

**A Review on the Inconsistent English Language Policy in
Teaching and Learning
At Secondary School Level In the Malaysian Education
System**

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Abstract

The inconsistent English language policy in teaching and learning at secondary school level in the Malaysian education system has resulted in a feeling of confusion amongst the students, parents, teachers and stakeholders. It has also negatively affected the students' competency in English language with the different varieties of English used, and the deterioration in competitiveness at the global level in terms of standards. Immense resources have been spent in terms of budget, equipment and personnel in implementing the Language Policy in the Malaysian Education System. This paper is a review of the inconsistent English language policy and planning as a medium of instruction in the secondary schools in Malaysia. It traces the evolution of the English language policy and planning and aims to offer recommendations to address the issues. The significance of this paper is in its findings and recommendations; that the pluralistic society composition of citizens of Malaysia and vested interests by certain quarters have made it an immense task to reconcile the contestation between *Nationism* and *Nationalism* efforts in the choice of language in education and suggestions to address some of these concerns.

Keywords: *inconsistent, English Language policy and planning, Teaching And Learning, varieties of English, standards, gaps, pluralistic society, contestation, Nationism and Nationalism.*

Introduction

The pluralistic society composition of its citizens and vested interests by certain quarters in Malaysia have made it an immense task to reconcile the contestation between *Nationism* and *Nationalism* efforts in the choice of language in education. The early history of language policy of Malaya, with the later inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak on Malaysia Day on 16 September (1963) have added on to the multitudinous ethnic composition. Current day Malaysia comprise of the Malays, Chinese, Indians (Tamil, Sikh, Benggali), Peranakans, Eurasians, Orang Asli/Orang Asal (Aborigines), Sea Dayaks, Ibans, Bidayuh, Melanau, Orang Ulu, Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, Bajau, Rungus and others (www.malaysian.tourism.guide.com). Thus, it is in this plethora of language matrix of the pluralistic society is situated the contestation for a unifying language for nation building. Against this background lies the inconsistent English language policy in teaching and learning at secondary school level in the Malaysian education system. This has resulted in a feeling of confusion amongst the students, parents, teachers and stakeholders. It has also negatively affected the students' competency in English language with the different varieties of English used, and the deterioration in competitiveness at the global level in terms of standards. Immense resources have been spent in terms of budget, equipment and personnel in implementing the Language Policy in the Malaysian Education System.

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Statement of the Problem

The inconsistent English language policy in teaching and learning at secondary school level in the Malaysian education system has resulted in deterioration in the competency and proficiency of Malaysian Tertiary level students (including Secondary School students) in the utilization of English Language. Students are not able to perform well and their command of the language is low. Furthermore, due to their weak command of the English Language, they could not grasp and comprehend the content resources and sources of information on other subjects which utilises English Language as the medium of communication. In addition, English is not a Second or Third Language but is a Foreign Language for some students. Teachers and students are both equally affected by the swings and reversals in the choice of language to be used as a medium of instruction in schools. Trainers for teachers were brought in from the UK [6] and the US and this exacerbated the situation further as the varieties of English from this content differ in terms of socio-cultural context in the pragmatics, spelling and corpus.

This observation is supported by many discussions in Forums, Conferences, Workshops, write-ups and comments made on the subject matter. This includes a newspaper article "A re-look at the Malaysia Education Blueprint by Hussaini Abdul Karim" [2], which explicated the current global dip in confidence level on the competency and proficiency of Malaysian students overriding past perceptions. Currently, students are required to undergo a special English language programme such as IELTS or TOEFL before they are allowed to proceed with their university studies. In addition to this, there should be a consistent Language Policy in Education for a long duration of time in order to garner better stability, grasp and mastery of the language and knowledge content.

Furthermore and in certain parts of the world they need IELTS or TOEFL to enter into universities or for work requirements with a certain band achievement, meaning the Malaysian certification is deemed inadequate. In addition to this, there should be a consistent Language Policy in Education for a long duration of time in order to garner better stability, grasp and mastery of the language and knowledge content

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to review of past literature on subject matter and to identify the impact of inconsistent English language policy & planning on secondary schools in Malaysia. It seeks to identify the causes that lead to the inconsistencies and to give recommendations.

Research Questions

This review seeks to answer the research questions:

1. What is the impact of the Inconsistent English Language Policy In Teaching And Learning At Secondary School Level In The Malaysian Education System:
 - I. Positive?
 - II. Negative?
2. What are the measures put in place by the Malaysian Government to rectify the negative impact?
3. What recommendations can be made out of the findings?

Proper and pragmatic language Planning

In the planning of Language Policy especially in education, it is in our opinion and knowledge that certain requirements should be followed through such as Corpus Planning, Language Acquisition Planning. It should be a thoroughly well researched and well planned use of English Language in the Language Policy for Education which also takes into consideration the variety of English to be used. Malaysia has enlisted assistant from Britain and the USA to assist in the research, mentor-mentee programme as well as the use of native speaker teachers to teach students from selected schools in Malaysia. As pointed out earlier, the English UK and English US variety of English differs in some ways in terms of spelling, semantics and cultural usage. Hence, we believe that the problem in the inconsistency in the use of English variety in terms of spelling convention, semantics and pragmatic use will lead to a non-standardised Corpus and confusion.

Literature Review

History on Language Policy in Malaysia

Before its independence from the British in 1957 when Malaysia was known as Malaya, it has a long history of being colonised under the British rule. Historically English has been the Language of Instruction in education in this country in the late 1950s and 1960s for all ethnic group. The British colonial masters have open opportunities for the local people of Malaya to be schooled with English Language as the medium of instruction to prepare them to fill in several positions in their administration. However due to several incidents such as the May 13, 1969 racial riot has resulted in a shift in the making Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction in education.

This is arrived at as a result of several important recommendations reports such as recommendations made by R.J. Wilkinson and the Razak Report in 1956.

According to Asmah (1987: 56 – 59), the English schools then were a passport to upward social mobility (Asmah. 1987: 56-59) This situation had created a disparity of the educated and the not educated. Privileged positions in the government were for those with the advantage of English Language knowledge competencies or at least have some basic rudiment of the language [16]

The privileged position of the English language was usurped by the Malay Language with the implementation of the National Language Policy under article 152 of the Constitution after the independence of Malaya in 1957 due to Nationalistic sentiments for ‘national integration’. English was to be used side by side the Malay language (Bahasa Melayu) for a further ten years after Independence. Under the ‘Revised National Language Act’ 1967, the Malay Language was made the sole language for purposes in Peninsula Malaysia (Asmah. 1987: 59).[22] In the field of education, four heterogeneous types of schools coexisted until 1970, the English Medium, Malay Medium, Chinese Vernacular School and Indian Vernacular School. The period saw schools using the Malay language, which is the ‘National Language’, as a medium of instruction were renamed as ‘ National Schools’ or *Sekolah Kebangsaan*.

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the Malay language, which is the 'National Language', as a medium of instruction were renamed as 'National Schools' or *Sekolah Kebangsaan*.

[3] In 1952, the Fenn-Wu Committee was established in 1952 to ascertain the requirements of the Chinese schools and Indian (Tamil) Schools. It reported that the Chinese schools and Indian Schools will still retain their mother-tongue for their cultural identity but are prepared to accept Malay and English as the medium of instruction. This situation makes them trilingual and gives them an added advantage.

[5] Stroupe R. and Kimura K (2015) espoused that from the time of the Razak Report (1956) and the Independence in 1957, language planners endeavoured to reconcile the English for international communication with national interest in a multilingual pluralistic nation (Asmah, 1993; Jeannot, 2013). Between the period 1970 to 1976, a huge proportion of the national schools, excluding the vernacular national-types had subsequently utilised Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction in phases, with English instated as a second language (Asmah, 1987; Ridge, 2004 in Stroupe R. and Kimura K, 2015)[5].

The end of 1982 saw the total phasing out of the English Language as a medium of instruction. Translation was thought to be the tool towards the development of the national language, the Malay language and the enhancement of the Bahasa Melayu literacy skills.

However there was a swing in the language policy when English language returned to be used in the teaching of crucial and critical subjects, such as Mathematics, Science and Technology. [17] Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia rationalised the reintroduction of English in higher institutions as crucial firstly, for Malaysia to remain competitive at the international level. Secondly, was because the pace of translation cannot keep up with the generation of knowledge and information in the field of science and technology (*New Straits Times*, 28 December, 1993:2, taken from Saran Kaur Gill, 2002:111).

Teaching and Learning Approaches in English Language

In retrospect, the method of teaching and learning was mostly the Traditional Method with heavy emphasis on the Grammar Translation method, Grammar drills and memorisation. Lessons rely heavily on textbooks and the chalk and talk approach with the teachers in full authority and communication is one-way with teacher in full command. This approach went on for years with the strong inclination towards an examination orientated mindset.

According to Asmah Haji Omar, 1984, during the initial years, there were three types of instructional approaches utilised, which were the (1) Grammar Translation Method, (2) the Direct Method and (3) the Situational Approach that is contextual (cited in Bawani Selvaraj) [4]. However at this juncture that the English language Teaching (ELT) focussed on the communicative approach for the teaching and learning of language, through contextualization. Unlike the structural emphasis in the past, focus is placed on meaning making. In fact, Nunan(1999) espoused that: "*Language was seen as a system for the expression of meanings, and linguists began to analyze language as system for the expression of meanings, rather than as a system of abstract syntactic rules*". (p.9)

In the Communicative Approach, capability in communication is considered as overriding linguistic competence. It emphasises on interactions and tasks in pairs work, group and involve oral drills. Students

are allowed to make mistakes without being put to right immediately and frequently. Creative use of the language is encouraged. Hence for the new Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) then, a new English examination known as English 122/322 was introduced (cited in Bawani Selvaraj) [4].

In a study by Mohd Sofi Ali (2003) on students from three East Coast primary schools, Malaysia found three causes for students' weakness in utilising English language, which are the lack of classroom, out of classroom use of English language and English alien in students' homes. Later ensuing this, in 1998, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) was launched by the Ministry of Education for pre-university and Six form students. The skills-set tested are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Later a non obligatory English for Science and Technology paper was introduced in 2003 for the upper secondary school students cited in Bawani Selvaraj [4]. From Mohd Sofi Ali's findings, we ascertained that the infrastructure such as number of classroom should adequately cover the needs of the people, with extensive research on short term and long term projection in place. Furthermore, we advise that the content of English language taught should be pragmatic and of real world value.

According to Saadiah Darus [15] the Malaysian EFL for the secondary curriculum which was formulated in 1975 and 1981 (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) was as a preparation for the upper secondary school students to be able to communicate well in English Language during their engagements in activities.

In a study by Harison Mohd Sidek [16] on EFL Reading Instruction: Communicative Task-based Approach English as a Foreign Language) found that an extensive part of the reading tasks falls short of CTBLT characteristics. The Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum was classified as communicative curriculum by the Ministry of Education, in 2003 as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which focuses on communication assignments or known as tasks (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 164). This involves Task-Based Instruction (TBI) that utilises tasks to make sense or meaning. This approach is different from the direct the traditional approach (direct approach) that has been practised in the past. In L2 instruction, the communicative approach is regarded as an indirect (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Terrell, 1997 in Harison Mohd Sidek) and likewise perceived as a learner-centred approach (Nunan, 1988). According to Vygotsky, 1978 (in Harison Mohd Sidek), the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is aligned to the Sociocultural Theory (SCT), with the concept that it is an instrument in a process that involves society and social discourses. However, we perceive the weakness in terms of grammatical structure, as sense and meaning making in the Communicative approach is centred on three interlocutors to be able to understand the codes and decode. Hence the inadequacies in mastering the grammatical structure will be very obvious in writing, as well as spoken when grammar is taken into consideration.

According to Stroupe R. and Kimura K, (2015) [5], students were put through model examination drills. Closed tasks and copying from the blackboard followed. In addition, teachers preferred lessons based on textbook input, with many using reading comprehension exercises, copying from the board, and worksheets (Hall, 2009). In order to remedy this, the MSELPU programme was implemented to enhance English language education interactivity at district level. In relations to this, the "Teaching English Through English," course was amended to "Teaching English Mainly Through English" (TEMTE). The TEMTE acknowledges that English is a foreign language rather than a second language in the rural classrooms. The project is inaugural in its approach of placing native speaker Teacher Educators - TEs for an extended duration in rural areas. Findings from research show that to use only English language in teaching without the use of other languages to explain certain words or concept is not suitable in a multilingual country where English could be Second, Third or Foreign language. We concur and acknowledge the fact that English may

not be the second language but will be a foreign language or other added language to the learners and users of the English language specifically in Malaysia. Thus the methodology and approach of teaching English should vary according to circumstances. Furthermore, certain concepts are difficult to grasp such as abstract concepts, hence the first language is needed to explain the concept. As such, translation is needed.

According to Muhammad Javed et al [6], as far the reading portion in textbooks is concerned, it comprises of a story, an essay, or an argument followed by some comprehension questions in order to develop ESL students' reading comprehension.

In the contexts of reading comprehension, Barrett's taxonomy of reading comprehension (cited in Clymer, 1968) presented five skill categories of reading comprehension such as 1) literal, 2) reorganisation, 3) inferential, 4) evaluation, and 5) appreciation. In addition, Day and Park's (2005) taxonomy of reading comprehension, and Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives revised by Anderson et al. (2001) presented almost similar skill categories. According to the taxonomies, literal comprehension refers to the information explicitly stated in the text, whereas reorganisation comprehension needs an ability to synthesise, analyse, and integrate the information plainly stated in the text.

Contrarily, inferential comprehension refers to the ability to locate information implicitly stated in the text through the making of assumptions and conjectures. These three skill categories are similar in the taxonomies in terms of concepts and meanings and are commonly used terms in the area of reading comprehension (Gill, 2008) Although the skills needed in reading comprehension has been identified by many researchers and presented in many established theories, we find the inconsistent English language policy has made the mastering of English vocabulary are at rudimentary level for most students.

The skill specifications stated in the Malaysian English Language Syllabus are ideal to develop ESL students' reading comprehension. However, they neither enable the teachers to know the students' level of reading comprehension nor do they reflect any diagnostic purpose (Sheikh-Ahmad, 1997). The Barrett's taxonomy of reading comprehension (cited in Clymer, 1968), comprises of five major skill categories of reading comprehension such as literal, reorganisation, inferential, evaluation, and appreciation that are categorised from easy to difficult level (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984) [6].

According to Afflerbach et al. (2008), reading strategies help the readers to decode text, understand the words, and construct or derive meanings of the text. Lapp, Flood, Brock, and Fisher (2013) concluded that well developed cognitive strategies have been used in various research studies since ESL students need to reread, interpret, ponder, integrate, analyse, infer, critique, connect, review and evaluate the ideas during reading the text in order to answer comprehension questions. Therefore, specific indicators designed to employ effective reading strategies and guidelines can enhance poor readers' performance in reading comprehension (Brown, Armbruster, & Baker, 1986) [6].

We view that a major study should be done to ascertain the mastery of the skill sets in secondary schools throughout Malaysia, covering urban and rural areas as well. This is to monitor the level and progress, and to measure the disparity and other requirements from the data garnered from the study.

Impact of the Inconsistent Language Policy

Thus, to answer Research Question 1 - What is the impact of the Inconsistent English Language Policy In Teaching And Learning At Secondary School Level In The Malaysian Education System; either Positive or Negative?

From International assessment evaluation result and ranking, the results indicate a negative result, that as a consequence to the inconsistent English Language Planning as MOI for Teaching and Learning at Secondary School Level in the Malaysian Education System. the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) results showed Malaysia was ranked 52 in reading, mathematics and science [24] out of 65 OECD countries (Sedghi, Arnett, & Chalabi, 2013) as reported in the Malaysia Education Blueprint

As a result of the inconsistent language policy with regards to the role of English as not being the medium for maths and science in primary and secondary schools anymore, there is an awareness of the gap. Hence training and development for English language teacher has been intensified and strategised in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MOE, 2012). In 2012, the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) results showed Malaysia was ranked 52 in reading, mathematics and science [24] out of 65 OECD countries (Sedghi, Arnett, & Chalabi, 2013) as reported in the Malaysia Education Blueprint. This clearly indicated that the rate of literacy has deteriorated and needed to be improved. Thus tracing the history and development in the inconsistent English Language Policy in teaching and learning at secondary school level in the Malaysian education system, the results are very clear. It clearly shows that the standard of English language has plummeted and has weakened as Malaysia is positioned almost bottom ranking at 52 place out of 65 OECD countries in the 2012, the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) results, just 13 places away from being abysmally last place at 65th placing. This can be attributed to the inconsistent English Language Policy Planning in Malaysia.

Furthermore, according to a newspaper report [25] the World Bank has released a report that although the 1970 language policy has improved the labour market outcome for the ethnic Malays through the change in the MOI (Medium of Instruction) in schools from English to Bahasa Malaysia, the change and other subsequent changes has brought about a negative impact on the nation as whole in terms of the deterioration of the English language in terms of the proficiency and competency of its users. The reversal from using English in the Teaching of Science and Mathematics to back again in Bahasa Malaysia has resulted Malaysia to have deteriorated in one aspect of international education benchmark

In addition to this, the same report [25] from the World Bank had stressed that before the changes was made to the MOI between 1999 and 2003; Malaysia's learning results were higher than the international average in the 'Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study' (TIMSS). However, results have shown a plummeting weakening in 2007 and further in 2011, corresponding with the inconsistent changes in the English Language policies in Teaching and Learning in the Malaysian education system in Malaysia.

Hence with both these two very important International level reports and subsequent world education rankings, it is very obvious of the significant negative impact from the inconsistent changes in the English Language policies in Teaching and Learning in the Malaysian education system in Malaysia.

Thus, to answer Research Question 2: What are the measures put in place by the Malaysian Government to rectify the negative impact?

It has been ascertained that due to the negative impact, the government has continued in allocating budget for English language in-service teacher training. The top-down planning and directives on a project-by-project basis, has created gaps as administrators and planners do not understand the realities and challenges on the ground.

There was a latest change in the national examination requirements that made it compulsory for students to pass their English Language examination in their Malaysian Certificate of Examination (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia -SPM) in 2016 [25] (and in Kulasagaran, 2014 in Stroupe R .and Kimura K 2015)[5]. According to Kulasagaran, 2013 in Stroupe R .and Kimura K [5] findings through a needs analysis done via survey found that the majority of classroom teaching involved of teacher-talk during teacher-student interactions.

Collaborations**Cambridge English is working with Malaysian Ministry of Education**

Recent development in English Teaching are in the form of collaboration between the Ministry of Education Malaysia and the Cambridge English Language Assessment to execute an extensive in-depth study of the learning, teaching and assessment of English in the Malaysian schools through an evidence-based approach. It focuses on students and teachers from pre-school to pre-university level. This project is known as "The Cambridge Baseline Project: measuring English language standards and establishing an evidence-based baseline for Malaysian schools." The programme is to bring to fruition the objectives set out in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025 to ensure that Malaysian students are proficient in English Language. The study aims to gauge the aptitude of students in utilising English language and evaluate the teaching capacity and methods in schools [7].

The present national curricula, the learning materials, assessments/examinations/tests and teaching practices will be examined. In addition ,the language levels of students and teachers at the end of pre-school, end of primary school (Year 6), end of lower secondary (Form 3), end of upper secondary (Form 5) and end of Form 6 will be tested.

Methodology

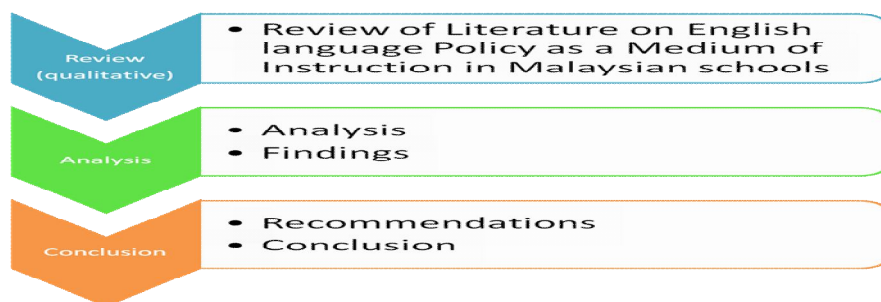
This paper traces the evolution of the English language policy and planning as a medium of instruction in the secondary schools in Malaysia, and aims to offer recommendations to address the issues of 'The Inconsistent English Language Policy In Teaching And Learning At Secondary School Level In The Malaysian Education System'. Data for consideration was from the related literature review and fieldwork on the subject of the inconsistent English language Policy in teaching and learning, and its impact at secondary school level in the Malaysian education system.

The framework for the research is a review of the historical evolution and changes that has taken place in the Malaysian English Language Planning since before independence in the 1950s till present day time. The impact on the inconsistent English Language policy in Malaysia is documented and ascertained through

reports, official statistics secured from the 2012 Programme for International Assessment (PISA) results, collaborative Teachers Training programmes between entities from other countries, such as from the UK and the US with the Malaysian government, and the deployment of native English Language teachers programmes to Malaysian schools that show that there are obvious gaps and room for improvement that the government has identified.



The Methodological Framework : Ascertaining impact in the Inconsistent English Language Policy In Teaching And Learning



Methodology : Qualitative approach through a review method

Thus, to answer Research Question 3: What recommendations can be made out of the findings?

Findings and Recommendation

We established and acknowledged from Mohd Sofi Ali's (2003 in Bawani Selvaraj [4]) findings that infrastructure such as number of classroom is a prerequisite and should sufficiently cover the requirements of the people. We advise that an extensive research on short term and long term projection should be carried out with policies to sufficiently run and have time to establish themselves. Moreover, we advise that the content of English language taught should be pragmatic and of real world value. However, we observe the limitation in terms of grammatical structure in current day communicative approach as sense and meaning making is focused on the interlocutors to be able to understand the codes in the target language and to

decode them with the added interference from the user's first language (mother tongue). Consequently the shortages in mastering the grammatical structure will be very obvious and show up in writing, as well as spoken form when grammar is taken into consideration.

We would like to point out that in Malaysia, English may not be the second language but will be a foreign language or other added language to some the learners and users of the English language. They who are not expose to English language, may not use the language or be able to practice it. Thus the methodology and approach of teaching English should vary according to circumstances.

Furthermore, for some of the learners at primary and secondary level, certain concepts are difficult to comprehend such as abstract concepts; hence the first language is needed to explain the concept. As such, translation is needed. Total English to teach English is not sufficient or appropriate in such circumstances.

Even though many researchers have been identified the skills needed in reading comprehension and are presented in many established theories [6], we find the inconsistent English language policy has made the mastering of English vocabulary are at rudimentary level for most students even at the secondary level. We view that a major study should be done to ascertain the mastery of the skill sets in secondary schools throughout Malaysia, covering urban and rural areas as well. This is to examine the level and development, and to gauge the inequalities and other requirements, and from the information garnered from the study to find remedial measures to be executed.

Thus through the tracing of the history and development in the inconsistent English Language Policy in teaching and learning at secondary school level in the Malaysian education system, the results evidently indicate that the standard of English language has plummeted.

This can be seen in the positioning of Malaysia almost at bottom ranking; at 52nd place out of 65 OECD countries, just 13 places away from being abysmally placed last at 65th placing. This can be attributed to the inconsistent English Language Policy Planning in Malaysia.

Conclusion

Despite the inconsistent English Language policy due to the socio-historical political aspects, the government should be decisive in the positioning of English language at the local and global level, and affirmative action on the concretization of the English language should be made in terms of its robustness. Thus, further studies could be made in the areas mentioned and the recommendations made should be considered and implemented. There should be a collective and concerted efforts with a well planned short-term and long-term strategic planning that could be modified accordingly, which will look into teacher's training and students learning outcome; with the adoption of technology and the utilization of various suitable tools and means where applicable - looking at Best Practices as well.

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