

KBSR- Constraints and Guidelines

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1.0 The aims and principles of the Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah (KBSR)

The New Primary School Curriculum (KBSR) adopts a double-pronged approach to satisfy the educational requirements of the Malaysian school-going child: one is to raise the literacy level of the pupil, and the other is to develop his1 cognitive and thinking skills2. By this means, it hopes to provide him with an all-rounded individual development which will help him operate efficiently within the social structure of this country.

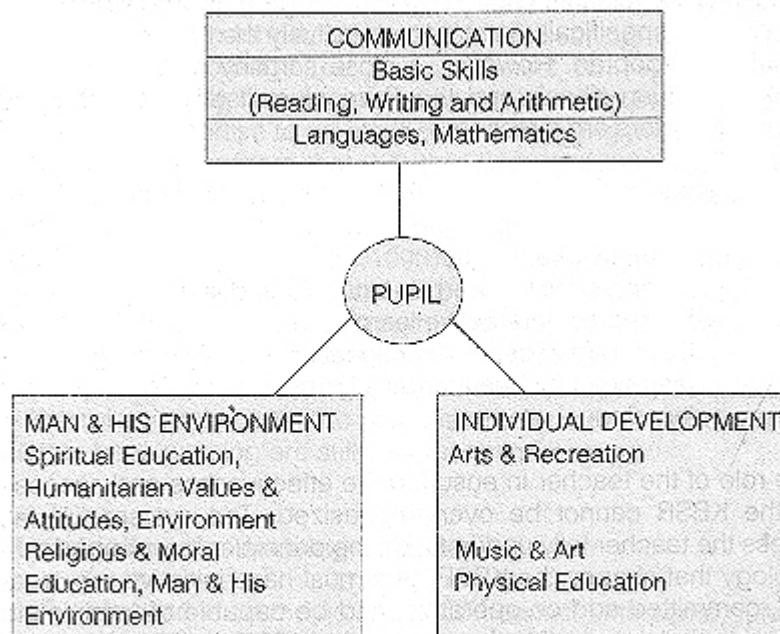


Figure 1: The New Primary School Syllabus (KBSR)
(Taken from "KBSR - Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1983)

The KBSR is divided into 2 Phases; Phase I comprises Standards 1 to 3, and Phase II, Standards 4 to 6. The former emphasizes the basic communication skills, that is, reading, writing and arithmetic.

Children are taught to listen, say aloud, recognize and form symbols (lambang), numbers and the alphabet, and to use all these in writing. They are also taught basic counting, and the mathematical skills of addition, subtraction, division and multiplication.

Phase II strengthens and builds upon these basic skills: the emphasis here is on using these skills for thinking and communication, especially logical reasoning, and understanding social and current issues. However, what should be noted is that, in both phases, there is an implicit demand for the creation of opportunities for individual expression (for example, through music, art and writing), the facilitation of understanding, and the employment of a variety of means to obtain knowledge.

2.0 Methodology

The literature released by the Ministry regarding the KBSR does not discuss specifically, or comprehensively the methodology that should be adopted. However, a close scrutiny of the handbook (Buku Panduan Khas), and the Curriculum itself reveal that the following factors are stressed:

- a. a spiral approach
- b. learning through doing
- c. a variety of activities
- d. a child-centred, learner-emancipated learning system
- e. integrated, interactive learning units
- f. the communicative, functional aspect of language
- g. the role of the teacher as a guide, and facilitator of learning

The role of the teacher in ensuring the effectiveness and success of the KBSR cannot be over-emphasized. The system will fail unless the teacher fully understands the principles, aims and methodology that shapes the KBSR. She must have initiative, be creative, committed and co-operative, and be capable of formulating activities that can realize the aims of the KBSR, activities that can exploit the methodology and the inherent flexibility within the system. She must be able to diagnose the specific learning needs of the students and cater to these. Most of all, she has to be able to surmount the innumerable obstacles that are at the moment proving to be major stumbling blocks in the effective implementation of the KBSR, for example, the teacher-pupil ratio (1:45-50), and the lack of adequate training for teachers.

3.0 Implications for methodology in the creation of teaching materials

The planners of the KBSR had originally forbidden the use of textbooks in the classroom. The intention was to increase teacher-pupil contact and rapport, and to ensure the creation of teaching\learning materials that would be tailor-made for the learners. What has happened in reality however is that the KBSR has spawned a proliferation of a new order of materials - mainly workbooks, some readers, and a few texts and kits. This is mainly because of an impractical teacher-pupil ratio (1:50 in many schools), and the heavy demands made by the syllabus of a teaching force that has received inadequate, if any, training in the implementation of the new curriculum.

At the moment, there are about 15 series of workbooks on the market, some with innovative, useful exercises, but most having numerous shortcomings (de Silva & Yunus: ud). Despite this, many teachers rely heavily on workbooks because they lack both the time and expertise to create their own teaching materials.

However, it appears that that this source of teaching aid will soon be made inaccessible to them because the Education Ministry has issued a directive that bans the use of workbooks in the KBSR classroom. (NST, Jan., 1990) Thus, the KBSR teacher has perforce to devise educational activities that can facilitate the learning of English in the classroom. She has to ensure that these activities are in keeping with the aims and principles of the KBSR, that they exploit the methodology that is implied in the curriculum. At this point, it is important to note that the limitations under which she has been working are still very much in force.

3.1 Guidelines for devising activities

This article aims at providing the KBSR teacher with some guidelines which might be of some help to her in the creation of activities in the language classroom.

3.1.1 Activities should be well-planned

Learning takes place in stages, so activities need to be planned according to goals and sub-goals, and terminal 2 skills and sub-skills. For example, if the final goal, or terminal skill is "to group words according to categories" (KBSR 1983: 5.15), the subgoal, or enabling skill, might be to:

- i. read and understand the words that need to be categorized,
- ii. understand the notion of categorization.

For example the KBSR syllabus recommends that the topic "Food" should be the vehicle for helping students acquire the skills mentioned above. Given below is a list of suggested activities:

Activity 1:

Ask students to name a few food-items, and list these on the board. (Ensure that the list is sufficiently comprehensive to enable various types of categorization.)

Activity 2:

Explain that food can be grouped (categorized) in many ways. Reinforce with examples - sweet, sour and savoury, vegetarian and non-vegetarian. Ask students to name a few categories, and check understanding of concepts.

Activity 3:

Allow students to work in groups; each group is to come up with as many categories of food as possible. Students should be asked to think of food items that are additional to those already listed on the board.

Activity 4:

Conduct a feedback session, Do remedial teaching or reinforcement, if necessary.

Explain that the skill of categorization can be extended to other topics, and to many areas of study.

Home assignment:

Ask students to come up with a list of categories in topics or areas other than "Food".

The skill of categorization can be taught in many different ways, but what is important is that the student should be able to apply the skill to any theme or topic that he might encounter in future, and use it in any problem-solving, or living-skills situation.

3.1.2 Activities should be task-based

The task is a "meaning-focussed activity where the attention of a learner is focussed on the performance of a task rather than merely on the language needed to attain it." (Samuel: 1986) What is significant here are the skills the student acquires while trying to accomplish a clearly specified goal; whether he actually achieves the goal is immaterial.

The task lends itself easily to structured learning, or learning in stages, as the output of one task actually becomes the input for another. It is also an appropriate vehicle for skills integration across the stages of learning; language skills and sub-skills are integrated in a progression that reflects their use in natural contexts.

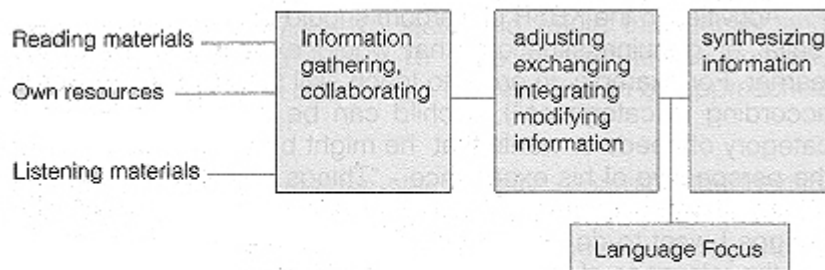


Figure 2: Framework of Task Design

(Madden & Samuda, 1983)

For example, in order to acquire skill 5.15 (mentioned above), a pupil can be asked to compile a list of common household pets", and another one of "animals found in the zoo", or "wild animals". In order to do this, he can be asked to utilize his previous experience, and enlist the aid (and experience) of his family and friends. If possible, he could even visit the zoo! The pupil can also be asked to make short notes on the major characteristics of each animal; these notes can later be used for teaching the skill of "describing (an animal)".

Task-based learning has many other characteristics that makes it suitable as a technique which can be incorporated within the methodology of the KBSR. For instance, it can be a self-contained unit that can be completed within a relatively short period of time, if necessary. This would cater to the short attention span of young children. Well-designed tasks would extend learning beyond the classroom, and liberate the child to a point where he can view the broader environment around him as a source and resource of learning.

3.1.3 Activities should be authentic, meaningful and communicative

It is important that the learner realizes the relevance of what he is learning; whatever he has learnt should play a meaningful role in his life, and help him attain the goals that he has set for himself. Classroom activities should thus be contextualized so that they acquire greater authenticity, and meaning. Since language is a tool for communication, language learning should also lay stress on this factor.

Activities in the KBSR classroom should thus be based on the realia, or genuine situations that would exist in the life of the learner. For example, in order to teach skill 5.15 ("to group words according to categories"), a child can be asked to draw up a category of needs or wants that he might be able to place within the perspective of his experience - "Things I want for study" and "Things I want for play", "Things I want to do this week" and "Things I want to do next week". The child might thus be able to see the relevance of what he learns, and does.

3.1.4 Activities should be learner-centred

As far as possible, the learner should be allowed to assume a dominant participatory role in the learning process. At times, it may even be possible to allow him to determine what he wants to learn; this might provide him with the commitment and intrinsic motivation that is so crucial to effective learning/education.

Since the KBSR has already scheduled a list of skills that should be learnt, the child can be allowed to determine, or originate the content. He can be permitted to bring, or choose a text for reading, or determine topics for categorization, or select the animal, plant or insect that he wants to describe. This might raise not only his self-esteem, but also his intrinsic motivation for wanting to acquire a particular skill. This in turn would foster more effective learning, as the student's participation in the educational process is greater.

3.1.5 Activities should be varied

Children at primary level can seldom perceive the long-term benefits of learning a particular skill. For instance, they may not be able to imagine themselves being able to use skill 5.15 when they graduate into the job market. Therefore, the KBSR teacher should exploit what is readily available - a child's innate curiosity, and his inclination for fun. She should, however, not forget his extremely short attention span.

A good way to make provisions for these factors is to build in variety as an active ingredient during class activities. One way of doing this is to design activities which would enable a child to use more than one of the four language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) within the same lesson. Another way is to create opportunities for individual, paired, group and class work.

To illustrate this, let us take a look at skills 17.3 - To seek the names of animals; 17.4 - To state and refute the identity and name of animals and 17.5 - To state and refute the number, colour, shape and size of animals. These skills can be approached in the following manner -

Activity 1:

Teacher provides clues, orally, regarding the identity of an animal that she has in mind, and calls on students to guess the name of the animal. Students who try should give evidence as to how they arrived at the answer.

Activity 2:

Once students have grasped the idea, they should be allowed to formulate their own clues. They can read out their clues, and call upon a student of their choice to guess the animal that he has in mind. The ones who answer should give the evidence (clues) that helped them to decide upon the answer.

Activity 3:

The class can be divided into groups of four or five. Each group is to think of three animals, as well as devise some questions (10 to 12) that they can ask to discover the identity of the animals thought of by others.

Activity 4:

Conduct a game. The rules of the game are as follows:

- i. The game consists of 3 rounds.
- ii. Each group should ask questions of the group that is numerically next to them

(Group one should ask Group two, and so on).

- iii. Maximum number of questions that can be asked is ten.
- iv. Students within a group should take turns to ask and answer questions.
- v. Points should be given. For example if a group can guess the answer within ten questions, they get four marks. However if another group guesses correctly, they get two marks. If nobody is able to get the right answer, the group that has thought of the animal gets five marks.

In order to carry out the above activities, students will have to use listening, speaking and writing skills. There is also provision for individual, group and class work.

Another excellent avenue for providing variety is to allow students to initiate topics for study and debate/discussion there will then be as many topics as there are pupils! At this juncture, it may be timely to note that variety should NOT supercede the unity within a lesson. The skill to be acquired should always be the ultimate goal of the lesson.

3.1.6 Activities should be integrated and interactive

The rationale for adopting the integrated or multi-skills approach in any ELT methodology is that this approach reflects authentic language use, where more than one skill is employed. Also, it leads to more effective learning because it is conducive to the inclusion of variety in language teaching. Moreover, it facilitates the reinforcement of learning since a particular discourse or sub-skill can be taught by using more than one mode.

Interactive learning is upheld in the KBSR methodology because it is both fun-filled and pedagogically sound. In addition, it allows spontaneous feedback which is a very essential part of effective learning.

Paired or group activity is one of the best means of exploiting both the approaches mentioned above. The example of activities for section 3.5 contains this idea. The idea can also be illustrated by using skill 16.3, i.e., 'to seek and give personal details'. Students can be asked to sit in groups of four or five, and obtain information about their friends that they could later compile into individual 'scrap-books' (for example "My Classmates"). This task would provide opportunities for using the skills and sub-skills that comprise listening, speaking, writing and reading. The students would have to ask each other questions about personal details (Wh- questions such as "When is your birthday?" "What are your hobbies?"), listen to replies, take notes of the replies and have them checked by their partners for accuracy. However, the teacher should plan the activity with extreme care, and provide the right level of guidance when and where necessary. For example, the weaker students can be given worksheets with more guidance (questions with word-gaps, rather than just the topics of the questions, which can be given to the better students).

3.1.7 Activities should be pitched at the appropriate level of difficulty for mixed-ability classes.

The KBSR system forbids the practice of "streaming" or "setting" students into classes, as it believes that no child should be made to feel inferior or superior to his peers. He is encouraged to believe in his innate potential for education, and in his ability to activate and exploit that potential under the guidance of able "catalysts" or "facilitators".

However, this imposes a further strain on the creator of materials, as she would have to prepare materials/activities which can be used simultaneously with a group of students with widely differing abilities, both in terms of cognitive as well as language skills. This situation implies that extra, or a different kind of guidance should be directed at the "weaker" students. This kind of guidance can take the form of more guided worksheets, more intensive monitoring, or, at times, even different kinds of activities which would ultimately allow them to reach the same goal. Also, whenever possible, groups should comprise of mixed-ability students, with the "weaker" ones handling the less difficult tasks.

One teacher, whom I had the opportunity of observing, handled skill 4.27 ("To arrange words, to form phrases, to copy them") in the following manner with her mixed ability class.

First, she divided the students into groups of four, and gave them each, two jumbled-up sentences to be put in the proper order. Then, she asked the group to combine the sentences into a short story, which the group leader would read aloud to the class. Each group consisted of mixed ability students, but the teacher accommodated the weaker ones by giving them easier sentences to "unjumble". There was full participation from all the students, and I could see that even the weaker students enjoyed themselves tremendously!

3.1.8 The teacher should be the facilitator of learning

The traditional educational system in this country has always seen the teacher as the central figure in the classroom - she is the dispenser of knowledge which she keeps in a vast storehouse within her. She determines what is to be taught (this need not necessarily coincide with what is, or has to be learnt by the passive pupil), and she has this awful hold over the academic future of the child in the classroom!

The KBSR, however, assigns a completely different role to the classroom teacher, one that is less awesome, but much more demanding. She is expected to facilitate the effective education of the child, i.e. she has to create a physical and mental atmosphere that is conducive to learning, and devise teaching materials and activities that will stimulate the skills acquisition devices within the learner. She is not expected to provide them with knowledge, but to equip them with the skills of acquiring the necessary information for themselves. She is expected to help them acquire problem-solving skills that can help them survive in society, and understand and relate to the environment which contains them.

There is no denying that the role of the KBSR teacher has become extremely challenging, especially in view of the fact that her change of role has received no bureaucratic recognition.

- She has to, quite often, cope with a frightening teacher-pupil ratio of 1:45-50 while the KBSR favours a much lower teacher-pupil ratio.
- She is heavily loaded with administrative and co-curricular work in addition to her teaching duties.
- She is subject to parental and administrative pressure to provide evidence of 'proper' teaching and assessment; for example, pupils' books must contain extensive written work (homework assignments) that must exhibit evidence of marking, or correction, despite the fact that some teaching activities cannot be subjected to this kind of assessment. Feedback is obtained, and assessed, by other means, for example, oral replies, group presentation aims and class discussion.

The above are just a few of the problems that the KBSR teacher has to contend with while trying to cope with the heavy demands made by the new curriculum.

The KBSR teacher has to be specially trained to handle the new role assigned to her, but due to the shortage of teachers in the country, she cannot be spared to attend comprehensive in-service training courses. There are, of course, the regular holiday courses, but, according to many of the teachers, these are still not adequate. The teachers feel that they need more workshop sessions, especially directed at the creation of appropriate teaching materials. Many still feel wary of treading confidently into the KBSR classroom.

4.0 Conclusion

The KBSR is rooted in sound educational theories, but it depends for its success to a very large extent, on a trained, dedicated and hard working teaching-force which needs massive support from the administrative and bureaucratic machinery that surrounds it. Teachers should be trained to create materials and activities that exploit the KBSR methodology. Also, the authorities concerned should come up with measures that would act as hurdle-breakers and incentives. Some such measures could be:

- i. They could, for example, set up a viable resource centre in each school, and devise a system that would "compel" teachers to contribute to it by providing incentives and/or exerting appropriate administrative pressure. (One major complaint of teachers is that some colleagues do not contribute to the preparation of teaching aids; another problem appears to be that

teachers are not willing to share their knowledge, expertise and products vis-a-vis teaching aids. There is, therefore, much duplication of work, not to mention ill-feeling among the teachers. The above recommendation is aimed at diminishing this problem.

- ii. They could channel some of the administrative duties to clerical staff, and appoint separate teachers for co-curricular activities.
- iii. Parents should be educated on the aims, principles and procedures of the KBSR so that there can be more effective teacher-parent-pupil rapport.
- iv. Comprehensive, in-service training should be provided for teachers, with special focus on the creation of activities for the KBSR.

Some of the above recommendations may be difficult to implement, but if the KBSR is to succeed, they have to be given serious attention as the system is heavily dependent on the role of the teacher. It is crucial that she is provided with sufficient training and incentives to be an effective creator of teaching\learning materials.

Endnotes

1. For purposes of convenience, the student will be referred to as "he" and the teacher as "she".
2. All the skills mentioned in this article have been taken from Buku Panduan Khas KBSR, 1983 (Bahasa Inggeris).

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