English Language Teaching (ELT) Curriculum Reforms in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses ELT curriculum reforms in Malaysia which is crucial to the educational development of this country. In the first phase (1957-1970), the types of instructional methods used were the grammar translation method, direct method and situational approach. During the second phase (1970-1990), the implementation of communicative approach was a move that was welcomed by all. The 1990s became the cornerstone in ELT curriculum reforms in Malaysia and this can be attributed to the process of globalization. Globalization is a multifaceted, multidimensional phenomenon which has affected the education system directly and indirectly. It is an age where global market forces determine curriculum reforms and the English language has responded greatly to these global processes. Thus, it is crucial to note that ELT curriculum reforms in Malaysia are made in line with the transitions and changes based on local, regional and global needs.

Keywords: Curriculum, Reform, ELT

1. Introduction

During the British rule in Malaya in the early 19th century, English was used as the language of administration and those proficient in English had the competitive edge (Gaudart, 1987). At the point of independence in 1957, changes took place in many directions. It is imperative to note that between the years 1957 to 1970, the status of English language in Malaysia was a much debated topic. Contrariant views stemmed between Malay nationalists who were trying to defend the supremacy of the Malay language and those who believed that English was the way to move forward in the competitive world. The pro-Malay believed that English language equals to British imperialism and they refused to be slaves to the policies and language of the colonial master. Thus, one of the priorities of the new independent government under the
National Front was the establishment of a national education system, which aimed to achieve unity, develop a national language (Bahasa Malaysia) and redress economic imbalances between the three major ethnic groups.

1.1 New Education Policy

The introduction of the New Education Policy in 1970 resulted in a common curriculum with a Malaysian outlook and Bahasa Malaysia became the medium of instruction in all schools and tertiary institutions. This move that began in 1970 was almost completed by the year 1980. It also gave birth to the establishment of national and national-type or vernacular schools in Malaysia. The national schools were fully assisted by the government whilst the vernacular schools were funded by the respective ethnic communities. The New Education Policy was aimed at creating a new national identity and promotes development among people who live in a pluralistic society. The post-independent government felt that English education benefited a selected few who were referred to as the ‘elitist class of Malayan’ and sidelined the others especially the Malays from the rural areas. Only 1% of the indigenous Malay population was admitted to an English medium school (Asmah Haji Omar, 1996). Due to all the factors mentioned above, English was given the status of second language. According to Asmah Haji Omar (1996)

“Almost four decades after the departure of the British rulers, the English language lives on, not as a colonial language but officially as the second language of the Malaysians, second in importance only to the national language, Malay”. (p. 513)

This is the beginning of a whole new chapter in the development of English language in Malaysia. The outcome that was feared by most became a reality: - the decline in the standard of English among Malaysians especially students in schools and higher learning institutions. The former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (1991), voiced his concern regarding the poor results of the national English exam and was perturbed that Malaysia might ‘lose its economic competitiveness and find it hard to progress in the industrial and technical fields’. This concern has continued in years to come forcing the government to change some of the educational policies regarding the use of English language. Educators are also apprehensive about the status of English as the second language in Malaysia. Firstly, the definition of the term itself is debatable. Mohd Sofi Ali (2003) argues that English must be considered as a foreign language if its use is not extended to any official matters especially in the government’s day-to-day administration. According to Nalliah and Thiagararajah (2002)
“Although English has been accorded the status of a second official language in Malaysia, it is only second to Bahasa Malaysia in importance for all official purposes and it is not a second language according to the definition in applied linguistics”. (p.439)

In contrast, the Ministry of Education recognizes English (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2001) as a second language, which contradicts the very nature and definition of second language.

2. Curriculum reforms

The field of curriculum is intriguing to many educators as well as researchers. The multiplicity of meanings given to the word curriculum portrays the dynamism of this field. Definitional issues can be interesting or even overwhelming but these differences pave way for acting on or thinking about the curriculum. Narrowly defined, it refers to specific subjects or topics within the curriculum of any learning institution. Ornstein and Hunkins (1998) have defined curriculum as two ends of a continuum; curriculum as a blue print for achieving desired goals and experiences of a learner. The broader perspective encompasses theories and principles of curriculum foundation, development, design, implementation and evaluation (Philip Jackson, 1992; Ornstein and Hunkins, 1998). These aspects are important for many curriculum decisions pertaining to methods, materials and activities of learning. When a learner is able to make sense of what he or she has learnt, only then the curriculum has actual worth. It is also important to note that no curriculum can work in isolation in the era of globalization. It is crucial to understand what is curriculum reform and within which contexts do these reforms take place? These are some of the fundamental questions that need to be answered. Kennedy (1995) states that

“curriculum reform is about changes to the content and organization of what is taught, within the constraints of social, economic and political contexts” (p.173)

This clearly portrays that no two countries can share the same political and socio-economic agenda. Each country will react differently in formulating their own curriculum reforms but the rule of thumb is that it must be consistent with the values of the wider society in order for its implementation to be successful and relevant (Kennedy, 1995). The idea of a larger and wider society plays a significant role as nation states have little control over what is happening in and out of their country due to global influences (Lee, 2002). In the national context, during the early years of independence, the focus of education in Malaysia was limited to national unity and nation building which was a crucial factor for political stability. Once this was achieved, human
resource development became the next priority of the country (Rahimah Haji Ahmad, 1994). In Malaysia, the establishment of Smart Schools require educated workforce and knowledge workers and English language proved to be indispensable to the process of development in global economy.

2.1 Types of curriculum reforms

Curriculum reforms can be initiated and carried out by various stakeholders in the society, for example, the government, teacher union, media, academics and the industries. Plank (1988) as cited by Marsh (2004) has put forward four main types of curriculum reforms and they are as follows:-

   a) Additive reforms
   b) External reforms
   c) Regulatory reforms
   d) Structural reforms

Additives reforms are the easiest to achieve, for example computer literacy programmes in schools whilst external reforms like pre-service teacher tests have little effect on the school structure. Regulatory reforms require changes but it does not affect the basic structure of the school such as longer school days and school years. Structural reforms are the most difficult to accomplish as it interrupts the school system involving the teachers and students. Among them are competency test for teachers. In Malaysia, additives reforms are carried out from time to time like the reading programme known as Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca (NILAM) which was introduced in 1999 by the Malaysian Education Ministry (Bahagian Teknologi Pendidikan, 2003) which serves to instill reading habits among primary and secondary school students as well as computer literacy programmes. The content integrated language learning i.e. the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English for primary and secondary school students was one of innovative features in the process of curriculum reform. But this has caused hue and cry among students as well as teachers as Bahasa Malaysia was the medium of instruction for past 30 years. Most teachers found it difficult to teach subjects like Science and Mathematics in English and the students were not proficient enough to comprehend what was being taught to them.

3. Phase One of ELT curriculum reforms in Malaysia (1957-1970)

The newly independent Malaysia had a major agenda on her mind that is national unity. With three major ethnic groups comprising the Malays, Indians and Chinese, a national language, was seen as the binding element to ensure a smooth transition from the ‘divide and rule’ policy implemented by the British. This has affected the English language teaching and learning in
Malaysia. In relation to the ELT curriculum, the syllabus differs between the national and national-type schools. The English language syllabus for Primary 1-6 is taught in three stages. Students in national schools complete Stages 1 and 2 while their peers in national-type schools undergo Stages 1, 2 and 3 (Nalliah and Thiyagarajah, 2002). The syllabi for secondary schools comprise of Syllabus for Secondary Schools (Malay medium): English and Syllabus for Secondary Schools (English medium): English for two different examinations namely Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or the Malaysian Certificate of Education and Overseas Examination Certificate (Nalliah and Thiyagarajah, 2002). Students were taught English 121 and English Y in national-type and national schools respectively.

Three types of instructional methods were used in the early years namely the grammar translation method, direct method and situational approach (Asmah Haji Omar, 1984). As the name suggests, grammar rules are of paramount importance in the grammar translation method. Little or no attention is paid to aspects of speaking and listening. Learning a second language is seen as a deductive process. Students are basically drilled to learn English especially memorizing the grammar rules. Next, the direct method is based on the belief that knowing a language is being able to speak it. This new method emphasized the importance of correct pronunciation of target language. Printed materials will be kept away until the person has mastered spoken skills. Lastly, the situational approach which was developed by British applied linguist in 1930. This approach has survived so far by complementing later methodologies and approaches. In this method, language is being taught realistically; all the words and sentences are based on real situations or imagined real situations. Thus, the meaning is tied up with the situations in which they are used. For example, the learners know the meaning of words not because they have looked it up in the dictionary but because they have learned the word in real situations. Since the purpose of teaching a foreign language is to enable learners to use it, it must be heard, spoken, read and written in a realistic manner. Neither translation nor mechanical drills can help if they are not connected to real life situations.


In the second phase, Bahasa Malaysia became the official language of administration but English was widely used in high courts, diplomatic services as well as local and international businesses. In the social context, English gained popularity among the upper and middle class people from urban areas. The educational reform in the second phase saw the implementation of a new curriculum for the primary and secondary levels. The New Primary School Curriculum (KBSR) was introduced in the year 1982 and the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM) in 1988.
According to Lee (2002), KBSR was introduced

“…. because of dissatisfaction with the old curriculum which was thought to be too subject content-biased, too much emphasis on rote-learning, too exam oriented, and excessive dependence on textbooks”. (p.12)

This approach was also in line with the emergence of global educational trends where studies have shown that ‘there is a continual worldwide convergence of educational systems and curricula (Lee, 2002). The ELT curriculum at this point in time emphasized communicative approach as the most flexible way in language teaching and learning. The core of this approach is teaching whatever the learner needs through proper contextualization. Emphasis is given to meaning and not so much the structure. Nunan (1999) states

“Language was seen as a system for the expression of meanings, and linguists began to analyze language as system for the expression of meanings, rather than as a system of abstract syntactic rules”. (p.9)

The focus is on effective communication. Drilling may occur but peripherally. Students are encouraged to communicate right from the beginning of the class. Personal experiences serve as an important feature in the process of learning. Communicative competence is more important than linguistic competence. Communicative approach focuses on pair work, group work and oral exercises. Errors are a natural part of learning the language. Learners are allowed to use the language creatively without being corrected constantly. In line with this approach, the Education Ministry introduced a new English paper for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination which is known as English 122/322. Students were tested on reading, writing and speaking (oral assessment) which is a more comprehensive way of gauging their language proficiency.

5. Phase Three of ELT curriculum reforms in Malaysia (1990-2007)

Globalization is the buzz word that has attracted the attention of educators in the 20th century. It cannot be denied that globalization with its far-reaching effects has played a major role in determining the educational as well as curriculum reforms in Malaysia and other countries around the globe. According to Lee (2002), globalization is a ‘multidimensional process which unfolds in realms such as the global economy, global politics, global communications and worldwide cultural standardization and hybridization’. It also means more competition where national borders are no longer a limitation thus acknowledging the view of compressed time and space (Carnoy, 1999). What are the factors that triggered globalization and how this has affected the ELT
curriculum in Malaysia are crucial questions that need to be answered. It is a fact that revolution in information and communication technologies (ICT) made globalization possible (Lee, 2002; David and Govindasamy, 2005; The Star, 2008) and knowledge became highly portable (Carnoy, 1999). Malaysia made a switch from an agriculture/commodity export-based economy to an industrialized nation in the early 1980s. This has created a need for an educated and skilled workforce in a knowledge-based economy. The need for skills like languages, mathematical reasoning, scientific logic and programming has emerged as the front runners of a nation’s development and English is the language of globalization, internet, trade and science (Carnoy, 2000).

5.1 ‘Going English’

Nunan (2002) finds that ‘economic globalization has given rise to the demand of English language and English language education’. In Malaysia, the two main concerns are the falling standard of English and the impact on the national language. The decline in the standard of English in Malaysia has affected the country’s ability to compete with other economies. Many educators find that the New Education Policy introduced in 1970 is to be blamed for this phenomenon. Besides that, other factors like inadequate funding, teacher education and appropriate resources also contribute to this problem (Nunan, 2002). Students especially in the rural areas lacked the kind of proficiency needed to be competitive in the global market. Mohd Sofi Ali (2003) who carried out a study in three primary schools in the East Coast of Malaysia unveiled three reasons namely; limited classroom, outside classroom language opportunity and English was also not used at home as a means of communication.

A survey conducted by the World Bank found a mismatch in the Malaysian economy. Malaysia has a strong economy with excellent infrastructure, strong resources and natural resources but it lags behinds in terms of labour productivity growth and total factor productivity growth (World Bank, 2005). Thangavelu (2005) suggests that the ‘educational system must recognize the demands of multi-national corporation, increase the supply of workforce with science and technical background, excellent academic teachers and include training to sustain the human capital in a rapidly changing economy’. He states

“The skills shortage problem is more specifically manifested as deficiencies in the areas of English language skills, ICT skills and professional and technical skills”. (p.3)

Thus, the ELT curriculum in Malaysia underwent some transformation in order to meet the demands of globalization. Firstly, the introduction of a
tougher public English examination for students sitting for the SPM examination. This English examination paper formerly known as English 122/322 was upgraded to English 1119 in the year 1995. The English 1119 syllabus is based on the O-Level syllabus set by the Cambridge Examination Syndicate in England (Lee, 2002). Directed writing, summary and continuous writing are among the restructuring efforts in the new syllabus. In 2001, the literature component was introduced to inculcate reading habits as well as creative and critical thinking skills in the students. Poems, shorts stories and novels are part of the syllabus to get students accustomed to different values and cultures. The selection of literary texts by prolific writers like Shakespeare, Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson and Roald Dahl reflect that language learning is something that has to be taken seriously. In 1998, the Ministry of Education introduced the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) for all pre-university and Form Six students. The four skills tested in MUET are listening, speaking, reading and writing. MUET is hoped to help students cope with the challenges in higher learning institutions. Content integrated language teaching was another move in order to cope with the advancement in the field of science and technology. This resulted in the introduction of English for Science and Technology in 2003 as an optional paper at the upper secondary school level. This paper is designed to help students develop the ability to grasp basic concepts and ideas in science and to understand methods of scientific thought and enquiry in English common to all kind of scientific and technical discourse. For this purpose, the areas covered include general science, physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics and environmental education. The communicative methodology is recommended for teaching this syllabus and teachers are encouraged to use the four skills in an integrated manner.

6. Conclusion

To a large extent, the British rule in Malaya had played a significant role in determining the status of English as a second language but the post-independence period has challenged the development and importance of this language. The rise of nationalism and the socio-economic imbalance among different ethnic groups have contributed to the amendments in the policies and planning concerning the ELT curriculum. In examining these reforms, the three different phases must be analysed in order to see the inter-connectedness and relevance to the development of English language teaching and learning.

Revolution in the area of information and communications technology has made the idea of borderless world and globalization possible. The needs within the world of work and employment are crucial and this is reflected in the different phases of ELT curriculum reforms. As English is the language of science and trade, it was timely that English for Science and Technology was introduced as an elective paper at upper secondary school level.
Other curriculum reforms taken by the Education Ministry are in line with Malaysia’s aspiration to produce knowledge workers and to compete with other developing countries.

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