

## WHY AREN'T STUDENTS PROFICIENT IN ESL: THE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated teacher perceptions of the reasons for *KBSM* students' low proficiency in English. The study focuses on teachers' perceptions of their classroom practices, their students, the *KBSM* syllabus, and the *PMR* examination. The subjects employed were 58 *KBSM* teachers from the central region of Malaysia. Data were collected through the use of questionnaires and interviews. The findings revealed that teachers, the *KBSM* syllabus and the national examinations focus mainly on two language skills – writing and reading. Another major focus was on grammar. Teachers were also found to be teaching mainly for the national examinations. Not much emphasis was given to listening and speaking in both classroom teaching and national examinations.

### Introduction

The issue of English language in schools has been one of the hottest topics in the country lately. Gaudart (1987) states that Malaysian society is constantly regaled with opinions about the falling standards of English but falling where and in what way, is seldom mentioned. Nevertheless, the declining standard of English among school children and the younger citizens in general, has undoubtedly worried many quarters, so much so that the Ministry of Education has taken a drastic measure in requiring Year 1, Form 1 and Lower Six students to learn Mathematics and Science in English from 2003 onwards. This latest move is deemed necessary so that time is not wasted in arresting the declining standard of the language among schoolchildren.

When addressing the deteriorating standards of English, it is important for us to study the contributing variables to this issue. Perhaps, one of the reasons is our teaching. The central focus of the Secondary School English Language Programme in *KBSM* is the development of the four language skills i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking. In fact, it is stipulated in the curriculum specifications that teaching is to emphasise both the *oracy* (listening and speaking) and the *literacy* (reading and writing) skills. The objectives of ESL teaching are to enable the learners to:

- listen to and understand spoken English in the school and in real life situations,
- speak effectively on a variety of topics,
- read and understand prose and poetry for information and enjoyment and
- write effectively for different purposes.

(Ministry of Education, 1989)

It is evident that these skills are outlined in the curriculum and one would think that classroom practice would reflect the above. The purpose of this study is to investigate if this is the case.

The other salient factor in Malaysian classroom practice is the examination-oriented lesson. It is common for teachers to focus entirely on the examination especially for learners who are sitting for national examinations such as the *PMR*. One of the main reasons given is that at the end of the day, the school, parents and learners want good grades. Everybody and all schools competes for better grades each year. According to Lewey (1977), the Malaysian education system is very examination-oriented. Even if there is a change in teachers' attitude and they accept any changes in the curriculum employed, they are still compelled by the examination and will teach according to what will be tested.

There have been several studies carried out relating to the deteriorating standard of ESL in Malaysia. One such study carried out by Pillay and North (1997), examined the role of the topics in an integrated approach and the way it is handled in the *KBSM* syllabus, textbooks and examinations. They found that there is a perceived conflict between the official syllabus, the textbook syllabus and the examination syllabus, leaving teachers in a dilemma over what to teach. The official syllabus and the textbooks stress topics or themes; whereas, the examination focuses on skills and grammar.

Ratnawati (1996) carried out a study to assess the attitudes of ESL secondary school teachers in the state of Selangor Darul Ehsan towards the different aspects of the *KBSM* English Language Syllabus. Her results indicated that the majority (69.4%) of the respondents felt that the syllabus would enable the learners to achieve a minimum competency in English. Nevertheless, some (27.9%) felt that the syllabus would enable learners to have a good command of English.

Lim (1994) studied fluency and accuracy in spoken English through a survey questionnaire conducted among EFL in-service teachers. Her survey revealed 84.1% of the respondents who taught at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, agreed that their learners were not able to speak English well and that speaking is the weakest skill among the four language skills. The results also showed that 73.3% of the respondents named speaking as the skill learners got the least practice in at the individual

level and 50% cited speaking as the skill in which learners needed more practice. She also identified certain classroom practices, which she believed were the possible causes for low spoken English proficiency. The practices in classes were the widespread use of Malay in teacher-talk, the use of mother tongue in peer interaction and the motor-perceptive nature of speaking activities like reading aloud and drilling.

Norrizan (1992) writes about the issue of socio-linguistics, which she believes is one of the reasons why learners are weak in English. The article discusses the importance of the knowledge of socio-linguistics in a heterogeneous, multiracial/cultural Malaysian setting to ESL teachers in order to understand learners, who may come from communities of different language habits, cultures, socio-economic status and backgrounds. This, according to her, is essential as teachers should be wary of any stereotyping “so as not to apply any miscalculated judgments on learners from different backgrounds” (1992: 88). For example, learners from remote and rural areas may not see the importance of learning English; thus they lack motivation and also find it difficult to learn this foreign language.

Rosli and Malachi (1990) investigated if there was a significant difference between the English proficiency of rural and urban school learners. They conducted a comprehensive proficiency test on the learners and also analysed their English *SRP* results. It was found that the proficiency test results differed significantly. Urban school learners were more proficient than their rural counterparts. The same was evident in the English *SRP* results, which showed a higher percentage of failure (47.7%) in the rural schools, while there was only 13.4% failure in the urban schools.

### **The Study**

This present study contributes to the relatively limited research concerning the low ESL proficiency among Malaysian learners. The study outlined the following research questions:

1. What are the ESL teachers' perceptions of their classroom practices?
2. Do teachers regard the KBSM syllabus as effective in developing learners' language skills?
3. What are the teachers' perceptions of the English PMR examination?
4. What are the teachers' perceptions of the challenges faced by ESL learners?

### *Subjects*

The subjects for the study were 58 ESL lower secondary school teachers in Forms One, Two and Three. All these teachers were from government sponsored schools rather than fully residential schools, technical schools, vocational schools or privately funded institutions. This is because most ESL teachers come from *SMK* and they

therefore, represent a sample of the target population. The majority of the subjects were female teachers (49 female and 9 male). Most of them were experienced, i.e. there were 32 teachers who had taught ESL for more than ten years and only 6 teachers who had less than two years of teaching experience. From this sample, 5 teachers were randomly selected for the oral interview conducted.

### *Instrument*

The study used two instruments: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire aimed at gauging teachers' perceptions of the following:

1. Their classroom practice (for example, tasks employed and the development of different language skills)
2. The KBSM syllabus
3. Teacher-prepared school assessment
4. The PMR national examination
5. Challenges faced by ESL learners

The questionnaire was generated from a review of related literature and insights from informal discussions with teachers. It employed the 5-point *Likert* scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The questionnaire was piloted among graduate teachers studying at Universiti Putra Malaysia and revisions were made as necessary. Item analysis was carried out and the reliability of the questionnaire was established through *Alpha Cronbach* ( $r = 0.7275$ ). In order to probe teachers' perceptions further, an interview was carried out. The interview was semi-structured so that a better insight into the issues at hand could be gained. The main focus of the interview questions was on asking the participants to describe their teaching approaches, their evaluation of the *KBSM* syllabus, the focus of the English *PMR* and the reasons behind the learners' weakness in English.

### *Data Collection*

A total of 70 questionnaires were distributed to selected secondary schools in the central region of Peninsular Malaysia. The questionnaires were left with the language coordinator of the respective schools and were recollected about 2 weeks later. The response rate was 82.9% ( $n=58$ ). A week later, 5 teachers who were randomly selected were interviewed individually.



*Data Analysis*

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the responses in the questionnaire. The SPSS was employed to calculate the frequency, mean and standard deviation. The interview protocol was transcribed to reveal the qualitatively different ways in which teachers perceived the above issues.

**Results of Questionnaire**

Table 1: The materials used by the respondents in their ESL Lessons

Material	Mean	s.d.
Workbooks	0.91	0.28
Textbooks	0.81	0.40
Newspapers	0.79	0.41
Games	0.50	0.50
Story Book	0.38	0.49
Magazines	0.33	0.47
Songs	0.22	0.42
Computer	0.21	0.41
Tapes	0.14	0.35
TV progr.	0.0069	0.26
Videos	0.0052	0.22

s.d.- standard deviation

n=58

The first section of the questionnaire focussed on teachers' perceptions of their classroom practices. From the questionnaire it was found that the 3 most utilized materials in the ESL classroom were workbooks (mean=0.91; s.d.=0.28), followed by textbooks (mean=0.81; s.d.=0.40) and newspapers (mean=0.79; s.d.=0.40). The 3 least used materials were listening tapes (mean=0.14; s.d.=0.35), TV programmes (mean=0.0069; s.d.=0.26), and videos (mean=0.0052; s.d.=0.22).

Table 2: The language activities frequently included in an ESL lesson

Tasks employed	Mean	s.d.
Writing exercise	4.38	0.70
Grammar exercise	4.09	0.94
Reading comp.	3.97	0.72
Vocabulary exercise	3.67	0.98
Literature exercise	3.67	0.76
Oral interaction	3.53	0.92
Reading aloud	3.45	1.06
Pronunciation	3.19	1.18
Listening exercise	2.93	1.02

s.d. – standard deviation  
n=58

Table 2 shows the language tasks employed in class. It is evident from the table that the writing exercise is the most frequently used activity (mean=4.38; s.d.=0.70) in the respondents' lessons. This is followed by grammar exercise (mean=4.09; s.d.=0.94) and reading comprehension (mean=3.97; s.d.=0.72). Listening and speaking activities are the four least employed classroom tasks.

Table 3: The role of KBSM in developing language skills

	Mean	s.d.
Reading	3.45	0.82
Writing	3.31	0.90
Grammar	2.91	0.90
Speaking	2.87	0.92
Listening	2.87	0.98

s.d. – standard deviation  
n=58

Teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of the *KBSM* syllabus in developing the following skills – listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar is shown in Table 3. The respondents reported that the *KBSM* is effective in developing the reading skill, followed by writing and grammar. The skills of speaking and listening were ranked as least effectively developed. This suggests that teachers perceive the *KBSM* to focus mainly on reading and writing.

Table 4: The Perceived focus of language skills and grammar in the school English examinations

	Mean	s.d.
Writing	4.07	0.79
Reading	3.72	0.85
Grammar	3.72	0.99
Speaking	2.18	1.22
Listening	2.00	1.10

Teachers' perceptions on the focus of the different language skills and grammar in the school English examinations is presented in Table 4. It is found that teachers reported focussing most on the skill of writing (mean = 4.07; sd=0.79) in the examinations that they prepared. This is followed by reading and grammar. Speaking and listening are focussed upon least.

Table 5: The perceived focus of language skills and grammar in the PMR English examination

	Mean	s.d.
Writing	4.26	0.86
Reading	3.93	0.81
Grammar	3.88	0.99
Speaking	2.37	1.23
Listening	2.17	1.24

Table 5 lists the perceived focus of the four language skills and grammar in the PMR English examination. The respondents reported PMR examinations as evaluating learners' writing (mean=4.26; s.d.=0.86) and reading (mean=3.93; s.d.=0.81) abilities the most. This is followed by grammar. The two skills that were reported least tested were speaking and listening.

Table 6: Learners' weakest language skills

Skill	Mean	s.d.
Writing	0.48	0.50
Speaking	0.48	0.50
Reading	0.0017	0.13

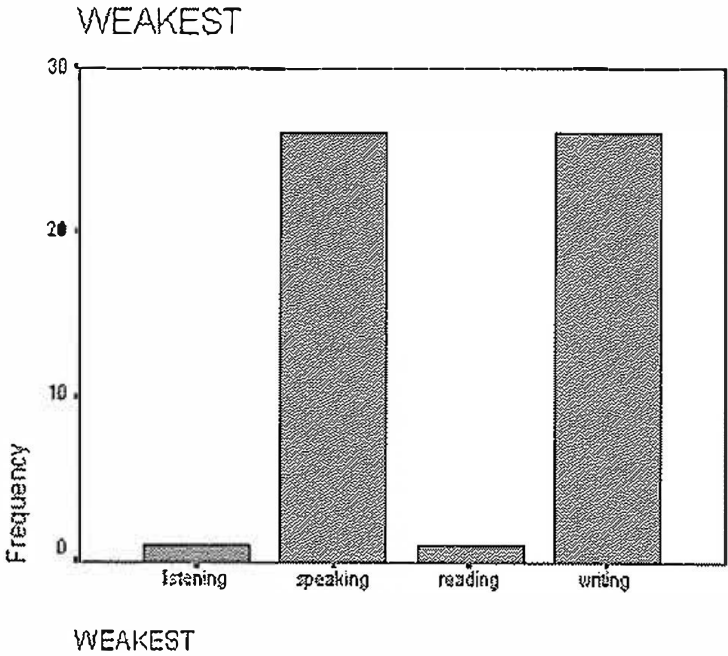


Table 6 and Figure 1 report the learners' weakest language skill. Writing and speaking skills are both thought to be learners' weakest skills.

Table 7: Factors contributing to low english proficiency among most learners

FACTORS	Mean	s.d.
Limited opportunity to use Eng. outside the classroom	4.24	0.90
Negative attitude towards Eng.	4.21	0.98
Lack of confidence	4.21	0.86
Lack of motivation	4.19	0.91
Insufficient exposure to Eng.	3.74	1.10
Imbalanced focus of lang. skills	3.37	0.88
Ineffective syllabus	3.21	0.99
Inadequate teaching material	3.02	1.16
Ineffective teaching methodology	2.95	1.06
Lack of time to study	2.76	1.40

The factors thought to be contributing to low proficiency in English among most learners are listed in Table 7. The main reason reported is limited opportunity to use English outside the classroom (mean=4.24; s.d=0.90). The second reason is negative attitude towards the English language (mean=4.21; s.d=0.98) and lack of confidence in using the language (mean=4.21; s.d.=0.86). In third place is lack of motivation to learn the language.

### Interview

For ease of discussion, only salient points gained from the interview protocol will be discussed. They are classified into materials used in the lessons, skills taught, the *PMR* examination, examination-orientation, and learners' weakest skill. Table 8 below summarises their opinions regarding these issues.

Table 8: Summary of interview responses

Participant	Teaching materials	Skills taught	PMR examination	Examination-orientated	Learners' weakest skill
1	No	Spkg	R & W	Yes	Spkg
2	No	Wrtg	R & W	Yes	Spkg
3	No	Wrtg	R & W	Yes	Grammar
4	No	Rdg	R & W	No	Spkg
5	Yes/No	Rdg	R & W	Yes/No	Spkg

R, Rdg – reading W, Wrtg – writing Spkg – speaking

### *Teaching Material*

To start with, let us analyse the materials used by the respondents in their classrooms. Four respondents did not use the prescribed textbooks during their teaching. They used other materials such as workbooks, newspapers, and Internet articles. Most of them said the prescribed textbooks were either too difficult or too easy, did not match the curriculum specifications, were outdated and inappropriate. Below are some of their comments.

*...the textbook is very rigid, and some of the passages there, are very difficult..*

*...I hardly use the textbook because I feel it is not appropriate...it does not challenge the learners' thinking skills.*

*...I cannot use the textbooks because they are so outdated...so irrelevant, so unauthentic ...they do not match the syllabus...*

### *Skills Taught*

As reported in the questionnaire, interviewees also disclosed that their lessons mainly focussed on writing or reading. They perceived this as important since these were the major concerns of the examinations, as related by two participants:

*...the writing skill definitely because if we were to refer to the requirements in the examination, the biggest portion of the marks is for writing...*

*...why writing? Because of the examination. To make sure students pass the examination..*

As for reading, the participants said that reading was less demanding and complex, so reading was considered as input before writing; thus, moving according to the logical progression from simple to complex. The following excerpts explain this:

*...I focus on reading. Because if they know how to read, then they would have some ideas on what to write and to speak...  
...so I work according to progression —from easy to difficult ones...*

#### *PMR Examination*

As far as the focus of English papers in PMR is concerned, the interviewees unanimously stated that reading and writing skills are given most weightage in terms of marks. Although speaking and listening are both tested in the public examination (PMR oral examination), these skills are not given as much weight. The participants explained:  
*...actually all skills are tested, but it's the weightage that makes the difference...*

*...listening and speaking skills don't carry a lot of weight. As long as they can pass the examination it's okay...normally they don't fail learners, if they say something.. yes or no.. they get one mark...*

*...you must have the writing skill and the reading skill, because that is the major part...the focus of the examination actually is reading comprehension and writing...*

An interesting comment about students' preparation for the examination is that some learners memorise to answer the examination questions in order to overcome their incompetence in the language—

*...they memorise...they don't write because they are creative, they don't write because they want to express themselves...they write because they want to pass the examination...*

*...you know, a lot of model answers are around. So they take a model answer that they have memorised. Then for the examination, they just write...*

*... some learners can really memorise a very long essay, word for word, when you assess them along the marking scheme, they've got a perfect score...they can come very close...say if you give 40 marks, they can simply get 35 to 36...because the grammar is so good and their memory is so good...*

#### *Examination-orientation*

Do the teachers orientate their teaching towards the examinations? From the survey, most respondents agreed that *"It is important for teachers to focus on the examinations"* (mean = 3.53; s.d.=1.327) and *"Teaching learners to do well in the examinations is the primary goal of teachers"* (mean=3.38; s.d.=1.565). The interview revealed further insights as most of them reported that they had no choice especially when they taught a class that will be sitting for a public examination like the PMR. Teachers in schools face tremendous pressure to achieve good results each year. The following excerpts describe the reality in schools.

*...I have to be honest. I have to concentrate on the examination. There are no two ways about it..*

*...the school you know, they need you to perform...of course they always remind you...ok...this is the TOV (i.e. take-off value). For example, our TOV last year was 70%, so the learners this year must score at least 70% or above, not below.*

*...because if the results go down, you know that you'll be called up and the principal will say, "Ok, look at all the other subjects, why is English the lowest?"...so teachers would tend to focus on this...I don't blame them.*

*...you know, the English teachers were condemned because our passing percentage dropped. So, we had no choice but to help the learners pass the examination. And we have to achieve the target...*



An interviewee also stated that helping learners to pass or to obtain better grades could make a teacher a better teacher in the eyes of the learners.

*...in the eyes of the learners, yes of course they'll say, so and so was the one who taught me English...but if they get a C or B, they may not say I'm a good teacher...at the end of the day, he's also basing his evaluation on the grade he gets...*

Another interviewee took a different view:

*...I'm not much of an examination-orientated person as I'm more for educating learners... trying to help them... understand what they are learning...*

However, when asked if she were to teach Form Three learners, would she change her strategies, the participant explained:

*...in the first semester, perhaps not...I'll teach them normally but perhaps in the second semester, I'll be examination orientated because that is more practical..*

#### *Weakest Skill*

As far as learners' weakest skill is concerned, almost everyone agreed that it is speaking.

*...the weakest skill would be speaking...because I realize that after some time, they are able to write, especially the Chinese learners. Because we don't test their speech, they may not be able to speak well but they can write well, if you guide them...*

The factors contributing to the low proficiency in English were many - incompetent teachers, lack of motivation, too difficult, low SES, negative attitude, lack of exposure to the language and an imbalanced focus of the language skills. One participant related about speaking being a neglected skill:

*... because not a lot of emphasis is given to speaking in the classroom...they don't speak at home...they don't speak in class, where do they speak?*

#### *KBSM*

When participants were asked about the effectiveness of the *KBSM*, most of them agreed that the syllabus was good *on paper*. However, most participants had their own constraints at school:

*...if I had a good class, then no problem, I'll carry out all the skills there. But because I have a very weak class, it's not appropriate...when you require them to speak, they speak grammatically wrong sentence to the point that you do not understand.*

*...because we don't have enough time, especially like some of us ...we're in the rural area, they can't speak well...we need more time to teach... when other teachers can take 2 periods to finish something ... we need 6 to 7 periods.*

*...but in the real setting, how much time do we have to focus on all the four language skills?*

### **Discussion**

The results of the questionnaire and the interview have consistently shown one main finding—that teaching and testing, both in schools and in the national examinations, focused mainly on two language skills: writing and reading. Listening and speaking are found to be much neglected in the classroom. This is a major concern as it is through speech that children learn to organise their thinking and focus their ideas (Lyle, 1993). The neglect of oral communication practice in the classroom will hinder such an important language learning foundation to emerge and severely obstruct the development of other aspects of language skills (Zhang & Kortner, 1995). The teaching and testing of the four skills need to be well balanced, as proposed by one of the interviewees:

*...so we got these 4 skills to work on but you'll find it difficult to give equal time to all 4. So, you'll soon realise that one skill will not be fully exploited, will not be taught fully...especially when you have examinations. When you have 3 more months to go, to be frank with you, most of us will focus on public examinations...in the public examinations, where are you going to put listening and speaking?*

It is also reported that speaking is the learners' weakest skill. This confirms the findings of Lim (1994). The combination of both lack of attention on speaking and this skill as one of students' main weaknesses is of great concern. Competent language learners are not just those who are grammatically competent. Learners also need to be communicatively competent where they learn grammar as a rule of use. This will

enable them to know what to say, to whom, in what manner and when, so as to enable them to function appropriately in the real world. Speaking proficiency involves being able to produce autonomous utterances which are appropriate to the context of the speech situation fluently and accurately (Lim 1994). According to Long's *Interaction Hypothesis* (1985) and *Output Hypothesis* (Swain & Lapkin, 1995), interaction and input are two major players in the process of acquisition. The opportunity to communicate is essential for L2 acquisition.

Other than speaking, the students are also reported to be weak in writing. Why are they weak in these two productive skills? Perhaps because of two reasons: internal factors and external factors. The results indicate that the contributing factors were:

- limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom (external factor),
- negative attitude towards English (internal factor) and
- lack of confidence (internal factor).

Many external factors to the classroom can affect learning of a second language (Norrizan Razali, 1992). These internal and external factors can influence each other; they are by no means independent. For example, a learner who has low self-confidence may refuse to use the language outside the classroom. The use of language in the real world is crucial as it creates interest in learning the language, helps learners to identify themselves with the target language and builds their confidence.

The next question is: Do teachers orientate their lesson towards the examinations? Yes, they do. When discussing this issue, one cannot avoid talking about the *backwash effect*. Backwash or washback (the terms are synonymous) can be both good and bad. Buck (1988; in Bailey, 1996: 257) describes washback as:

*... there is a natural tendency for both teacher and learners to tailor their classroom activities to the demands of the test, especially when the test is very important to the future of the learners, and pass rates are used as a measure of teacher success. This influence of the test on the classroom is, of course, very important, this washback effect can be either beneficial or harmful.*

It is not the intention of the writers to delve more into this washback issue as it involves more elaborated concepts of validity and reliability of testing and the curriculum, but suffice to say that washback can bring positive influence if the tests or examinations *promote* not **impede** the educational goals. As Buck (1988; in Bailey, 1996:268) says:

*"Most educators would probably agree that the content of classroom instruction should be decided on the basis of clearly understood educational goals, and examinations should try to ascertain whether these goals have been achieved. When the examination does that, it forces learners and teachers to concentrate on these goals, and the washback effect on the classroom is very beneficial".*

## Conclusion

The results of the study suggest that teachers perceive the *KBSM* syllabus as effective in developing reading and writing skills compared to listening and speaking skills. Writing and reading also are reported to be given more emphasis in both the school and the national examinations. These perceptions have an effect on their teaching approaches in the ESL classroom. Most subjects reported that they laid more emphasis on reading skills, writing skills and also grammar in their lessons. This is also seen in their materials used and the activities carried out in the classroom. On top of that they believed that they orientated their lessons towards the examination too. The factors, which were thought to be contributing to the low proficiency of English among learners were limited opportunity to use the English language and lack of confidence. Further research on this issue is required to match teachers' perceptions with actual practice.

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