Promoting the 3Es (Exposure, Experience, Engagement) in an English-Rich Rural Primary School Community

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ABSTRACT

In a non-native English speaking rural community, getting the community of students, teachers and parents to communicate in English is a huge challenge. When SK Rungus, a rural school in Tuaran district of Sabah, Malaysia initiated SK Rungus English Village (SKREV) as a highly immersive programme aligned to the Upholding Bahasa Malaysia, Strengthening the English Language (MBMMBI) policy in 2015, it became a proactive measure to create an English-rich environment to deliver the 3Es (exposure, experience and engagement) in English communication. SKREV became a pet project and part of the professional learning community culture where collaborative learning is encouraged and innovation to create best practice is promoted. The programme guaranteed exposure to English with the provision of facilities, materials and activities rich in the language. It provided meaningful learning experiences with emphasis on positive attitudinal change. SKREV necessitated significant engagement of stakeholders - the school leaders, the teachers, parents, community and private entities and most of all, the students in community activities carried out in an environment immersed with English language and literature. This paper describes the notable success in overcoming the barriers of shyness and awkwardness and the limitations of infrequent use of the language in a remote English speaking village within the school community. Evidences are provided on the eagerness and commitment of the students, parents, teachers and the community at large in collaborative efforts as the project slowly transformed the affinity towards English. The project encouraged creativity, innovation and strong community participation.

KEYWORDS: highly-immersive programmes, professional learning community, School Improvement Specialist Coach Plus (SISC+)

Introduction

Spearheaded by Vision 2020, Malaysia has embarked on numerous strategies to transform conservative and traditional development engines into contemporary and success-proven means of generating appropriate competences that duly described a high-income developed nation by year 2020. A more aggressive transformational approach began in 2010 aligned to the Government Transformational Programme, GTP1.0 and followed by GTP 2.0 in 2012. The Malaysia National Education Blueprint was launched on September 6, 2013 and along with that, there has been many programmes introduced within the school environment to address numerous gaps in education. One of the programmes includes a native speaker's programme under the supervision of School Improvement Specialist Coach Plus (SISC+). These were among the 23 initiatives introduced under the Upholding Bahasa Malaysia, Strengthening the English Language (*Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia, Mengukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris,* MBMMBI) policy. Three core elements focusing on strengthening the English language are the Literacy and Numeracy Programme (LINUS), Pro-English Language Teaching (Pro-ELT) and Highly Immersive Programme (HIP). The LINUS programme aims to ensure that all Malaysian children have basic literacy and numeracy skills after three years of mainstream primary education. The Pro-ELT on the other hand, focuses on strengthening English teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools across Malaysia. HIP aims to codify best practices of school leaders and scale up to all schools via sharing, learning and support (Azian, 2015).

In support of the implementation of these programmes, there have been more efforts to create a culture of professional learning community (PLC) in schools. Shumar (2009) explains the aim of the PLC is to develop a knowledge society via knowledge co-creation, thus deviating from the traditional methods of professional development. The PLC is a community of practitioners; in this study, referring to the teachers and SISC+ executives who collaboratively engage in continuous cycles of inquiry-based teacher learning (DuFour et al., 2010; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hord, 1997; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Teachers collaborate with others when they need to find effective solutions to overcome the challenges faced in teaching students (Campbell, 2005; McLaughlin, 1992; Webster-Wright, 2009). The PLC brings out creativity and innovative ideas from the teachers and other stakeholders via data collection and analysis, problem identification and understanding so that effective solutions are expressed from peer collaboration (Fullan, 1993, 2007; Schon, 1983; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2007). Therefore, an effective learning cycle is developed as the teachers take ownership of this knowledge when they adapt and apply this co-created knowledge into concrete strategies to improve teaching and learning (McLaughlin, 1992; Vescio et al., 2007).

Background of the Case Study

This paper presents a case study on the implementation of the HIP in a rural school in Tuaran, Sabah, Malaysia. SK Rungus is one of the 300 selected schools in Malaysia as a pioneer for this programme. The effort integrated other strategies such as PLC and SISC+ programmes to ensure that SK Rungus becomes a community village that encourages the use of English to create an English language environment, thus promoting greater English proficiency among the pupils in the school. The programme was named SK Rungus English Village (SKREV), implying it as a highly immersive programme and providing three main elements of success, called the 3Es (exposure, experience and engagement) in English communication. The programme guaranteed exposure to English as there is provision of facilities, materials and activities rich in the language. There are meaningful learning experiences emphasizing

improving motivation and positive attitudinal change towards communicating confidently in English. SKREV also prompted significant engagement of various stakeholders consisting of school leaders, teachers, parents, community, private and public entities and most importantly, the pupils in the school.

Problem Statement

Malaysia is a strong economy within the ASEAN Economic Community and is considered as a prominent trading nation in terms of trade percentage of GDP compared to other countries in the Southeast Asian region. It identifies a significant move towards attaining Vision 2020, propelling Malaysia to become a high-income developed nation by 2020. However, Azian (2015) reported that despite these rapid developments and continuous developmental programmes over the years, students in Malaysia are still facing tremendous challenges in attaining English proficiency. According to statistics in 2012, English was the weakest core subject in national assessments with 25% failure rate at UPSR, 23% at PMR and 22% at SPM. In international English exams, 50% of students failed in the 1119 paper. It was also noted that 62% of tertiary level students were in MUET bands 1 and 2. In addition 48% of employers rejected students due to their poor command of English (Azian, 2015). Based on data from the Malaysian Examination Board, there has been a consistent failure for English in SPM since 2011. Rozana (2015) highlighted that there were 23.2% failure in the subject in 2011, 22.9% in 2012, 20.0% in 2013 and 22.7% in 2014. These statistics implied an acute achievement gap which requires a paradigm shift in approaches to teaching and learning of English in the school. It also expressed the needs to integrate and employ all available resources to raise the standard of English among the pupils.

The performance gap in English is even more prominent in rural schools, particularly in low-performing schools. With inadequate facilities, materials and exposure to English, the pupils in these schools are deprived of the opportunity to learn English effectively. However, with the recent adoption of the professional learning community culture, the existence of *in situ* assistance from SISC+ executives and adoption of HIP in rural schools such as SK Rungus, there is a high possibility for positive change leading to increased performance and proficiency level in English among the pupils. This paper highlights the journey of SK Rungus which was selected as one of the pioneer village schools in using the HIP and other strategies to improve the standard of English and at the same time, promoting greater motivation, commitment and concerted efforts from all respective stakeholders to ensure ownership of the programme.

Research objectives and questions
This study aimed to address some questions pertaining to the implementation of the SKREV. The following research objectives were developed as a guide to the inquiry.
   (a)   To determine the effectiveness of the programme contents in improving the pupils' English communication proficiency;
   (b)   To determine the impact of the programme on the stakeholders (teachers, pupils and the parents); and
   (c)   To determine the motivation level of the pupils to learn more in English; and
   (d)   To determine the perceptions of the parents who participated in the various activities under this program.

The corresponding research questions were:

   (a)   How effective were the programme contents in improving the pupils' English communication proficiency?

   (b)   What was the impact of the programme on the stakeholders (teachers, pupils and the parents)?

   (c)   Did the programme increase the motivation level of the pupils to learn more in English?

   (d)   What were the perceptions of the parents who participated in the various activities under this programme?

Literature Review

The journey of SK Rungus towards improving their pupils' performance in English particularly was supported by several learning theories which are elaborated in this literature review section. Further to that, the successful implementation of activities under the programme was due to the incorporation of strategic approaches such as professional learning community implemented under the coaching and mentoring of SISC+ and the HIP.

Supporting learning theories

There are many theories and models to explain and guide learning approaches in the classroom. This includes behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism, design-based and humanism (Thirusanku & Md Yunus, 2014). The implementation of SKREV is based on constructivism which portrays learning as an active constructive process. Learners actively construct new information associated with prior knowledge to create subjective mental representations. Knowledge is not acquired but constructed through a contextualized process. Learners make hypotheses based on the environment and test them again and again through negotiation in the learners' social life (Alghzewat, 2015). Hence, the theory of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Development also supports the construction of knowledge. Lee (2015) explains that there are two main viewpoints in this theory. The first one indicates that cognitive development is mediated by culture and social interaction. The second belief is about the zone of proximal development model (Vygotsky, 1978). The zone of proximal distance (ZPD) happens when there is social interaction between a student and a more knowledgeable individual in a particular subject matter (Thirusanku & Md Yunus, 2014). The more knowledgeable person will supervise the students' learning or there is peer cooperation which promotes the learner's capabilities to solve the problem on his/her own. Peer cooperation provides interaction that enables the learner to achieve even higher or understand abstract concepts with greater consciousness (Crawford, 1996).

Strategic approaches

In SKREV, two main approaches in promoting teaching and learning were applied. The first one utilized the professional learning community (PLC) culture. There are many researchers who support the use of PLC in education as it improves student achievement positively (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Farkas, 2003; Jackl & Lougée, 2012). As teachers, particularly those in rural schools, are often struggling to improve the quality of teaching and learning, PLC is able to foster collaboration (Wood, 2007) and ensure that teachers are supported by the district education office and school management in implementing more meaningful and effective English language activities in and out of the classroom. In past practices, teachers became inherently isolated with classroom teaching closed to others and they had limited means of enhancing their skills and knowledge of curriculum and instruction except via attending training from time to time (Hord, 2008). The

removal of physical barriers and isolation has inspired teachers in school to be more motivated to share their work and significantly bring improvement to the students (Ratts et al., 2015). With the inclusion of SISC+ as a permanent staff at the district education office who provides coaching and mentoring to these teachers, as well as linking the teachers to contemporary best practices, this has opened wider opportunity for collaborative work, effective team effort and combined competences to support school-based language projects.

Additionally, the introduction of HIP to further improve students' competences in language in 2015 triggered more positive changes. The HIP became one of the core elements of change in language teaching and learning in school to address the poor performance in English. The programme was initiated after the Ministry of Education conducted an English Language Lab in 2012. The outcome of the study showed low proficiency level among students and therefore, the HIP together with Dual Language Programme (DLP) were included in the 2016 National Budget with an allocation of RM38.5 million (Azian, 2015).

The HIP program is aimed at increasing students' English language proficiency through an immersive learning environment and positive behavioural change. The HIP Toolkit is developed based on the roles of stakeholders in students' learning and there are suggested activities to create an immersive learning environment. Each stakeholder; the school leaders, teachers, parents and the community and private bodies play their roles. The school leaders provide continuous motivation, enforce discipline and engage parents and the community in the HIP activities. As for teachers, they are required to deliver effective teaching and learning and to create English language programmes. This should also include creating English language program, ensuring materials, tools and teaching aids are developed. Teachers are also encouraged to carry out events and activities. On the other hand, the parents may organize personal development and learning. They can volunteer as support teachers during the activities. Lastly, the community can provide expertise and assistance including financial assistance. Private organizations may conduct corporate social responsibility activities that involve schools.

Both strategies provided key success elements such as effective team building and collaboration, provision of resources and goal-centered integrated team comprising of relevant stakeholders. Schools particularly those located in rural areas would benefit tremendously from this programme.

Methodology

Research design
The study used an action research approach beginning with problem identification followed by action plan development, data collection and analyses, result reporting and implementing actions that continue to go through the cycle of action research (Hine, 2013). In this study, students' issues and challenges in learning English were examined through a collaborative meeting of SISC+, school leaders, teachers and parents' representative in a series of meeting. A survey was carried out with the distribution of questionnaires to the students and parents. Additionally, reflective discussions with teachers via lesson study were conducted under the guidance of the SISC+. Interviews with parents were also conducted to understand the issues from their viewpoints.

The SKREV action committee

The initial discussion in December 2015 led to the creation of an Action Committee called the SKREV Committee which included teachers, school administrators, parents and members of the community. Under this committee, several activities were planned for intervention the following year.

Programme intervention

The programme was carried out based on the strategic elements of the 3Es – exposure, experience and engagement in English communication. Table 1 provides detailed explanation about each of these strategic elements.

Table 1
The 3Es of the SK Rungus English Village Programme

Element	Description	Examples of Activities
Exposure	Providing students with greater exposure or direct contact with the use of English language in communication	Audio-video shows, active communication activities such as debate, speech, and mock market
Experience	Providing situations to students which require them to use English language to communicate in order to solve issues and challenges	Games, quizzes, problem-solving adventures, etc.
Engagement	Extending the time for direct contact with English language by providing tasks and assigning roles to the students	Group projects, out-of-class discussion via Facebook and social media

Based on consensus and decision of the Action Committee, the following four main projects were identified:

- (a) English Language Centre
- (b) English Everywhere
- (c) Fun English Zone
- (d) English Market

Target population and sampling procedures

The school, SK Rungus, is a rural primary school with 14 teachers. The school comprises 125 pupils including pre-school students. There are 40 students in the upper level (Years 4, 5 and 6) while the remaining are in pre-school and the lower level (Years 1, 2 and 3). Table 2 presents the number of students in each class. All the students are from the Dusun ethnic group with 90% of their parents working as farmers. The number of parents involved in this project is 85 coming from 48 households.

Table 2
School population in the target school

Class	Number of students	Percentage
Pre-School	25	20.0
Year 1	19	15.2
Year 2	20	16.0
Year 3	21	16.8
Year 4	15	12.0
Year 5	11	8.8
Year 6	14	11.2
Total	125	100.0

For the purpose of this study, the upper level students (n = 40) and representative of each household were all selected to participate in the questionnaire survey. However, only ten students from Year 5 and Year 6 classes were selected using simple random sampling method

in the pre-post tests as they are considered as the critical group to benefit the most from this project. It was hoped that the project can contribute to their confidence and ability to communicate in written and oral English as well as achieve improvement in their UPSR. Standard pre- and post-tests were designed for this study. The pre-test was conducted prior to the programme while the post-test was done last March.

Research instruments

This study used several research instruments to gather adequate and appropriate data to fulfil the research objectives and answer the research questions. The main research instruments are pre- and post-tests which evaluated students' English proficiency level. A questionnaire was also designed to gather information from students and parents. A total of eight items with 5-point Likert scale (beginning with "1" for "strongly disagree" up to "5" for "strongly agree") were in the questionnaire. Three items needed to be answered by the students and five items by the parents. The pre- and post-tests were an overall assessment test consisting of grammar, vocabulary, sentence building and short composition, similar to their monthly test. The pre- and post-tests were parallel tests that assessed proficiency in the same aspects of the language. Besides that, an interview protocol was prepared to conduct a semi-structured interview with the parents. Other than these instruments, information was collected from the reflective discussion of the SKREV Action Committee.

Data collection and analysis procedures

Data was collected from various means such as pre- and post-tests, questionnaire, interview answer sheets, meeting minutes and discussion notes of the Action Committee. Data from these sources were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data were analysed with SPSS 23.0 while qualitative data were analysed manually by compiling information based on thematic procedures.

Results

Implemented projects
Setting up the facilities

The creation of SKREV started with initial discussions, followed by fund development from various sources including the school, parents and donations from the community and private entities. With available fund, the Committee initiated a *Gotong Royong* or collaborative work to build the English Fun Zone Hut. Parents, teachers and members of the community helped to build the hut (*see Figure 1*).

Figure 1: Pictures showing parents and teachers working together to build the English Fun Zone Hut

Activities for the students

Many activities were implemented on a daily or weekly basis to encourage more exposure to English. Table 3 lists the activities and their roles in encouraging students to speak in English among themselves.

Table 3
Mini projects in the 3Es Programme

Mini Projects	Activities	Roles
English Language Centre	Teaching and learning activities are carried out here as an alternative to the classroom.	Serves as a library whereby students can access resources on their own or with their teacher.
English Everywhere	Educational materials are showcased in and out of the classroom throughout the school area in posters, photos, banners, etc.	Visual representation of nouns, verbs, proverbs, idioms, etc.
English Fun Zone	Various activities are carried out for the students, teachers and parents.	An interactive learning atmosphere is provided to encourage communication in English.
English Market	Students speak in English with the canteen operator to buy food and drinks. The canteen walls are decorated with educational materials in English. The list of food and drinks is written in English.	The market is transformed into a rich English environment whereby students, teachers, parents and canteen operators are encouraged to speak in English.

Figure 2 shows some of the activities that were carried out in this programme. It shows a variety of the activities, and involvement of the students, teachers, parents and even the canteen operators.

Figure 2: Pictures showing activities carried out in the school

Table 4 presents some of the activities, participating groups and achievements at the English Fun Zone. The various activities provided exposure, experience and engagement to the students.

Table 4
Accomplished activities at the English Fun Zone

Activities	Time/Duration	Participants	Comments
Find the Words - Dictionary	Recess Time	1-4 students	Learn and practice how to use the dictionary
Scrabble	Before/After School	Parents	Create/practice vocabulary
Read Me a Story	After School	Students and Parents	Enjoy/enhance reading
Word maze/Puzzle	Recess Time	5-6 students	Create/practice spelling
Let's Sing	School Assembly	Solo or group	Boost confidence
Show and Tell	Weekly School Assembly	1 student per assembly	Enhance knowledge and public speaking skills

Effectiveness of the programme
The results are shown in Table 5. The pre-test mean score was 44.80% which is lower compared to the post-test mean score of 54.80%. The paired sample t-test at 95% confidence level shows that the t value is -4.277 at a significance level of 0.002. Therefore, it is concluded that the students' achievement in the post-test is significantly higher than their achievement in the pre-test. This shows that the programme was effective to improve the pupils' English communication proficiency.

Table 5
Comparison of students' achievement in pre- and post-tests

Tests	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.
Pre-test	44.80	12.87		
Post-test	54.80	11.69	-4.277	0.002

Impact of the programme on the stakeholders
The impact of the programme on the teachers, pupils and parents was determined based on their feedback during the committee reflective discussions and meetings as well as through semi-structured interviews with the parents. Based on the comments presented in these discussions and meetings, an overall positive result was shown. The comments from the stakeholders were compiled and summarized as follows:

(a)   The programme fostered greater relationships among the stakeholders; it was observed that there was a progressive level of participation and cooperation from the parents as the activities were carried out. Parents and pupils were more eager to help after the first month and more open to give ideas for change.

(b)   Students were always anticipating in new activities and eager to join; the lack of interest to learn English was replaced with greater anticipation for new activities. The students became more excited to learn to speak the language informally out of the classroom.

(c)   The parents felt appreciated for being able to contribute significantly to their children's education; this was observed in their show of gratitude to the school by willingly working as volunteers to complete the building of the facilities. They were more open to ask the teachers how they could contribute more.

(d)   The teachers were more confident to deliver their teaching in the classroom; the enthusiasm of the students led the teachers to be more active in discovering new things that they could introduce to the school. The reflection with their mentor became livelier as they shared new knowledge and skills to improve their teaching and learning processes.

Motivation level of the pupils

Data from a total of 40 questionnaires distributed to students in Level Two (Years 4, 5 and 6) was analysed and the results are shown in Table 6. The students looked forward to more activities (mean = 3.98). They perceived the activities as fun and enjoyable (mean = 4.00) and they want to learn more in English (mean = 4.03). The results show that the students' motivation to learn English is generally high.

Table 6
Motivation level of students to learn English

Item	Mean	SD
(a) Students were looking forward to the activities	3.98	0.62
(b) The activities were fun and enjoyable	4.00	0.72
(c) Students want to learn more in English	4.03	0.70

Perception of parents about the activities

The parents' perceptions about the activities were determined based on their responses in the questionnaires sent to all 48 households. Table 7 shows that the parents perceived the activities as beneficial for their children (mean = 3.69) and helping their children to be confident in English (mean = 3.80). The parents are also happy to participate in the activity (mean = 3.73). However, their perception level is moderate to participate more in the future (mean = 3.50) and willingness to give assistance in future activities (mean = 3.65).

Table 7
Perception of parents about the activities

Item	Mean	SD	Level
(a) Activities are beneficial for their children	3.69	.78	High
(b) Activities help their children become confident in English	3.79	.71	High
(c) They are happy to participate in the activity	3.73	.76	High
(d) They want to participate more in the future	3.50	.74	Moderate
(e) They are willing to give assistance in future activities	3.65	.81	Moderate

Discussion and Conclusion

The results presented above show that there are improved facilities in the school due to the collaboration of the school, teachers, parents and community. The collaborative effort contributed to the building of an English Fun Zone hut where activities can be carried out either as planned or impromptu by the pupils themselves. The results of the pre- and post-tests show that students have improved significantly after only three months of programme implementation. It shows that intervention in and out of the classroom was able to boost students' competence in English language communication. The various activities provided opportunities for exposure, experience and engagement of the students.

The programmes provided ample opportunities for exposure as students were in direct contact with the use of English in communication, particularly in the mock market, the Fun Zone and the English Language Centre. The numerous activities that were carried out created situations for the students to communicate in English and learn experientially. The consistency of doing the activities repeatedly and yet with continuous introduction of something new assured that students were engaged in the programme. The implementation of SKREV based on HIP was able to provide an English-rich environment with numerous opportunities for exposure, experience and engagement to English.

Further to that, the programme also fostered better relationship among the stakeholders. It brought parents closer to the school to openly participate in the school activities. Nevertheless, there is still some reluctance from the parents to join in future events or to contribute in these activities. One of the reasons may be due to inferiority complex as most of the parents came from a low socio-economic group. Those who are actively involved in the programme now are mainly the minority, particularly those with steady income jobs. It is necessary that more efforts are taken to encourage parents' participation in these activities.

The assessment of this programme was carried out as a phase one evaluation at three months after the implementation of the programme. It has shown great promise and potentials to achieve greater success in the future. However, regular monitoring of the progress is necessary and appropriate actions should be taken to rectify current weaknesses. There should be more effective means of generating involvement from the parents as they play the role as teachers to their children at home.

Nevertheless, the programme showed that teaching English was easier when students were more responsive to English. In the English-rich environment at SKREV, students were given encouragement to communicate in English. Continuous and repeated exposure to English not only in the classroom but within the entire school promoted active learning.

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