

A NEGLECTED RESOURCE AND SKILL IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIAN SCHOOLS: DICTIONARIES AND THEIR USE

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1.0 The Curriculum as a Factor

It has been well documented by numerous educationalists, parents and practising teachers that the current curriculum implemented in Malaysian schools is excessively over-loaded. The preoccupation with facts and knowledge is in response to the demands of examinations and pressures of competition. Thick text-books, guide-books and model-answer books are in abundance and reflect the need to cope with the curriculum and the examinations. The number of text-books and exercise books that fill a student's bag should cause concern. If this concern has not provoked anxiety about the load on the pupil's mind then it should at least be expressed in terms of the weight of materials he has to shoulder each day to school. It would be rather unusual to find a normal and conscientious pupil whose bag is not chock-full and heavy.

In the light of the limited capacity of the pupil's bag and the fight for a place of priority in it, the dictionary invariably loses. Very few pupils bring dictionaries to school. A very small number may possibly bring pocket-size dictionaries. It would be rare to find a teacher carrying a dictionary to school for teaching purposes. This almost benign neglect of not giving a place of some importance to dictionaries in the language curriculum is prevailing and rampant.

2.0 Teacher-Pupil Attitudes and Current Practices

In the classroom, most language teachers do not give sufficient weight to the role of dictionaries in the teaching and learning of English. Teachers rely on their command of the lexis and their ability to explain the meanings of words focused on in teaching situations. This mirrors the overwhelming emphasis on the teacher as a resource person and a repository of the language register rather than on a reliance on the dictionary as a resource in the development of language skills. In concrete terms, the teacher during a lesson usually does not refer to a dictionary neither does he require the pupils to use dictionaries. The most common reason for this is the fact that both teachers and pupils do not bring dictionaries to the teaching-learning situations.

Teachers and pupils, generally, do not feel a need to use dictionaries in a lesson. This could be due to sheer laziness, over-confidence or ignorance of how dictionaries can enrich and sharpen a language class. The net effect is an almost criminal neglect of the dictionary among teachers and pupils. The attitudes of the teachers and pupils have interacted to engender this undesirable and deep-rooted habit in our language lessons.

3.0 Correlates of this Neglect

The Majority of our pupils possess a bare skeletal vocabulary. This is not only in English but also in Bahasa Malaysia. The range of words available to them in listening or reading comprehension is sadly deficient. The problem is even more severe when language production at the oral and written levels is demanded. A sufficient command of words, the variety of nuances and the inter-relationships of the lexis is beyond the reach of just too many. There is too much guess-work and rough approximations by pupils and even teachers when it comes to word meanings. Simple words are frequently misrepresented, misconstrued and mangled. Vagueness in understanding and expressions is glaring.

Children as a result of a limited vocabulary are irritatingly repetitive in usage of words. Their speech often degenerates into disjointed colloquialism or pidgin English. Malay, Chinese and Tamil words are generously interspersed in their conversation. This reflects to a large extent their failure to find the appropriate words in English. Their expressions are, moreover, lacking in variety and richness of ideas encapsulated in different words. Subtleties of the language are beyond many. Precision in both oral and written forms is unusual. This much valued precision in the command of the language goes together with the appropriate choice of words. An alarming number of students are found wanting in these aspects of the mastery of the language which are based on word power and control.

Another symptom of the insufficient reference to dictionaries is the misspellings committed by both teachers and pupils. This problem has reached almost epidemic proportions. Many students do not own dictionaries, and even more are not bothered to check in the dictionaries to ascertain the correct spelling of words in question. The love for dictionaries and the habit of treating them as companions which can provide indispensable and invaluable assistance are certainly not widespread.

4.0 Example of the Importance of Dictionaries in the Communicational Syllabus

Area Fourteen, for example, requires pupils to translate accurately information worded in Bahasa Malaysia into English. The target message is translated in full detail or in a summarized form.

This translation exercise is at two levels, namely:

(a) oral; and

(b) written

The main skills involved are:

(a) listening comprehension skills;

(b) reading skills;

(c) reporting skills with special emphasis on identifying and relaying the key ideas in the message; and

(d) oral and written translation skills related to (a), (b) and (c).

Many pupils do not perform well in Area Fourteen because they have not fully comprehended the target message or passage. This is to a significant extent due to their ignorance or vagueness of words in the target message. A number of non-Malay pupils encounter serious problems in these situations because of their poor command of Bahasa Malaysia. A quick and effective way to remedy this ailment is to use Malay—Malay or Malay-English dictionaries. Once the words in the target message are clearer, then the task begins to be more manageable.

At the next stage, the pupil has to translate the ideas understood into English. He may be required to produce a gist or a complete translated version of the target message. If he has comprehended accurately the source passage, then his main challenge is to express the key ideas or all the ideas precisely in English. The choice of appropriate words to capture in full the intended meanings with their subtle shades is crucial. Some common mistakes are:

(a) missing completely with wrong words in English;

(b) choosing words in English which only convey a portion of the intended meanings;

(c) choosing words in English which over-generalize;

(d) selecting words in English which are partly correct but including in them irrelevant and subsidiary meanings which were not intended in the words in Bahasa Malaysia.

The use of Malay—English and English—English dictionaries would go a long way in helping to resolve many of these problems. The examples and clarification in the dictionaries, and the proper interpretation of context should be combined to arrive at a satisfactory choice of suitable words.

5.0 Recommendations

There is a need for a variety of dictionaries for pupils of different ages. Even within an age cohort, the range of individual differences with reference to command of English or Bahasa Malaysia may be very significant. There is a strong case for graded dictionaries to cater to these problems of different levels of entry skills of pupils. Often and unfortunately, pocket-size and graded dictionaries contain too few entries. The lesson objectives as seen in the target message may be far above many pupils and their pocket-size dictionaries. Consequently, there must be a reasonable match between pupil characteristics, lesson objectives and the sufficiency of the dictionaries.

We need Malay–Malay, Malay–English, English–Malay and English–English dictionaries in our schools for both teachers and pupils. These dictionaries should have examples of usage. Teacher explanations coupled with references to good dictionaries would be most effective in promoting language skills and good habits in language learning.

If pupils and teachers have difficulty bringing big dictionaries to school, then an adequate supply of good dictionaries must be made available in the school or classroom libraries. At least 10 to 20 copies of **each** good dictionary should be located in the school library. A teacher may borrow a total of 10 to 15 dictionaries for a class. This would work out to approximately 4 pupils to 1 dictionary. If there were sharing, these would suffice.

Teachers should be good models in using or inculcating the habit of using dictionaries. They need to advise their pupils in buying dictionaries which are good, practical and can be carried in their school bags.

Every opportunity in language teaching situations should be seized to press home the effective use of dictionaries. Besides these incidental occasions, there should be planned lessons focused on using dictionaries to enhance language comprehension and written skills.

Teachers and pupils should learn to know their dictionaries and those available in the libraries. Dictionaries contain a wealth of information. Some of these are pronunciations, source of words, original meanings, grammar and examples of usage. Many good dictionaries have good systems of cross-referencing. An example is the system directed to helping users locate synonyms and antonyms.

In short, a language teacher must develop the skills and habit of referring to dictionaries in teaching-learning situations. These must be part and parcel of the total repertoire of skills and habits of the language teacher who aspires to be effective.

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