP) in Taiwan

What language policy and planning (LPP) means should be made clear right from the outset. Language planning is a “government-authorized, long-term sustained and conscious effort to alter a language’s function in a society for the purpose of solving communication problems” (Wardhaugh 346). Janet Holmes considers language planning simply as deliberate language change (emphasis mine) (Holmes 123). At the same time, according to the *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics*, a language policy would be any political measure targeted at an individual language/variety (e.g., the prohibition of the use of certain terms) or the relations between different languages/varieties, their social importance, function, relevance in international communication, etc. (Brown 576) In recent years across academia, though, the two terms have gradually merged into one umbrella term: LPP (language policy and planning).

Now that we have a better understanding of the historical contextualization of Taiwan’s LPP, we would probably be in a better position to approach—and possibly understand—any potential future change in LPP for Taiwan in a constructive way. Admittedly, bi-/multilingualism has been an age-old topic for sociolinguists, whose work is mostly taxonomic and descriptive (Coulmas 7). A language is usually given official status (or any status) out of a mix of incentives ranging from the political, social, economic, and cultural incentives (and rarely simply

⁹ <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2025/12/30/2003849745> . Accessed on March 02, 2026, at 19:15 (UTC).

linguistic ones) (Holmes 100). In more specific terms, a language would be given national status if it serves as a token of unity or solidarity for a polity (e.g., Basque for the Basque Country), whereas official status would usually be given to a language out of functionalist concerns (e.g., English as an official language in Singapore) (Holmes 109). When it comes to recognizing a non-local language as a favoured foreign language, it is usually done for reasons such as historical tradition, political expediency, and the wish for commercial, cultural or technological contact (Crystal 5).

When there are two or more languages with some status (official, national or recognized) or simply in regular use in the same spatiotemporal context (such as Macedonian and Albanian both in regular use in North Macedonia with Albanian given co-official status due to a significant influx of ethnic Albanians), there would be a situation of bi-/multilingualism ensuing. In many contexts, bilingualism is considered a symbol of prestige over the course of history; in the legal profession of Britain, for example, French used to be the language spoken by legal professionals following the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 while English largely remained a lower-class language of a subjugated people for a long time. As language historians have pointed out, the generalization that French was the language of the aristocracy and English was basically the language of the masses would be, by and large, accurate (Tiersma 20); from the perspective of sociolinguistics, this would make a typical example of elite bilingualism¹⁰.

Worldwide, in terms of language count, there are, of course, at least two approaches to the creation of language policy. On one end of the spectrum, there is India, where a whopping total of 22 languages (Tamil and Sanskrit being two of them) are listed in the constitution as scheduled (not national or official) languages.¹¹ On the other end of the spectrum, in linguistically diverse South Africa,

¹⁰ Elite (or elitist) bilingualism, as opposed to folk bilingualism, would be the form of bilingualism in which the ability to speak both languages is the privilege of the middle-class and well educated members of that society. Elite bilingualism is considered a benefit-driven investment, while folk bilingualism is a situation where individuals are forced into speaking more than one language for the sake of sheer survival. *Quod vide* Harding and Riley, *The Bilingual Family*, 1994, p.24.

¹¹ India's case would be a unique one in that a total of 22 languages are listed in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India as recognized languages. Apparently, language policy makers preferred to avoid the use of "official language" and "national language". At the same time, the *Official*

there are only 12 official languages (such as Xhosa and Afrikaans), all of which enjoy equal status, and, yet, while English is but the fourth most common first language in the country, it is undoubtedly the dominant language in the government sector and the media in the country.

What this means for Taiwan, where hardly anyone speaks English as a native language, is that, with English being a global language (with about 400 million native speakers and another more than one billion regular L2 and L3 speakers), and with more than two-thirds of all children worldwide growing up in a bilingual environment (Crystal 17), the power of English and the potential benefits that come with it simply cannot be ignored. At the same time, though, surprisingly, university students are notorious for their inability to conduct a free and comfortable conversation in English with non-local people (who may or may not be native English speakers).¹²

In recent years, while things have been slowly changing, language policy, as a public policy, does not seem to have received sufficient rigorous review and elaboration in Taiwan, and the reasons for this are many. First off, many sociolinguists seem to fail to realize that language policy is essentially a public policy, and all public policies must go through a process from agenda setting via policy formulation all the way to policy termination¹³—be it monetary policy, immigration policy or language policy. In addition, all public policy is more or less political, and so by simple inference, language policy would be political, as would Taiwan's language policy, and this, again, is something many in Taiwan fail to acknowledge. Since the lifting of the martial law in 1987, there have only been a handful of language-related legislations passed, with the *Hakka Basic Act* of 2010 and the *Indigenous Languages Development Act* of 2017—along with the *Development of National Languages Act* of 2019—being three of the most prominent ones, and this has contributed to the controversy around *Bilingual 2030*.

Languages Act of 1963 granted official status to only two languages: English and Hindi, effectively making India an officially bilingual country.

¹² <https://vip.udn.com/vip/story/122866/6772737>

¹³ This process is termed the “Policy Cycle” by public policy scholars. *Quod vide* Stewart, Hedge & Lester, *Public Policy: An Evolutionary Approach*, pp. 8 et seq.

This controversy notwithstanding, the administration is now planning on going one step further by introducing English, a non-local language, into the picture presumably in an effort to make future generations more competitive by rendering them more bilingual (in one local language and English). Understandably, this new language policy, however well-intended, has been met with doubt and controversy because English, despite its monumental status on the global stage, is not a local language at all, and nor is it part of the cultural heritage of the local people. According to some academics, bilingualism will do little to address Taiwan's age-old language problem—at least not in the way intended by the government, and claims about the eventual failure of the language policy under the initiative have been ubiquitous across the media.¹⁴

Then what about the status of the English language in and for Taiwan? What type of LPP is the government aiming for ultimately? Is it bilingualism under which English is given official status? Or is it even bilingualism at all? What about monolingualism? Initially, in 2017, the action plan proposed by then-vice president Lai Ching-te was entitled *2030 Bilingual Nation* (2030 雙語國家), under which official status would be slated for English by 2030. Subsequently, under the National Development Plan (NDP) for 2021–2024 (NDC 2020), which was created and published by the Executive Yuan, the Initiative received an updated title: *Bilingual 2030* (2030 雙語政策). True, the subtle shift from making the *nation bilingual* to just plain *bilingual* was obvious, but, in any case, for the first time ever, the status of English, a foreign language, was brought to the forefront in the form of a government action plan.

Perhaps a closer look at the Initiative will reveal something interesting, and that is that all discourse on status for English seems to be framed in a unique way. The three pillars of the Initiative as featured in the Blueprint are "Enhanced English education", "Bolstering English proficiency amongst the general public" and "Enhancing the nation's competitiveness on the global stage", while the six implementation strategies include: accelerated bilingual higher education (推動高等教育雙語化), balanced bilingual conditions in schools (高中以下階段教育雙語化),

¹⁴ <https://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20250515000634-260118?chdtv> . Accessed on February 28, 2026, at 15:05 (UTC).

development of digital learning (數位學習), affordable English proficiency tests made available (英檢量能擴充), an increased level of English proficiency among civil servants (提升公務人員英語力), and creation of a dedicated administrative body (成立行政法人專責推動). Thus, according to the Blueprint, English deserves to be promoted because it is a language that is the key to an edge in a competitive market for the general public and, in turn, the key to a greater competitive edge for the nation. Also, the six implementation strategies all appear to be specific steps (i.e., bilingualizing high school education and the entire public service) to take towards a higher level of English proficiency amongst the general public.

By contrast, Ireland's language policy, under which English is listed as a second official language, tells a very different story. In contrast to Taiwan, where the government is making every effort to increase the use of English, a global but non-local language, the language situation of Ireland would be blunt and astonishing to say the least. As education experts have lamented, while all high school students are required by law to study Irish as a subject, hardly any of them have the motivation to speak the Irish they were taught at school (Hussey 494-495). The balance against Irish in favour of English is even more striking after the requirement for a certificate for college was removed for high school students in the 1970s. To this day, all Irish schoolchildren must learn Irish, the national language, as part of the core curriculum in all primary and secondary schools. According to the Census of 2016, 39.8% of all Irish people aged 3 and above spoke Irish. However, of the roughly 1.77 million self-proclaimed Irish speakers, only 4.3% indicated that they spoke Irish on a daily basis and outside the education system. Admittedly, 4.3% is by no means a high figure for a language that is supposed to be official and national. The very fact that the *Official Languages Act* 2003 needs to stress in its prologue that the act is meant to "promote the use of the Irish language for official purposes..." is a tell-tale sign that there are so many Irish people who do not speak it well, if at all. Thus, apparently, the legal status accorded to the Irish language and the English language in Ireland would be very dissimilar to the status that is being considered for the English language in Taiwan. In essence, in Ireland, the status of Irish is being promoted out of culture and heritage concerns in response to a decline

in its use amongst the younger generation based on economics, whereas in Taiwan, the status of English is being promoted presumably out of economics concerns.

Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, *An Coimisinéir Teanga* was created and is responsible for promoting and safeguarding the respective language rights of Irish and English speakers in the country. Its head, the *Coimisinéir*, is appointed by the President of Ireland on the nomination by the Government of Ireland. This office is in charge of functions such as the promotion of the use of the Irish language in public life, monitoring compliance with language policy by all government agencies, investigating complaints, issuing regular reports and providing advice and counselling to government bodies. Apparently, what this regulatory office of Ireland does is decidedly different from what the administrative body that is to be created in Taiwan under the Blueprint is to do. In short, the Irish government office serves as the gatekeeper in the enforcement of language policies in connection with language equality, monitoring of compliance, complaint investigation and even the issuance of fines for non-compliance. By contrast, in Taiwan, the “administrative body,” which is still at a hypothetical stage, presumably will only be empowered with non-regulatory functions such as the teaching and learning of English in the education system and across the entire civil service. In other words, it will come with far less power.

Apparently, in light of the Blueprint, whatever status granted to English, it will be for a functionalist purpose, and not an ethnocultural or administrative one. In other words, English, if given official status, will not serve as a language (on par with Mandarin Chinese, for example) for full-fledged administrative purposes, but, instead, it will serve as a stepping stone in the pursuit of a nation with more functionally bilingual people that are blessed with more opportunities, at home and abroad.

IV. Language Policy and Globalization: What It Means for Taiwan

Now, let us take a quick look at the European Union, arguably the “poster

child” of language equality. While the supranational entity boasts a total of 27 member states and 24 official languages, language could still be a knotty issue when a non-official language is at stake. Up until 2010, within the framework of the European Union, there used to be an NGO entitled the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages (hereinafter referred to as “EBLUL”) that was established in the name of language equality. Its key aims were to promote active EU policy-making in favour of regional and minority languages (such as Basque and Catalan) and to safeguard those languages by defending the language rights of the speakers of those languages, who number more than 40 million across Europe.

Even across a multilingual and multicultural entity like the EU, specialists have noticed that for a foreign language policy to contribute to bi-/multilingualism, organization and teaching methodology will be key (de Cillia & Busch 581). More specifically, foreign language teaching should start early, and the use of the foreign language as a medium of instruction should also increase; curricula should be more flexible; passive multilingualism should be encouraged (Ibid.). This partially justifies mandatory English classes for third-graders in Taiwan, and even for many first-graders—though in a different format.

Granting a language or a variety thereof some status (national, official, regional, minority, or the like) inevitably involves four basic steps: selection, codification, elaboration, and acceptance establishment (Holmes 107). As a quick example, Kurdish is recognized as a minority language in Armenia, a signatory to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), despite a lack of a guaranteed place in any aspect within the education system.¹⁵ Kurdish has a history of usage in literature particularly when Armenia was still part of the Soviet Union, and today it is spoken by a minority that numbers around 30,000. Broadly speaking, a government may decide to grant some status to a language for the sake of national unity, as in the case of Kurdish in Armenia.

Language diversity and also, by inference, bilingualism are widely recognized

¹⁵ Declaration by the Republic of Armenia contained in the instrument of ratification deposited on 25 January 2002 to the Council of Europe Treaty Office.

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=declarations-by-treaty&numSte=148&codeNature=10&codePays=ARM>

as both a cognitive and sociocultural resource, despite their different challenges in certain contexts. Research shows that bilingual individuals often demonstrate enhanced metalinguistic awareness and cognitive flexibility, particularly in executive control and language learning (Bialystok 45). From a sociolinguistic perspective, bilingualism contributes to cultural identity, social inclusion, and language maintenance, especially for minority communities (Holmes 63–65). However, perceived disadvantages—such as uneven proficiency or student learning difficulties—are typically linked not to bilingualism itself but to unequal language policies, social stigma, and inadequate educational support (Baker 9–11). Overall, if supported by inclusive language planning and effective instruction, bilingualism will function more as an advantage than a drawback.

Moreover, at a global level, the fact that bi-/multilingualism is considered an asset would be even more conspicuous. People use more than one language to communicate with people from different language backgrounds, and since the long-standing global primacy of English for most people across the globe (people who would otherwise speak a non-English language at home) shows no sign of decline, granting English some prestige by granting it some status alongside the statutory national languages (one of the Chinese dialects or one of the indigenous languages) seems to make sense if doing so will encourage the acquisition of it by the general public. Such LPP, therefore, falls in line with the tools of granting a language official status out of concerns such as unity, demography, administrative efficiency, historical legacy, political compromise and international recognition.

Many tend to think of Taiwan as a homogenous country—ethnically, culturally and linguistically, while reality tells a different story. Granted, most of the residents (roughly 96%) are ethnically Han Chinese, yet indigenous people, who speak more than a dozen different non-Chinese languages, are ethnically Austronesian, and they make up roughly 2.6% of the total population, not to mention an increasing number of new immigrants settling down in Taiwan through study, employment, or marriage.¹⁶ This, undoubtedly, has contributed to the linguistic diversity of the

¹⁶ <https://www.ey.gov.tw/state/99B2E89521FC31E1/2820610c-e97f-4d33-aa1e-e7b15222e45a#:~:text=%E8%87%BA%E7%81%A3%E7%9B%AE%E5%89%8D%E5%B7%B2%E8%A8%AD%E6%88%B6%E7%B1%8D,%E7%A8%AE%E6%97%8F%E5%85%B1%E6%A6%AE%E4%B9%8B%E>

country. Moreover, many people fail to realize that, however paradoxical as it may seem, Taiwan is a nation both old and young. It is young in the sense that the current regime was not established until 1949, when the Republic of China retreated from the mainland of China to the island of Taiwan, and it was not until the late 1980s that it was democratized. At the same time, it is old in the sense that the vast majority of the local inhabitants are ethnically Han Chinese who speak either Mandarin or some Chinese dialect as their native language, with Chinese being an ancient language representing one of the oldest civilizations of the human race, not to mention that the Han Chinese people (whether they are Hoklo, Hakka or *Waishengren*¹⁷) still maintain customs and traditions that have been in place for thousands of years.

Admittedly, the motivation behind the Initiative seems to be more economic than cultural or ethnic, as English, without a doubt, is no local language. Truth be told, Taiwan university students lag behind in English proficiency, and this is reflected in their scores from the TOEIC and other similar standardized language tests. According to official statistics released by TOEIC¹⁸, in 2024, test takers in Taiwan achieved an average TOEIC score of 581 points (out of a possible 990) (with an average of 315 points in listening and 265 points in reading)—the highest ever since the launch of the test in 2001—for the total average score on the test, which constitutes an intermediate level of English proficiency.¹⁹ To put that in perspective, we should have a look at how this compares with students from other countries, other Asian countries in particular. Taiwan's figure was slightly higher than Japan's 564 and China's 561, but much lower than South Korea's 678 and India's 772—the

6%B1%BA%E5%BF%83%E3%80%82 Accessed January 02, 2026, at 18:09 (UTC).

¹⁷ The term *Waishengren* is a collective term that refers to a group of migrants (as well as their Taiwan-born descendants) who arrived in Taiwan from mainland China between the end of World War Two in 1945 and during the KMT retreat at the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949. They, by definition, would have their ancestral homes in mainland China.

¹⁸ Here is the title of the document: TOEIC® Tests 臺灣地區成績統計報告 2024 年, which was compiled by Chun Hsin Limited. For the original, *vide* <https://www.toEIC.com.tw/Upload/att/2025-07/202507090906501477678138.pdf>

¹⁹ Here is a detailed breakdown of the total average score: listening average: 315 points; reading average: 265 points; speaking average: 145 points (out of a possible 200); writing average: 157 points (out of 200). For details, *quod vide* <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/lang/archives/2025/11/27/2003847883>

highest in all of Asia. As if that were not enough, it also shows something alarming at the same time—high school graduates scored slightly better than university students (661 vs. 585). This indicates that students seem to “let go of” learning and studying English once they are done with high school. If this is truly the case, then it indicates that Taiwan’s college education might be under threat because of poor organization of curricula of courses (language courses and core courses) in higher education in general.²⁰ Moreover, this language deficiency might be problematic for universities, as well as students themselves if universities are to strictly adhere to the EMI course requirement under the Initiative.²¹

Understandably, a fair amount of skepticism is coming from academics, language teachers and parents with children of school age, and their fear is not totally unwarranted. Their concerns typically touch on claims such as worry for indigenous languages and non-Mandarin Chinese dialects, such as Minnan, Hakka and Eastern Min, being compromised because of a stronger focus on English, and also additional costs that will have to be incurred by the administration, not to mention staffing issues.²² For them, while English must be taught in schools, this should not come at the expense of local languages in the name of bilingualism. In response, some scholars have proposed a “language policy” by the name “Multilingual Nation, English Friendly” (多語台灣, 英語友善) that could presumably close up the gap left behind by faulty English education and inadequate mother tongue education. The chief concerns reflected in this slogan-based policy include, as shown on the relevant website, disregard for Taiwan as a multilingual country, interference with the Taiwan identity as well as the language ecology of

²⁰ Of course, a complete discussion of why English proficiency in college students degenerate during their years spent after high school and in college, however fascinating, would be beyond the scope of this study. In any case, the reality is that Taiwan’s college students’ English proficiency shows much room for improvement. Having taught many university courses (most of them EMI) at several institutions over the years, I think I am personally in a position to vouch for this.

²¹ Under the Initiative, by 2030, at least 50% of all sophomore students are supposed to have attained a CEFR B2 level for English proficiency, and, as well, each sophomore student and postgraduate student is supposed to have at least 50% of their class hours dedicated to EMI courses. *Quod vide* https://depart.moe.edu.tw/ED2200/News_Content.aspx?n=90774906111B0527&s=B92BCD8072ECC23F.

²² <https://www.rti.org.tw/en/news?uid=3&pid=226070&typeId=2>

Taiwan, inadequate supporting resources across the education apparatus and potential discrimination for non-English speakers.²³ Truth be told, their concerns are not entirely unfounded.

V. Bilingualism-Lite: The Best Compromise?

In light of the language situation of Taiwan and in response to the Initiative and the Blueprint, I personally would like to coin a term for the language situation to be pursued—for the moment at least—as “bilingualism-lite,” which is descriptive of the language situation that resembles both monolingualism and bilingualism in some way, while, at the same time, keeping some aspects of bilingualism on hold. That is what I intend to refer to with the suffix *lite* (or *light*).

For its part, a lite product, such as “Pepsi-light”, “Marlboro-lights”, lite butter and lite salad dressing, is supposed to feature only some of the advantages of the full-fledged (or “real”) product without sacrificing all its virtues (Sabatino 1290). In real terms, lite ice cream, for instance, is supposed to taste slightly like regular ice cream because of the small amount of fat in it; or put another way, lite ice cream does not taste exactly like regular ice cream because of a lesser amount of milk fat and lower sugar content, and as a result, would come with a less rich flavour and less creamy mouthfeel. The regular version and the lite version are supposed to cater to consumers with different tastes, both featuring a title that hints at their mutual resemblance. By the same token, ADR, as a form of *litigation-lite*, as coined by Jack M. Sabatino, would come with some features unique to litigation—but minus some features that may be considered unnecessary or non-essential (such as rigid evidentiary rules and a lengthy timeline) for some disputants in certain contexts.²⁴ As the famous French saying goes: *Chacun à son goût* (literally, “Each to their taste”).

²³ https://www.twlls.org.tw/NewsMasterPage.php?_ID=27

²⁴ As a quick note, ADR, or alternative dispute resolution, is an umbrella term for all non-judicial dispute resolution mechanisms such as, but not limited to, negotiation, mediation and arbitration. The term is often used in contrast to litigation, an age-old form of dispute resolution that often involves strict procedural norms and evidentiary rules in the name of procedural justice.

To put that in perspective, this is what the administration has in store for us as far as *Bilingual 2030* is involved. The major two objectives, as shown in the Blueprint are to “Enhance Taiwan’s international competitiveness” and “Improve Taiwan citizens’ English proficiency”, and the four concepts for implementation are to “comprehensively improve Taiwan citizens’ English proficiency from the demand side”, “reduce the urban-rural divide with digital technology”, “take into account the development of the bilingual policy and native language policy” and “develop international competitive advantage for young talents.” In addition, the Initiative comes with two core visions: cultivating Taiwan’s international talents and catering to the demands of multinational corporations based in Taiwan. Finally, the Initiative features six strategies of implementation, and they are accelerated bilingual higher education (推動高等教育雙語化), balanced bilingual conditions in high schools and elementary schools (高中以下階段教育雙語化), digital learning (數位學習), expanding affordable English proficiency tests (英檢量能擴充), raising civil servants’ English proficiency (提升公務人員英語力), and creating a dedicated administrative body (成立行政法人專責推動).²⁵ Again, apparently, in light of all these categories, one cannot but conclude that the form of bilingualism that is being pursued by the current administration is decidedly different than that pursued by typical bi-/multilingual jurisdictions such as Canada, Singapore and the EU.

For its part, bilingualism is not a fixed and stark term; instead, it is a fluid phenomenon that manifests itself vibrantly across a spectrum. While many seem to consider the ability to speak more than one language/variety a quality worthy of envy and admiration, bilingualism is actually not all that rare. Additionally, in many bi-/multilingual societies, one’s language choices would make up a significant part of one’s social identity (Wardhaugh 95). While bilingualism is by no means rare, the value or quality of bilingualism does manifest itself across a spectrum, along which many shades, or “dimensions” of it coexist (Li in Li 3). While roughly half of the world’s population is bilingual by some estimates, what is rare would be equi-bilingualism, a quality that implies that the speaker has equal and perfect

²⁵ <https://ws.ndc.gov.tw/Download.ashx?u=LzAwMS9hZG1pbmlzdHJhdG9yLzExL3JlbGZpbGUvMC8xNDUzNC8zMzlkMmI5NS01NGIxLTRmMmMtYmJiMi00OGY3ODAzMGNhNjgucGRm&n=QmlsaW5ndWFfSIWIwMzAo5qC45a6a54mIKS5wZGY%3d&icon=.pdf>

knowledge of both languages (Harding and Riley 5). Sociolinguists have documented dozens of different forms of bilingualism, ranging from additive bilingualism to symmetrical bilingualism, along with many others in between (Li in Li 5-7).

In this country, for its part, a typical bilingualism policy at the national/central government level should operate under a paradigm that features parameters like statutory or constitutional recognition of bilingualism, the scope of the governance of bilingualism, language rights of the people, education policies, public administration and the civil service, the judiciary and legal justice, the media and the press, as well as policy enforcement details and legal consequences for non-compliance. Apparently, all these parameters profoundly involve values like national unity, social inclusion, minority protection, historical reconciliation, and economic equality, and are mostly absent in the algorithm of language policy formation at the moment.

For the sake of contrast, a typical bilingualism policy (such as that of Canada and of Belgium) usually operates under a paradigm that encompasses these parameters:

1. Official recognition of both official languages: This is provided in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, essentially Canada's constitution.²⁶
2. The individual's right to use either language is guaranteed in both the public sector and the private sector: The federal government must be able to conduct its business in both official languages and provide government services to people in either language—at the request of the applicant for the service.
3. All key state functions such as governance, infrastructure, security and all civil service schemes (such as general education, social welfare, medical care...) must be symmetrically available in both languages. In

²⁶ Section 16.(1) of the Charter provides that "English and French are the official languages of Canada and have equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions of the Parliament and government of Canada."

Canada, this is made very explicit in the *Official Languages Act* (OLA) (of 1988).

4. Most importantly, throughout the judiciary, either language may be used by any party or any participant (such as an expert witness) to any legal proceeding within the jurisdiction without prejudice.
5. All laws, which are passed by the legislature, and all regulations, which are enacted by the executive branch of the government, must be made available in both languages in a timely manner, with both versions equally authoritative and with equal effect.
6. Citizens must have the right to use either language when exercising all legal rights such as the right to basic education and higher education, and their right to vote in elections.
7. A state-sponsored bilingual terminological database (term bank) must be in place that is comprehensive and updated on a regular basis by a team of professional terminologists. In Canada, there is Termium Plus, and in the EU, there is IATE. While, in Taiwan, there is something similar that is entitled *NAER Web of Words*²⁷, which is sponsored by the National Academy for Educational Research, it is nowhere close to the aforementioned two term banks in terms of language coverage, term record count, domain count, term record content and professionalism.
8. All enforcement and monitoring of language policy by all relevant regulatory agencies must be made transparent and consistent. For instance, the enforcement and monitoring of bilingualism in Canada is primarily governed by the *Official Languages Act*, and the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (OCOL) oversees and monitors government agencies' compliance with it.

Now, let us ascertain which form of bilingualism is being pursued under the Initiative by examining the content of it vis-à-vis each one of the parameters listed above. The two objectives, as shown in the Blueprint are to “Enhance Taiwan’s

²⁷ The web address of the term bank: <https://terms.naer.edu.tw/>

international competitiveness” and “Improve Taiwan citizens’ English proficiency,” and the four concepts for implementation are to “comprehensively improve Taiwan citizens’ English proficiency from the demand side”, “reduce the urban-rural divide with digital technology”, “take into account the development of the bilingual policy and native language policy” and “develop international competitive advantage for young talents.” One would probably need little more than a *prima facie* look at them to notice a form of bilingualism that is decidedly different than Canada’s.

Purportedly, the two objectives of the Initiative are better English language proficiency for the general population and, in turn, a stronger competitive edge for the nation, with virtually everything else centered on them. This, apparently, has little to do with any government functions in Taiwan being made available in both languages (Chinese and English), nor is it about the individual being allowed to use either language in the context of any government branch. Instead, the two objectives appear to take aim at individual talent and cater to the demands of Taiwan-based multinational corporations. Essentially, this means that the initiative is about the benefits and repercussions of being bilingual in our days, which include a higher level of employability on the global job market for people and a positive response to the calls of multinationals. Again, the motivation behind this is simply economics—and not culture, religion or domestic politics.

Furthermore, the four concepts for implementation do not seem to stray too much from that either, focusing primarily on economics and education. They include better English language proficiency amongst ordinary citizens, elimination of the urban-rural divide, equal attention to bilingualism and national language policy and a competitive edge for the younger generation. Again, three of the four concepts of implementation seem to touch on economic development more than they do the eight main parameters of true bilingualism (as presented previously), while the remaining one, equal attention to bilingualism and national language policy, seems to be little more than a guiding principle running throughout the implementation of the Initiative.

In addition, the two core visions: cultivating Taiwan’s international talent and catering to the demands of multinational corporations based in Taiwan further

fortifies this assumption. As is claimed, by virtue of the Initiative, people, especially those of the younger generation, will have their talents made more noticeable to multinational corporations from around the world if they learn English well. Apparently, these two visions would be economic in nature, not cultural, ethnic or even political. Finally, the Initiative features six strategies of implementation (such as accelerated bilingual higher education...), which all seem to revolve around economics.

All in all, while I personally do not find any of these six strategies inherently inappropriate, almost all of them seem to point to one thing: Good English means high productivity, and everyone is supposed to start learning English from a young age and be offered a wider choice of English courses from elementary school all the way through college and even beyond—in physical form and in electronic form.²⁸ On a side note, the only strategy of implementation that does not directly point to this would be “creating a dedicated administrative body”, which, by the way, is too vague to be helpful.²⁹

In light of the discourse along with all the rhetoric that comes with it, is Taiwan seeing true bilingualism? Why or why not? While this is not a simple question of fact or opinion, I would be slightly inclined towards negative—for two fundamental reasons: dynamics and formality. In terms of dynamics, under true bilingualism, as is the case of Canada, both French and English are given full and equal status, with individuals being allowed to file a building license application or make a request throughout all government functions in either language with equal legal effect. In Canada, for instance, a party to a court case may present their paperwork in either French or English, and parliamentary members can question officials in either language during question period, and then it will be the task of the government to

²⁸ At this point, it remains unclear whether the term “accelerated bilingual higher education” (推動高等教育雙語化) refers to more university courses being instructed bilingually, or more university courses being offered in both a Chinese version or an English version (like at the University of Ottawa, where most courses have an English version and a French version to them).

²⁹ Of course, questions as to what such administrative body, which is tentatively entitled the Bilingual Nation Development Center (雙語國家發展中心), should look like (Do we want it to look like Chunghwa Post, the post office corporation, or the Taiwan Railway Corporation, the conventional train company?), what functions it should perform and what title it should be given, however intriguing, would be best left for another paper.

generate the corresponding translation (if the particular member of parliament (or “MP”) happens to be unable to speak that official language). Also, representatives from the press get to debate issues and events with elected officials in either one of the official languages. Clearly, this is not the case in Taiwan, and nor is it the direction the government is moving in under the Initiative. Then, in terms of formality, under true bilingualism, all information (e.g., open information presented on official websites) will have to be presented in both official languages with neither language being conspicuously favoured, and whenever ambiguity arises, there should be a government body (OCOL, for example) entrusted with the power to resolve it. However, unfortunately, the language situation in Taiwan fails both tests—dynamics and formality.

First of all, let us take a look at the judiciary. Under true bilingualism, both official languages are to enjoy equal official status; in effect, a party to a legal case should be entitled to file a claim in court in either language with the same legal effect, and, at the same time, they must be allowed to use either language when filing paperwork or making a sworn statement, or a testimony. In Taiwan, all court cases must be presented in one of the national languages (typically, Mandarin Chinese), and any representation in any other language, while not inherently illegal, would have to be rendered into the language of the jurisdiction by a certified interpreter/translator for it to have any legal effect. Moreover, laws and legislations basically have only one official version to them: the Chinese version, and while most laws and regulations enacted in Taiwan do eventually get translated into English and then compiled into an almanac, only the Chinese version of them can be directly cited by attorneys when they present their client’s case to a judge, who is not even allowed to take the English version thereof into consideration.

Second of all, inasmuch as the legislative branch is concerned, any parliamentary member would be entitled to use either language in their statements during questioning of government ministers and officials, who, in turn, would be expected to respond in the same language (Mandarin Chinese or English). Apparently, this would be very difficult, if not totally impossible, in Taiwan.³⁰

³⁰ As a quick case in point, on March 09, 2020, Legislator Chih-wei Ho tried to question the then

Third of all, in all government sectors, either language may be used or must be used at the same time as far as official documentation and signage are concerned. Essentially, what this means is that the Ministry of Economic Affairs, for example, is to make all information and publications available in both languages, and everything from the annual report to the day-to-day information posted on the official website is to be presented in both Chinese and English. For sure, this will entail horrendously high costs and, thus, be unrealistic for Taiwan, not to mention staffing challenges caused by a lack of professional translators with adequate translation skills would further complicate things. In fact, translation specialists have pointed out time and again that only a modest portion of government websites are fully bilingual (in Chinese and in English) with all information made parallel in both languages, and the quality of the translations that do exist is far from perfect, not to mention chronic problems with genre, style, stylistics, typesetting and typography abound in those translations (presumably exclusively Chinese-to-English translations) (Law 23).

Finally, all public services must be made available in both languages at the central level, the municipal level and the county level...at all levels of government. For instance, the health card application form, the passport application form and the national ID card application form must all be made bilingual, as well as all relevant documents such as the national ID card, real property title deeds and driver's licenses. As well, every citizen should be allowed to use either language in tests administered by any government agency (such as the college admission test, which is sponsored by the Ministry of Education), as well as in public servant qualification tests sponsored by the Examination Yuan—all in the English language if they so prefer. Needless to say, something like this will require a high level of bilingualism of all public servants, which will, in turn, unnecessarily cause a significant strain on

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joseph Wu, in a routine meeting of the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee in English, but this immediately triggered a bewildered reaction from the meeting minutes-taking staff, who reported difficulty in following what he was saying. Moreover, it received mixed reactions throughout the press, with some hailing it and some denouncing it. *Quod vide*

<https://www.anntw.com/articles/20200312-XFHO#:~:text=%E4%BD%95%E5%BF%97%E5%81%89%E5%92%8C%E9%99%B3%E6%9F%8F%E6%83%9F%E5%9C%A8%E7%AB%8B%E6%B3%95%E9%99%A2,%E5%85%A8%E7%A8%8B%E4%BB%A5%E8%8B%B1%E8%AA%9E%E7%AD%94%E8%A9%A2%E3%80%82>

the staffing (and many other aspects) of the public service, which could adversely impact future recruitment. Moreover, not all public information is even made available bilingually, and whenever some information appears available in English, it would often be inadequate to say the least.³¹

If none of that is realistic for Taiwan, then what is the administration seeking to achieve with the Initiative in the form of the Blueprint? Once again, as previously stated, the rationale behind everything seems to be economics—not culture, not religion, not racial equality or even politics. On the face of it, while Taiwan has managed to pass itself off as an exemplary model of economic success over the past four decades or so, having created hi-tech behemoths such as TSMC and Delta Electronics, it still lags behind many advanced countries in terms of academic performance. University rankings, for one, may shed some light on this. According to the most recent rankings released by Times Higher Education (THE), National Taiwan University (NTU), the top university of Taiwan, finished 140th of all major institutions worldwide in 2026, with only a modest six institutions in Taiwan making it into the Top-500 club.³² As if that was not enough, of the top 50 institutions featured in the same rankings, more than half of them are based in English-speaking countries.³³ This seems to suggest that more efforts should be dedicated to the teaching and learning of the English language in higher education in Taiwan.

In any case, basically, the Initiative boils down to this: “Higher English proficiency entails better job prospects.” Unlike in bilingual jurisdictions like Canada, Hong Kong, the EU and Singapore, where bi-/multilingualism is backed up by a strong institutionalized mechanism, in Taiwan, a similar arrangement does not exist at all; by contrast, under the Initiative, the administration is devoted to only one aspect of bilingualism: Being bilingual in Chinese and English will be an asset for the individual and, in turn, the collective in terms of productivity and easier access

³¹ I have personally conducted informal investigation of public signage in Taiwan through personal observations as well as student course assignments, and apparently a high percentage of signage appears inadequate in terms of content, translation quality and consistency. Not only would this be detrimental to the reputation of the country as a tourist destination, it could lead to fatal consequences.

³² <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/latest/world-ranking>

³³ Ibid.

to a diverse job market and greater academic success.

Presumably, the administration is trying to retain some features of bilingualism that it deems relevant and urgent while omitting others (at least for the moment). In real terms, the administration is purportedly “testing the water” in its attempt to join the global trend associated with the power of English by making more people bilingual (in English) without embracing some of the non-economic dimensions that are considered cumbersome or difficult (such as mandatory bilingual signage that is adequate, parallel and consistent throughout the public service).

This all but paints a clear picture: Taiwan does not seem ready for true bilingualism yet—a language policy that requires that everything be parallelly presented in both languages—at least in the public sector and, to a certain extent, in the private sector. Instead, it is opting for something of a lesser magnitude but more cost-effective, and I would like to coin a term for it: “bilingualism-lite,” a term reflective of a watered-down version of bilingualism. Bilingualism-lite might be able to account for the dilemma that the country is finding itself in and thereby provide a sensible and harmless way out. Essentially what this refers to is a form of bilingualism in which some features of full-fledged bilingualism are retained and others, ones that are considered less essential or of less urgency, are omitted (for now), and this invokes the analogy with a food (say, butter) in which the lite version (lite butter) serves as a watered-down version of the regular product (regular butter). Lite butter and regular butter differ mainly in fat content, calorie count, salt content and texture, with the lite version designed for consumers with a low-calorie diet. As a result, regular butter excels in baking and cooking due to its higher fat content, whereas lite butter suits spreading on bread but underperforms in baking, often yielding drier and less savoury results. In other words, each product serves a certain niche of consumers.

The same thing applies here. Bilingualism-lite would be an acceptable LLP policy for Taiwan in that it accounts for the overall *status quo* of the country, which is unique in a way, while steering clear of most of the potential shortcomings of bilingualism. Full-fledged bilingualism might flourish in a place that is ethnically diverse (such as Singapore, where the largest ethnic community, the Chinese,

constitutes just under 80% of the total population) or a place that has had a long history under colonialism (such as Hong Kong and South Africa), whereas bilingualism-lite would work for a place that is simply working towards a higher level of visibility and a broader vision on the global arena and across academia by means of better English skills (such as Taiwan and, arguably, Japan and South Korea). If the full-blown version of bilingualism were adopted in Taiwan now, it would certainly entail high costs for almost everything, not to mention labour shortages for virtually every industry and every sector of the economy (due to widespread lack of bilingual staff). By contrast, a bilingualism-lite policy, which comes at a lower cost, would simply focus on the economic aspects of bilingualism that matter the most, and these include higher English language proficiency amongst citizens, elimination of the urban-rural divide, equal attention to bilingualism and national language policy and a competitive edge for the younger generation. Put another way, in more specific terms, under bilingualism-lite, all schoolchildren are to be given equal opportunity at learning better English without anyone's mother tongue (be it Minnan or Amis) compromised throughout the education system regardless of where they reside (in urban or suburban areas), and this will ultimately lead to a higher level of English proficiency amongst the citizenry. Apparently, making all information and public signage bilingual is not on the agenda, and nor is allowing the bilingual filing of court cases or the bilingual questioning of government officials in parliament (i.e., the Legislative Yuan).

Indeed, people are starting to feel the negative impact of the language barrier, at higher education institutions and in the tourism industry in particular. According to Zalil et al., the correlation between the level of English proficiency across the host population and the local tourism industry is beyond description and thus deserves more attention on a larger scale (Zalil et al. 31), and foreign visitors have been reporting about how English-unfriendly Taiwan is—especially outside Taipei (as compared to other Asian cities like Hong Kong, Singapore and Seoul), and this would be something counterintuitive and counterproductive if Taiwan is to transform itself into a tourism hotspot.³⁴

³⁴ As tourism figures of 2025 reveal, there were a total of 18 million overseas trips made by Taiwan

More specifically, given the largely economic nature of the Initiative, which outlines the three pillars of English education, higher English proficiency amongst the general public and a greater competitive edge on the global stage for Taiwan, the potential effects of the Initiative on tourism cannot be ignored. Thus, at a minimum, adequate bilingual signage must be available for foreign visitors. Additionally, the effects of inadequate bilingual service for international students at higher education institutions, where the international student ratio is an important index in terms of the overall ranking of the university and international student enrolment is becoming a major source of revenue for the university, are turning up in the spotlight.³⁵ All of this should and can be more or less tackled under a bilingualism-lite policy.

All in all, any public policy requires a comprehensive understanding of the symbiotic relationship between legal rights and the relevant social and cultural settings, which is referred to as a “mutually constitutive” relationship by some (Engel and Munger 11). As public planning specialist Roger Bristow confesses in one of his papers, in Taiwan and in many parts of Asia, there is still a tradition of tolerance of illegality, which makes changing public opinion and attitudes extremely difficult but worth a try nonetheless (Bristow in Bristow 297). Only in this way can we stop passing laws and creating policies that lack legitimacy and public support. Thus, any attempt to introduce any change to the current language policy of Taiwan will inevitably require a full understanding of the social and cultural settings of the day in the country, and the case of the *Bilingual 2030* Initiative would be no different. It was under this inspiration that my idea of “bilingualism-lite” was created.

Finally, there is one other thing that we should take note of. Our language policy, bilingualism-lite, which is an *ad hoc* alternative to bilingualism, however

citizens, while, by contrast, there were only a modest 8.5 million foreign arrivals, leaving behind a striking TWD 700-billion deficit in tourism revenues. Presumably, the language barrier along with unfriendly practices such as inadequate signage were the major culprits. For details, *quod vide* official statistics released by the MOTC Tourism Administration at <https://stat.taiwan.net.tw/information>

³⁵ Again, most global rankings of colleges and universities take into account the two metrics of international outlook and research environment, both of which are dependent on the level of bilingualism demonstrated amongst the staff, faculty and students.

chic, warm and inclusive it may sound, should not be expected to replace the regular version of bilingualism permanently, in much the same way that ADR, as a form of "litigation lite" may only complement—not replace—litigation, or state-sanctioned justice (Sabatino 1349). At its core, bilingualism-lite is simply a language situation that is reflective of bilingualism, and the two have their respective intensions, extensions and purposes, and they should function in a mutually complementary relationship with neither replacing or supplanting the other. The only thing for us in Taiwan to consider at the next stage would probably be whether to move slowly towards bilingualism (or any other language situation).

Conclusion

We live in times in which government functions are being slowly redefined and reshaped, and language policy is by no means immune to that. Not only has the current administration launched various initiatives (such as the “Economic Global Diplomacy” Initiative), civil society is also more vibrant and proactive than ever. Against this backdrop, for better or for worse, bilingualism (in English and one local language, which would be Mandarin Chinese for the vast majority of the masses) is high up on its agenda. For the policymaker, deciding which programs to cut and which ones to retain will always be difficult because the values they are trying to uphold—or disregard—are constantly evolving. Even if there is consensus as to what values to pursue and what problems to tackle, there will always be controversy about how best to go about accomplishing them. This is precisely the dilemma facing language policymakers in Taiwan today. On the one hand, they, acknowledging the deficiency in English proficiency amongst the general public, are trying to create an initiative (i.e., *Bilingual 2030*) that is supposed to bring Taiwan’s younger generation improved job prospects by arming them with better language skills, and, by extension, to provide more lifeblood for our vibrant economy, but, on the other hand, they are trying not to overreach by forsaking any of the local languages and thereby invite criticism. At the end of the day, a language policy, just like any policy, will be a process that is designed to remedy some public

problem—usually a systemic one. In our case, a balance between bilingualism and language diversity would be indispensable, and, as such, a scheme under which we can reap the benefits of higher proficiency of the global *lingua franca* English while keeping all potential drawbacks in check would be of the utmost relevance. In this sense, at this moment, bilingualism-lite would probably be a favourable language policy to pursue in this country.

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「輕量雙語」—— 台灣的語言政策的最佳選擇？

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摘 要

語言乃極其複雜的現象，語言政策更是茲事體大。位處地緣政治板塊中心的台灣，經貿實力令人刮目相看，近年來各項政策上亦開始發生重大轉變。在這樣的背景下，既有的語言政策開始受到矚目。台灣華語雖號稱是事實上的官方語言，但並非唯一的國家語言。無論如何，華語已經在台灣被普遍使用七十餘年。幾年前，政府宣佈了一項賦予英語以某種程度的地位的行動計劃（題為「2030 雙語政策」），以期提升國家的整體競爭力。這項決定，儘管立意良善，仍受到來自各方的嚴厲批評。各界多半擔心雙語教學資源不足以及可能對本土語言所造成的衝擊。這兩種截然不同的看法似乎劍拔弩張，沒有轉圜的餘地。

有鑒於此，筆者想透過本文推出一個或許能夠涵蓋台灣當今的語言政策的方方面面的概念，那就是「輕量雙語」（bilingualism-lite）。其實政府當前的想法是，在不犧牲本土語言的大前提下，以賦予英語以一定地位的方式普遍提升國人對英語學習的興趣和動力，進而帶動國家整體的國力。政府在不正式賦予英語以官方語言地位的範圍內，採納雙語政策的部分特徵，同時也顧及台灣特殊的環境進行部分的調整。如此形塑出來的語言政策，筆者稱之為「輕量雙語」（bilingualism-lite）。

關鍵詞：語言政策、雙語主義、輕量雙語、台灣

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