

Implementation and Challenges of English Language Education Reform in Malaysian Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This article elucidates the implementation of English as a second language (ESL) learning and teaching programmes at the primary school level, spanning three decades of English language education (ELE) in Malaysia, its reform initiatives as well as the arising realities. The realities highlighted underscore the paradoxical challenges experienced with each ELE reform that are introduced, arising from the multilingual and plural socio-political circumstances of the country. In particular, among recent reforms that are examined, is the consequence that the new Primary School Standards-Based Curriculum for English language education (SBELC), which was introduced in 2011, has on the literacy performance of year three pupils when they sit for the LINUS LBI (literacy and Numeracy Screening for English Literacy) test, and the extent to which the English teachers and these young learners are ready to embrace the new curriculum. Concurrently, a review of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) as well as the Malaysia English Language Roadmap (2015-2025), is undertaken and their implications for yet another major language in education reform juxtaposed against existing problems related to teacher's language proficiency, inadequate trained and skilled teachers, mismatch between curriculum and practices, limited language exposure, and most significantly, the foreboding view of the English language as a threat towards maintaining multilingual plurality, are duly extrapolated. By way of conclusion, this article draws upon selected innovative practices to illustrate the creative pathways that have emerged from these multifarious circumstances and have ironically shown potential in strengthening the young learners' English language proficiency, notwithstanding identified impeding factors.

Keywords: ESL Literacy; English Language Education Reform; English Language Proficiency; Language in Education Policy; Primary Education

INTRODUCTION

The English language is introduced to the Malaysian child as early as preschool, at the tender age of 5-6 years old. It continues to be taught as a compulsory subject in the national curriculum at the primary (6-12 years old), secondary school (13-17 years old), as well as post-secondary and tertiary levels of education (18 plus onwards). In sum, the approximate number of years the ordinary Malaysian who completes his or her formal education from pre-school to tertiary levels (undergraduate degree) averages between 14-15 years of English language education.

The inclusion of the English language as a subject in the national education curriculum of Malaysia is compulsory and guided by the language in education policy. However, it is not compulsory for the students to pass the subject towards completing their education at the primary or secondary levels. Even so, the role and status of the English language is institutionalized as an important Second language (English as a second language) in the Education Ordinance since 1957 and reaffirmed in the Education Act (GoM 1961 and 1996) and the National Education Policy issued in 1970 (MoE 2012). Meanwhile, Bahasa Melayu is decreed as the national language and as the medium of instruction at national public schools. At the same time, at the primary level, in the spirit of embodying pluralism, ethnic languages such as Mandarin and Tamil are permitted as mediums of instruction at vernacular public schools in the nation.

Even though it is established that a Malaysian child is taught the English language from the age of 6, early English language education does not guarantee competent acquisition of the language, as evident in the Malaysian scenario. Hayes (2014, pp. 8-9) in his assessment of English provision in primary schools, revealed that international comparisons in the Asia-pacific region by Nunan (2003) and reconfirmed by Bauldauf et al. (2011), as well as Kaplan et al. (2011), found policy decisions to lower the starting age to introduce English in the primary level has generally been unsuccessful. On the other hand, they highlighted that limited success of the policy is mainly due to inadequate trained and skilled teachers who are not proficient in the language themselves, mismatch between curriculum and pedagogical realities, limited time dedicated to language teaching and learning, insufficient and inappropriate learning resources, as well as increased fear of language endangerment.

In the same way, the Malaysian situation clearly exemplifies the aforementioned findings, where despite being taught the language since Year One or Year Three, at the national and national-type schools, respectively, Malaysian students, in general, have been unable to achieve a reasonable level of competency. It was reported in 2013 that less than 50% of the students who had completed six years of primary education were literate in the English language (EPU 2016, pp. 10-2). This problem has increasingly become critical in the current years with regards to graduate unemployment, where low English proficiency is cited (56%) as one of the main reasons for not hiring (JobStreet.Com). This situation directly posed a threat to the realization of Vision 2020 - the nations' aspirations to be fully developed and economically competitive (GoM 1996).

In response to these English proficiency challenges, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Government of Malaysia (GoM henceforth) had rolled out several notable reforms spanning more than thirty years of English language education or ELE in the country. Suffice to note that comprehensive historical accounts of the development of ELE in Malaysia and its reforms since pre and post-independence have been reviewed widely, critiqued and analysed elsewhere (See Hazita 1999, 2003, Pandian 2002, Selvaraj 2010, Wong et al. 2010, Musa et al. 2012, Sulaiman et al. 2015). However this paper focuses on the impact of selected education reforms on ESL teaching and learning at primary schools. Hence, it traces the development of ELE for primary education in Malaysia, and examines the multifarious factors leading towards the reforms, while determining their impact on the teaching and learning contexts and performances.

NATIONAL EDUCATION REFORMS

Essentially, four major national education reforms introduced by MoE and the government of Malaysia (GoM), in response to nationwide tensions over English language performance issues as aforementioned, are highlighted here. These initiatives include firstly, the Integrated English Language Syllabus for Primary schools or KBSR introduced in 1982, which employed the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, emphasizing on learning language for communicative purposes and not for grammatical knowledge. The fundamental principles in CLT was learner centredness and contextualized language use (Nunan 2003). The halo effects of this reform tapered out by early 1990s when differing results were reported in terms of teaching the communicative way, mismatch between syllabus objectives and CLT principles with actual classroom practices as well as language assessment (Musa et al. 2012).

The second reform came about with the onset of globalization and the need to develop knowledge-based society for Malaysia to be economically competitive going into the new millennium. Carnoy (1999) as cited in Selvaraj (2010, p. 7) emphasized that advancements in

information and communication technologies (ICT) and portable information has made English “the language of globalization, internet, trade and science”. Towards equipping students with computer literacy and ICT skills, MoE adopted the SMART School approach conceived by Perkins and his colleagues at Harvard (Perkins 1992 as cited in Mirzajani et al. 2016, p. 12) in 1997. The Malaysian SMART way of teaching Maths, English, Science and Bahasa Melayu was implemented in 1999. Unfortunately, this initiative was inundated with hardware and software problems right from the beginning. Time factor, limited computer literacy, lack of instructional design resulting in irrelevant content, technical malfunctions, inefficient ICT infrastructure and insufficient hardware were found to be the major reasons that caused teachers not to aggressively adopt and integrate ICT in their teaching (Azizah et al. 2005, Selvaraj 2010, Mirzajani et al. 2016).

Subsequently, a comprehensive review of the national education system conducted in 2011, led to the development of the new Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB henceforth) which was launched in 2012. The implementation of the MEB brought about the third education reform for primary education with the introduction of the Primary School Standards-Based Curriculum or KSSR in 2013. Moreover, the implementation of the MEB had an additional impact on ELE at the primary school level, i.e. the inclusion of English literacy in the Literacy and Numeracy Screening or LINUS programme. The LINUS programme underlined the imperative to ensure 100% of primary school children is literate in Bahasa Melayu and not less than 90% in English Language by the end of year Three (GoM 2012, pp E 9, E12).

The fourth and most recently introduced reform, which essentially is extended from the MEB, is the launch of the English Language Education Roadmap for Malaysia 2015-2025, (Don et al. 2015). The roadmap which is progressively aligned with the MEB serves as a guide for English language curriculum developers and teachers to ensure that students achieve proficiency levels aligned to international standards, benchmarked against the Common European Framework of Reference or CEFR. The reform holistically outlines the development of learners as competent users of the language to enable them to participate fully in both professional and academic contexts from schools up to tertiary level and also in teacher training. Aligning the system with an international standard (CEFR) is an element in the Malaysia Education Blueprint that aims to boost the level of education in the country to international standards.

Closely related to the English language education reforms is the language in education policy, which has undergone three significant shifts as well between 2013 and 2015. Major decisions with regards the language policy in the education system directly impact on the government’s attempt to uphold the national language, Bahasa Melayu, as a language for national unity as well as language of knowledge, whilst strengthening English language proficiency among multilingual learners, and maintaining the pupils own languages such as Mandarin and Tamil. A case in point is the reversal of the Maths and Science in English language policy, which was put into practice in 2003 but reverted back to Bahasa Melayu in 2012. This reversal came about as a direct result of the multilingual ethnic (mainly the Malays and Chinese) groups’ collective fear of the endangerment of their languages.

The following section will discuss the primary English language education pathways as they are impacted by the language in education policy and juxtaposed against the multifarious state of multiethnic Malaysia. It will reprise the effects of the education reforms discussed earlier, in relation to the shifts in medium of instruction language policy, on the development and aspirations of English language learning and teaching programmes.

PRIMARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION REFORMS

The introduction of the New Education Policy in 1970 marks the beginning of formal English as a Second Language education in Malaysia. A cursory observation of the history of English Language education in Malaysia from then reveals the steady decrease in access and exposure to the English language as two types of public primary schools in Malaysia were established with the policy--the National Schools and the National-Type Schools. This is because, at the National schools, the medium of instruction is Bahasa Melayu and English is taught as a subject from Year One. Meanwhile at the vernacular National-Type schools which use Mandarin or Tamil languages as mediums of instruction, Bahasa Melayu is taught as a subject from Year One, and English language is taught only from Year 3. Therefore, children who go through the national school system would receive 6 years of English language input whereas those who are taught at vernacular schools would only receive 4 years of English language tutoring. Nonetheless, for both systems, English Language is only a compulsory subject to be studied but not compulsory to pass in standard national examinations.

Henceforth, with the enforcement of the language in education policy which made Bahasa Melayu and the vernacular languages the mediums of instruction, at the national primary schools, English was taught for 210-240 minutes a week, while students at vernacular national-type schools only received 60-90 minutes of English a week. With regards to the English language curriculum that was employed from 1970-1980, the syllabus was influenced by grammar based language learning approach, while choral repetitions and substitution drills were widely practiced.

Not surprisingly, the limited amount of exposure to the language saw the majority of students in both the national schools as well the vernacular schools from the rural areas, performing poorly in the nationwide English language examination. This situation created an apparent divide between urban and rural schools performances, which spurred the ministry to review and reform the curriculum, by the end of 1980, to be more inclusive and holistic in learning principles as well as practices. This review led to the development of the integrated curriculum introduced to primary and secondary schools or KBSR and KBSM respectively.

THE INTEGRATED ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM (KBSR) INITIATIVE

As elucidated earlier, the first major curriculum reform for primary education occurred in 1982 with the introduction of the New Primary School Curriculum or KBSR. This reform came about in 1979 following the Cabinet Committee Report on the Review of the implementation of the 1970 Education Policy. The overarching educational aim of KBSR incorporated the elements of knowledge, skills, and values to bring about holistic and integrated development of the intellect, spiritual, emotional and physical aspects of the individual. The review had recommended that the teaching of English as a second language at the primary school level should provide a strong foundation in communication skills and operational competency to use the language correctly in both speech, “with international intelligibility” and in writing (MoE 2001, p. 2). It was to replace the grammar biased rote learning orientation of the previous syllabus. Hence the overarching goal of the new KBSR integrated English language curriculum generally was to teach the language for effective communication with the following specific aims:

“To equip pupils with the basic skills and knowledge of the English Language so as to enable them to communicate, both orally and in writing, in and out of the school”.
(MoE 1983, p. 1, 2001, p. 2).

In line with the holistic aims of the new integrated curriculum, the KBSR English syllabus, which was informed by the Communicative approach, aimed to be purposeful and meaningful for the English language learners in the Malaysian contexts so that they can use English in everyday life. This is reflected in the learning outcomes of the curriculum where the themes and topics in the syllabus were locally contextualized, integrating the purposeful use of the English language into local contexts that are familiar to the students. For example, the names in dialogues and role-playing are that of local names and scenes as well as events are all locally relevant. Littlewood (2013) explains this adaptation of CLT in Carless' terms (2007, p. 604) as 'context-sensitive teaching methods'. In the case of KBSR English in Malaysia, the English syllabus is designed around 'situated task-based approaches', contained within the national goals, educational values and cultural settings. Besides, the KBSR English syllabus encouraged holistic, student centered learning and interactive integration of the four language skills in its approach to language learning. The overall effectiveness of the KBSR English syllabus on the mastery of the language amongst the primary school students was measured at the end of Year Six in the Primary school achievement test or UPSR. Conceptually, the CLT approach as conceived should have produced competent users of the English language. Instead its implementation had created a distinct chasm in the society, between the urban and rural as well as between categories of socio-economic status.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AND TEACHING EFFICACY REALITIES

It is indeed unfortunate that in the twenty years (1983-2003) that the CLT approach was implemented, proficiency in the English language was increasingly influenced by socio-economic factors rather than teaching efficacy. The performance among primary school students who completed six years of primary education has shown a consistent gap which was widening between urban and rural schools performance. With 68% of the population still living in the rural areas, the numbers amounting to this gap became critically significant by the end of 1980s (GoM 2012). This prompted the Cabinet to ask for another review and reformulation to the curriculum, fearing the long term impact on the goals of the then New Economic Policy (1981-1985). Most of the blame directly related to English language performance then is placed on the teaching hours, teacher quality, teaching pedagogy, language assessment, teaching technology and infrastructure, as well as, home environment and student motivation (Hazita 1999 and 2009, Ali 2003, Salvaraj 2010, Musa et al 2012, Darmi and Albion 2013). These reasons are found to be similar to those reported by Nunan (2003), Bauldauf et al. (2011) and Kaplan et al., (2011) in their Asia-pacific Region studies as abovementioned.

Towards 1990, the cabinet committee report recommended several approaches and strategies to bring about better democratization in educational opportunities and reduce the imbalances between rural and urban societies. Leveraging on technology to bridge this gap in terms of access to knowledge and opportunities, technology in education paradigm became the driving concept for transforming teaching approaches and ways of learning in the classrooms. Hence integrating computers into systems of learning and subject-content development became the pedagogical learning design for the nation's SMART school initiative that was introduced just as the nation entered the new millennium.

VISION 2020 AND THE SMART SCHOOL PROGRAM INITIATIVE

To achieve sustainable development as well as develop globally competitive citizenry for the new millennium, Malaysia was intent on keeping pace with the wave of globalization which was riding on scientific and technological advancements (Hazita 2006). Related to this end,

the former prime minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (1991), voiced his concern regarding the poor state of English proficiency among students from the primary up to the university levels, and was very worried that Malaysia may lose its economic competitiveness in the 21st century. The concerns raised by him then led to the formulation of Vision 2020, which remains the envisioned national goals for the 21st century.

“To achieve the goals of Vision 2020, the nation will need sustained and productivity driven growth, which can only be achieved with a technology-literate, knowledge-based workforce that is fully prepared to compete in the fast-changing global economy of the 21st century. The cornerstone of this initiative is the Smart School concept.”

(MDeC 2006, p. 11)

Subsequently, the Smart School pilot project began in 1999 and employed the integration of educational technology in teaching four subjects, Maths, Science, English and Bahasa Melayu at primary and secondary schools. This initiative can be considered another reform of the curriculum as such an enhancement in the education system entailed change in the school culture and pedagogical practices, which endeavour to ‘stimulate thinking, creativity’, catering to differential learning needs and styles, while enhancing equitable access (SSPT 1997, p. 3).

While the novelty of integrating subject content with technology as a teaching tool had generated positive feedback, aspects that specifically hampered the teaching and learning English the SMART way, are reported by Azizah et al. (2005). Their study revealed that, on top of the hardware issues, English teachers found the subject courseware made available to them were inappropriate for their students in terms of level of proficiency as well as content. It was also interesting to note that their investigation revealed the majority of the students still preferred face to face interaction with their teachers as they struggled to listen and understand the instructions and content delivered only in English through the computer based lessons. Additionally, both teachers and students preferred to carry out activities that will prepare them for the English language tests, i.e. in the traditional paper and pen mode, alluding to the fact that their teaching and learning goals remain exam oriented (Azizah et al. 2005, pp. 19-20).

Nonetheless, the advent of technology and the wave of globalization have underscored the need for improved English language proficiency among Malaysians, especially the younger generation, to enable them to competitively perform 21st century skills. 21st Century skills are essentially e-literacy skills that all members of the networked society should acquire. They include a series of “higher order skills, abilities, and learning dispositions” that have been identified globally as being required for success in 21st century society and workplaces (P21 2007, pp. 1-2), where English language apparently has become the dominant language. As such, the precipitous deterioration in English language competency among Malaysian students especially in understanding English scientific texts, desperately needed to be arrested.

GLOBAL LANGUAGE AND ETHNIC LANGUAGE PARADOX

As the world entered the new millennium, advancements in information technology and globalization have made English language proficiency imperative for developing countries such as Malaysia, as most knowledge based information is in the said language. In a drastic attempt to address the decline in English proficiency, the government reintroduced English as medium of instruction for Maths and Science in 2003. However, this initiative was met with resistance right from its initiation from various groups. Mother tongue advocates argued that the move will marginalize the potential for the vernacular languages to develop as a language of knowledge and may lead to mother tongue endangerment.

As such amidst the hue and cry of nationalists and vernacular schools proponents, in 2009 it was announced that this controversial language in education policy was reversed and the teaching of both subjects reverted back to Bahasa Melayu or the vernacular languages as of 2013. Conversely, this decision, seen as a reversal of the English language in education policy, openly drew strong criticism from the industry and corporate world that claim low English proficiency among the graduates especially, rendered them unemployable and competitively disadvantaged against others from rising economies in the region.

THE NEW PRIMARY SCHOOL STANDARDS-BASED CURRICULUM (KSSR) INITIATIVE

Struggling for a compromise between nationalism sentiments and socio-economic aspirations in the face of current global competitiveness, the MoE launched the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 in 2012 and announced the implementation of another new Primary School Standards-Based Curriculum or KSSR beginning 2013, replacing the KBSR after nearly 20 years of its implementation. KSSR is also a platform for developing Higher Order Thinking Skills or HOTS in student learning. This major curriculum change was brought about by the increasing realization that the Malaysian education system failed to get more than 60% students to attain the minimum proficiency levels in mathematics and science compared to the international standards in the TIMSS and PISA, when Malaysia first participated in the international assessments in 1999 and 2009 respectively. Another contributing factor was the alarming discovery that from 2010-2012, more than 35% of the primary school children, exiting after year Six scored below the minimum competency level. This worrying situation led to the introduction of the LINUS program in 2010, and LINUS LBI 2.0 (Literacy and Numeracy Screening for English Language) in 2012, designed to screen and identify students who will need remediation in Bahasa Melayu, Maths and English literacies from years One to Three.

The introduction of KSSR for primary education and KSSM for secondary education hope to enhance the development of higher order thinking skills and emphasise the attainment of expected competencies, by the students, according to established standards in the curriculum. The modular approach adopted allows the teacher to be truly learning centred and facilitates differential learning needs rather than focussed on academic and cognitive achievement outcomes. The new curriculums aim to ensure that no child will be left behind and that every child, by the end of Year Six for primary education and end of Form Five for secondary education, will acquire the literacy, numeracy and essential life skills (MoE 2015).

Towards this end, literacy problems at the primary level are identified through the LINUS assessment, which screens all enrolled students twice a year from the beginning of Year One up to Year Three. The results from the screening enable teachers to identify students who require literacy and numeracy remediation from an early stage. The screenings are conducted by the teachers at schools in March and September annually as a pre and post measurement of the students' achievement of the standard competencies, after undergoing remedial sessions or the Literacy Intervention Program (GoM 2012, p. 13). Those who do not pass the screening test for the written and oral components will be enrolled for these remedial sessions for 7-10 periods in a week. In total, the lower primary student would go through 6 screenings by the end of Year Three, at the end of which 100% rate in literacy and numeracy is expected of a Year Three student. The KSSR reform included the introduction of the Standards-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) described below.

THE STANDARDS-BASED ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM (SBELC)

The Standards-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC), which was introduced in 2013 in line with KSSR, gives equal emphasis to English literacy skills as to English communication skills, as core elements in the language curriculum. The SBELC gives emphasis on basic reading literacy, phonics, penmanship, language arts and higher order thinking skills (HOTS) such as critical and creative thinking skills as well as reasoning skills. The SBELC is organized in a modular structure around themes that are designed to enable students to solve simple problems, make decisions and express themselves creatively (Curriculum Development Division 2011). By the end of Year 6, primary students should be able to competently demonstrate ability to:

- i. communicate with peers and adults confidently and appropriate in formal and informal situations;
- ii. read and comprehend a range of English texts for information and enjoyment;
- iii. write a range of texts using appropriate language, style and form through a variety of media;
- iv. appreciate and demonstrate understanding of English language literary or creative works for enjoyment; and
- v. use correct and appropriate rules of grammar in speech and writing.

For SBELC, standard British English is the preferred choice in terms of pronunciation, grammar and spelling. The number of English language hours is also increased. In this new curriculum English language is taught about 6 hours a week or 300 minutes to cover four modules: listening and speaking, reading, writing, and language arts. Three broad themes that provide content for the modules are: (1) world of self, family, and friends; (2) world of stories; and (3) world of knowledge (Sulaiman et al. 2015).

It should be noted that the main shift in this new curriculum is the mandatory focus given to English literacy at the early lower primary level. Previously students who were neither able to read, write nor speak in English may have managed to slip through the system until reaching Year Six. However with the implementation of LINUS assessment which is conducted twice a year from Year One, this problem can be identified and addressed specifically right from the onset of primary education. This screening is very important for students from rural areas and vernacular schools especially as majority of the students do not live in English enriched environments at home nor in and around the schools. Most often the only access and exposure to the language is experienced at schools only no matter how limited (Hazita 2003, Sulaiman et al. 2015).

The curriculum reform aims for at least 90% literacy acquisition by the end of year 3 (or lower primary level) of the child's primary education on the LINUS LBI 2.0 programme. Students who fall below the established literacy standards, after three years in primary school will be provided with concurrent remedial coaching, as an intervention initiative. The established literacy standards are based on twelve constructs (MoE, 2014) that the students in Year One – Year Three should show more than 90% competency in:

- Construct 1: Able to identify and distinguish shapes of the letters of the alphabet
- Construct 2: Able to associate sounds with the letters of the alphabet
- Construct 3: Able to blend phonemes into recognizable words
- Construct 4: Able to segment words into phonemes
- Construct 5: Able to understand and use the language a word level
- Construct 6: Able to participate in daily conversations using appropriate phrases
- Construct 7: Able to understand and use the language at phrase level in linear texts
- Construct 8: Able to understand and use the language at phrase level in non-linear texts

Construct 9: Able to read and understand sentences with guidance

Construct 10: Able to understand and use the language at sentence level in linear texts

Construct 11: Able to understand and use the language at sentence level in non-linear texts

Construct 12: Able to construct sentences with guidance.

Interestingly, screening for English literacy which was introduced in early 2013 as LINUS 2.0 saw an increased attainment as well from 59% in Year One to 75% in Year Two and 83% in Year Three. Yet, it is important to note that for English literacy a score below 90% in the LINUS screening for English is unsatisfactory and requires further remediation and increased enhancement. Even though the implementation of the LINUS 2.0 initiative appears to show plausible improvement in the students' English language proficiency, its operation has encountered some problems thus far. Early investigations into the effectiveness of the literacy intervention program for English literacy found that the English teachers, unlike their Bahasa Melayu and Math counterparts, have to double up as remedial teachers as well. Additionally they are in dire need of the right remedial content, and require separate teaching environments for remedial sessions. They also ask to be provided with expert support and assistance for remedial sessions as they need help and time to prepare the teaching aids (Bokhari et al. 2015, Ahmad and Mutalib 2015). Many English teachers are also asking to be provided with opportunities to upgrade their own proficiency in the language. These inhibiting problems should be addressed immediately by the Ministry of Education to ensure the literacy intervention programme's success.

Indeed the implementation of the new KSSR English curriculum, SBELC, is still in its early stage and its impact on the English language competency of the young students may still be early to gauge. Nevertheless, the most valuable introduction of KSSR is the employment of LINUS, the compulsory early literacy screening in Year One and its literacy intervention programmes that will be the key turning point in ensuring English literacy and English language proficiency will be equitably attained from an early stage, eliminating the rural and urban as well socio-economic gaps. Of course, in this regard, raising teacher quality, improved infrastructure for schools in rural areas should also be enhanced simultaneously. Relatedly, the social realities of teaching and learning English in non-native context such as Malaysia with its multilingual cultures are also important considerations as they have implications for language learning motivation as well as long term assimilation of the language.

CHALLENGES ARISING FROM PARADOXICAL SOCIAL REALITIES

Many conclusions can be derived based on the examination of the education reforms discussed above. However for the purpose of this paper, three critical observations are offered in relation to English language education at the primary school level. The first is the mandated importance of the role of English language in Malaysia. The fact remains that even in its contested position since independence, English language is maintained as an important 'second language' constitutionally. Moreover, high competency in English literacy skills are valued and fully appreciated. Ironically, in spite of the emphasis given to the teaching and learning of this language, as evident in the upscaling of ELE standards embodied in each new reform introduced, English language performance amongst school going and tertiary students remain inadequate. The reasons for this predicament have been extensively explicated previously throughout this paper as well as elsewhere (Hazita 2006 and 2009, Selvaraj 2010, Musa et al. 2012, Ahmad et al. 2015, Don et al. 2015).

Secondly, it should be pointed out that the learning design and underlining emphasis of the reforms proffered have shifted from subject or skills specific outcomes in the 1980s to

outcomes that promotes ways of learning, applying and regenerating knowledge, as well as internationally benchmarked competencies. In relation to English language learning in Malaysia for example, language rich content which is critically important for language uptake remains limited. Hence, students find themselves engaged in communicative activities unprepared as fundamental enabling language skills such as vocabulary, grammar, phonetics and basic aural-literacy skills (Nation 2005, Schmitt 2009, Ahmadi et al. 2012) are not directly taught to prepare them. Obviously this is a perennial debate in the field of language teaching in non-native contexts: do you teach about the language or do you teach how to communicate in the language? Of course the answer is you have to teach both. Unfortunately local research have found that students receive limited input before engaging in a communicative activity (Noor et al. 2011, Ahmadi et al.2012).

The third conclusion that can be derived from the review of the reforms, is the growing influence of social constructivism learning theory perspective on education. Social construction theory dictates that knowledge construction is dependent on the context in which the learning occurs (Street 1994, Howell 2012). This means that students need to experience authentic and meaningful learning experiences across a variety of real contexts. The MEB, and SBELC for example advocate integration of ICT to facilitate learning, while encouraging student-centred learning as well as interactions with others within and outside of the learning community to create meaning and develop knowledge. But how do you create ‘authentic experiences’ for English language in a target-language-deprived context juxtaposed against a multilingual rich environment? The answer lies in focusing on learning centredness over student centredness while creating authentic learning experiences that situates the learners in thinking roles, while forming strategic purposes for learning English in glocal (global and local) contexts. Hence, it is vital for the curriculum content to draw upon the multicultural realities that the students are socially exposed to and experience in their lives and translate them into content for the syllabus and practices in pedagogy. Only through this process of socialising the practices of English literacy into their normal circumstances will the student be able to value the practices and internalise the behaviours for long term (Vygotsky 1978, Gee 1990, Heath 1991, Street 1994).

Situating English language learning in the non-native context by using source culture content can encourage students to gain a deeper understanding of their own culture and local knowledge, while at the same time build their English language competency to talk about and share their own cultures to a wider global circle. Such a concept is exemplified in an innovative programme called *Your Language My Culture* introduced by Zawiyah et.al (2015) where the focus is on cultural based language enrichment through readings on local culture and inter-disciplinary readings across disciplines. Their objectives are three-fold: to provide local content (local knowledge, culture, tradition, literature, history, geography) for students to draw upon in their performance of oral and written communication in English; to nurture a local reading perspective while recognising western perspectives embedded in the English language; and to develop an understanding of the relevance of other school subjects to the way of life of ordinary Malaysians. Early response to the pilot use of this module in Terengganu, (a rural state in Malaysia where 16% of its schools are performing below 85% of the English literacy rate), has been encouraging, as both teachers and students find the local content more relevant and meaningful to them in relation to learning the English language in their non-English environments.

Additionally other ways of socialising the students into learning English meaningfully in their own local contexts, is increasing parental and community involvement in schools. Some of the related initiatives developed and implemented for the MEB 2013-2025 since 2013 are the Parent-School engagement programmes, School-Community at large Programme and Teach for Malaysia. These programmes are further explained below.

Parent-School Engagement programme. The central aim of this initiative is to encourage parents to be involved their child's learning, achievements, and potentials. Schools are guided on how to engage parents to be more involved in school activities, while parents are shown how to assist their child's learning at home. According to the Malaysia education blueprint review 2015 report, to date, more than 2.2 million parents have been involved in home-school mediating activities. The most significant impact this programme has had on school children is in the increased home reading practices. A survey conducted by the MoE on 1,800 parents nationwide revealed that 60% of parents spend more time reading with their children while helping them complete their homework (MoE 2015, pp. 207).

School-Community-at-large programme. This initiative encourages schools to reach out to the wider communities to collaborate in fostering student character building and talents. The collaboration includes programmes such as mentorship, job shadowing, and adopt a school campaign among others. The programme has witnessed stakeholders from industries, businesses and non-profit organizations entering partnerships with schools to train, sponsor and collaborate on improving schools management systems, improve learning spaces and pool expert resources to provide extended learning experiences to the children (MoE 2015, p. 208). The biggest impact of this programme is that these same stakeholders whom before this initiative had remained in the periphery making demanding noises of their expectations are now part of the solution to the problem.

Teach for Malaysia. Teach for Malaysia or TFM was initiated in 2010 with the view of bridging achievement gap between urban and rural schools particularly. High performers from various backgrounds are selected as role models to teach for two years in mainly rural areas. In collaboration with MoE and the global Teach for All network, TFM provides experiential training programme that blends teacher training modules with innovative leadership development components (Teach for Malaysia 2016).

In summary, it can be deduced that the success of any reform and its initiatives for ELE can be hampered by extenuating socio-cultural factors that pose as obvious challenges such as socio-economic disparities that causes limited access to opportunities in a multithnic society, and fears of vernacular language endangerment among multilinguals. Other related factors such as teachers' English proficiency as well as quality of pedagogy and materials can also hinder progress of the implementation. This situation becomes more complex when the same issues are politicized and debated upon by language nationalists, vernacular advocates, politicians, economists, educationists, and linguists.

CONCLUSION

English language education in Malaysia has undergone several reforms in the last three decades. However, the author opines that the two significant reforms, the MEB 2013-2025 and the English Language Education Reform Roadmap 2015-2025, recently introduced in 2013 and 2015, respectively, will bring definitive transformations to the way English as a second language is taught and learned in Malaysia in the 21st century from primary to tertiary levels.

English language teaching as envisioned in the MEB document is progressive and comprehensive as all stakeholders concerned with the quality of the future generation are given a role to contribute towards ensuring its quality and standards are attained. This position has effectively extended the responsibility for teaching English beyond the

classrooms into the realm of the society from all domains. Never before has the learning of English by a Malaysian child been the responsibility of every single stakeholder in the country. Essentially, with participation and collaboration from all responsible, the child will be socialized into learning English as a local experience, thus helping him to develop integrative motivation to acquire the language in its non-native context. Furthermore this nurturing environment will make the language less foreign to most children, in particular those from rural areas and multilingual home environments, where access to the target language may be limited. Moreover, in relation to English language teaching and learning, early results have shown there are more earnest and serious efforts to guarantee improved English language proficiency. Some of the initiatives worth mentioning include ensuring skilled and trained English Language teachers with the imposition of language proficiency criteria as a prerequisite; operationalization of the literacy screening and intervention (LINUS) programmes; use of locally enriched learning materials and creative ways of learning; employment of differentiated assessments; and involvement of the stakeholders from all levels of society as partners in learning.

At the same time the launch of the English Language Education Roadmap is timely and long awaited. It is envisaged that the roadmap dedicated to ELE will finally provide a systematic guide for the development of trained English language teachers, benchmarked syllabus items and teaching materials, internationally standardized assessments, and clearly defined language competency expectations and outcomes for all education levels. It is also foreseen that the existence of the roadmap for ELE development will buffer any potential shifts in socio-political sentiments against English language, that have previously influenced flip-flop decisions, with regards to its role in language in education policy and practices. Having said that, it is necessary to underline the two measures that can improve the chances of this reform succeeding. Specifically these are, adequate support and training for the teachers and the development of effective CEFR aligned syllabus and assessments.

Clearly, these two aforementioned reforms if implemented successfully as planned, will change the landscape of English language learning experiences in multilingual and plural Malaysia at micro and macro levels. With greater emphasis on standards and competencies that are closely assessed for self-achievement rather than school success, and increased involvement of parents and community including private and public sectors, an expanded ecosystem of learning is created beyond the classrooms to encompass the social realities of the students' life outside of the schools. With these changes, there is potential that previous challenges arising from paradoxical social realities where even though the English language is acknowledged as a necessary medium to acquire, it is simultaneously viewed as a threat to the sustainability of local languages, while its dominance is alleged to colonize thought and world of knowledge, will eventually dissipate. Situated within this enhanced ecosystem, learning the English language, which is not native to the local environment, becomes relevant, purposeful and more socialized to the young students.

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