

The Teaching of English as a Second Language in West Malaysia

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Many changes have taken place in the educational scene of our country since Independence, but one of the most significant of them pertains to the relative importance of Bahasa Malaysia and English. Bahasa Malaysia, besides being the medium of instruction in all National Schools and a compulsory language in all National-type Schools, is gradually replacing English as the medium of instruction in progressively higher levels of learning. English, on the other hand, is a compulsory second/foreign language in all non-English medium schools, and is taught as one of the subjects in the curriculum.

The steady progress achieved in the teaching of Bahasa Malaysia is manifest all around us. We see non-Malays using the language fluently. Bahasa Malaysia is an acknowledged tool of communication among Malaysians. If we look back to the time when it was necessary to differentiate between National Language and Bahasa Melayu (Malaysia), and to hold the National Language days, weeks and later National Language months to whip up enthusiasm among Malaysians for their National Language, we cannot but marvel at the great strides made in such a short time as a little over a decade after Independence.

The position of English today on the other hand, is the opposite of that of Bahasa Malaysia. The standard does not seem to be as high as when English was used as the main medium of instruction. Periods are allotted on the school time-table, and the syllabus is meticulously covered, but unfortunately most of the pupils are unable to do what they are supposed to – and that is to communicate well in that language. Many children leave the primary school especially the Sekolah Kebangsaan unable to converse in correct simple English. One cannot expect the standard to be as high as when English was used as the main medium of instruction, nevertheless a standard must be set based on the aim of teaching the language. Whatever the aim may be, the principle of learning and teaching any language, that is, to enable the pupil to express himself, to read and write in that language should not be thrown by the board. It is generally not recognised nor appreciated by teachers, pupils and parents that the main aim of language teaching in our schools today is to make children bilingual, or even trilingual as in the case of children in Chinese or Tamil National-type Primary

Schools. The term 'bilingual' refers to the ability to communicate effectively in two languages i.e. Bahasa Malaysia and English in the context of our country.

With the steady increase of emphasis on Bahasa Malaysia the level in the teaching and learning of English has somewhat wavered. In the eyes of most parents and pupils, English is just one of the subjects in the curriculum and is not as important as Bahasa Malaysia. Many pupils have become apathetic towards studying English as it does not seem to command the 'bread and butter' value as it did before.

There is much left to be desired both in the recruitment and training of second language teachers. A large number of teachers trained are S.P.M. holders whose level of English is not as high as one would like it to be and, therefore, if any language is to be taught effectively, the teachers must not only be proficient in that language, but should also be able to understand the philosophy behind the whole system of teaching the language. There are teachers who follow slavishly any method that is recommended to them without using their discretion or imagination to vary it to suit the particular circumstances of their students. If they are drilling a pattern, they contrive situations that are often unnatural. If they succeed in evoking the desired response from their pupils they are satisfied, even if the pupils learn the structure in a meaningless manner. Although remedial work should be an essential feature of language teaching, many of the teachers are not able to add this dimension to their normal chores of language teaching. Automatic promotion ensures that children move from one standard to the next higher standard although they may be very weak in the language. The cumulative effects of continued failure are not very conducive to further effective learning of the language. The syllabus and teachers' handbook have been put out in good faith in an attempt to provide the young and inexperienced teachers with a well-planned, orderly, progressive course for use in the primary school. Unfortunately, these have had the effect of putting teachers in a straight jacket. Teachers work through the items painstakingly without deviating even a little until they can proudly claim that they have covered the syllabus. Although it is stated in the syllabus that the

Handbook does not aim at stifling originality and initiative in the teacher nor does it expect uniformity of teaching techniques throughout the country, the vast majority of teachers who are incapable of using this freedom merely follow the suggestions in the Handbook.

The new syllabus being a structural syllabus, emphasizes the structural aspect of the language. Too much is lost, damaged or sacrificed in trying to teach English in the best possible way. The complete reliance or dependence on the structural syllabus is habit formation. The purpose of practice through pattern and other drills is to make speech production automatic, given the necessary stimulus – response relationships. Although it is realised that the pattern drill is not really speech in the sense of true communication, it is believed that the learner will subsequently be able to transfer what he has practised and learned in an artificial situation to an actual situation demanding real language communication. In our schools, as they exist today, generally there is neither the congenial atmosphere nor appropriate motivation that will ensure that this belief will materialize.

The trend towards objective testing in the country has its impact on TESL. While it is agreed that objective tests have certain advantages, sole use of them in TESL will have an adverse effect on the achievement of the important aim of using the language as a tool of communication.

Modern facilities and equipment for TESL are not available in all schools. Schools do not seem to make effective use of radio lessons because of the lack of suitably trained teachers.

I do not pretend that there are easy remedies at hand to deal with some of the problems as mentioned above. However, it is incumbent on all of us who share this concern over falling standards in TESL, to explore all possibilities to check the situation and to improve it.

The importance of regular evaluation at all levels of TESL should be stressed. In this way it will be possible to keep track of the progress made and to carry out corrective measures where necessary.