

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION CONCERNS

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1.0 Introduction

My main interest is to examine the state of English language teaching (ELT) in primary schools. I want to understand what is happening in the primary schools. In particular I want to understand why after six years of ELT, the pupils still face difficulties in learning the language.

I begin with the ELT scenario in the primary schools, where I portray the reality of ELT as shown by my three case study schools¹. Next I look into the policy context of ELT, in particular the status given to English language in Malaysia. I examine the current primary English language syllabus in the primary schools: its structure, aims and organisation, the stated, which has been mandated to ESL teachers to implement in the classroom. I explore the possible issues of conceptualising to teaching to the test phenomenon in those primary schools. I set out to find a way reconciling the dilemmas I discovered in the ELT agenda; but I found that I could not do this without a total shaping up of the expectation of the Malaysian community towards ELT.

2.0 The ELT Scenario in Primary Schools

2.1 The Over-riding Concerns for Examinations

2.1.1 The English language environment

The English language environment in the three primary schools studied apparently was lacking. The pupils were not being exposed to a conducive English language environment where they were given ample opportunities to use the language in and out of the classroom, and in and out of the school.

- **Classroom language opportunity:** On the whole, the pupils' only opportunity to use English was limited to the classroom; i.e., during the English language lessons. That would mean a maximum of an hour (for a double period) or a single period of half an hour, six periods a week if the instruction was totally done in the language.
- **English outside the classroom:** Outside the classroom, English language, as a means of interaction amongst the pupils, was practically non-existent. English language panels and society, which had been entrusted to plan and implement English language programmes for the pupils, seemed to have failed to carry out the task. Besides the English language Day, an English language activity initiated at the district level, other language activities were not implemented.
- **English at home:** English was not widely used at home, or outside the school compound. One, as the teachers claimed, the parents could not understand the language;

¹ The case study was conducted over a period of three months in three primary schools in the east coast of Malaysia. I interviewed Headteachers, English language teachers, Heads of English language panels, District and State English language officers (DELO & SELO), Division, State and District Education officials. I observed teaching in the classroom, I talked to pupils, and I talked to the parents, too. I examined and analysed school documents, inclusive of policy documents at Ministry's level. I kept journal of my observation and my field-notes.

therefore they could not use it with the children; neither could they teach them at home. Second, the local culture, as the parents and teachers claimed, was antagonistic to the development of the English language among the pupils. Local dialect was a preferred means of communication.

- **Teacher's modelling effects:** I observed that ESL teachers do not serve as an effective language role models to their pupils. The teacher's language modelling effect; i.e., the pupils emulating the language of the teachers, was remarkably lacking in the primary school context. This was particularly so because the ESL teachers themselves seldom used the language in the classroom or outside the classroom either for instructional or communication purposes. Pupil-teacher interaction and communication were primarily effected through the local dialect than the English language. Furthermore, it was also observed that only a handful of ESL teachers interacted and communicated with each other in English. This was partly due to the language proficiency of the ESL teachers themselves; the other being the tradition and workplace culture of the primary schools.

2.1.2 Examination results as the performance indicator

Raising school standards and pupils' performance took the form of improving target setting in line with external expectations, vis-à-vis improving examination results. English was, as I have mentioned, being considered as the main reason for the performance in the Primary School Assessment Test or Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR). Improvement in the performance, the main target of all primary schools, was therefore essentially seen as an improvement in the English language examination results.

The examination results of primary schools were compared, charted, published in league tables and distributed to all primary schools in the district at least. The implication of the league table on the schools was detrimental. Parents, in the first place, wanted to send their pupils to the most effective schools (as judged against the examination results) as they wanted their children to pass in the examination. Good effective schools, to them, would be those schools with more pupils scoring five A's in the UPSR.

The school heads were worried over results attained below the 40% level in the UPSR. The schools would be labelled as 'low-performance schools, and they would become the centre of attention for continuous visits and consultations from educational authorities (national, state and district) – which was a cause for worry for all primary schools. As a result, the maintenance of educational standards has always been associated with the examination results, and school heads, in particular, felt that they are answerable to the policy-makers and the other stakeholders. It becomes a big worry for the schools and publication of league table by the District Education Office (DEO) caused further concerns and a lot of preparation to raise the examination results has to be made.

Teachers and pupils were pressured due to the frequent tests. It was observed that education has become "learning for the examination and not learning to be intelligent" for the pupils. For the teachers, it meant more clerical and administrative work for them (which they had already too much of), especially in reports of examination results to the DEO and to the parents.

2.1.3 Focus on examination classes

As the over-riding concern was on the examination, primary schools therefore focussed on the examination classes; i.e., Year Six pupils. Hence, as was pointed out in the cases, extra classes became a common phenomenon in the primary schools. They were seen as a prerequisite for excellence and quality; parents expected the extra classes to be held, and they were ever willing to send their children to those classes. They were held in afternoons, evenings, weekdays, and weekends and during school holidays, paid or on voluntary basis. Another common academic practice was the organisation of motivational workshops and examination techniques for those

pupils to prepare them for the examination. Non-examinable subjects were not given priority, and subsequently some of the periods were being taken by examination subjects, namely English language, Bahasa Malaysia, Mathematics and Science (Lim, 1997)

Pupils in the other years (Year One through Year Five), however, were left to the discretion and good judgement of the subject teachers. The School Development Plan did not incorporate a long-term academic planning of programmes for those classes.

Year Six teachers, therefore, had to finish the syllabus as soon as possible. The month of May was set as the deadline, but teachers have been found to have finished it very early in the year (March). Revision ensued, and the common practice was to prepare the pupils for the examination.

Extra-curricular activities apparently, were neglected in the examination classes. Afternoon extra-curricular activities were replaced by extra classes for the examinable subjects. The three primary schools were caught in the dilemma. One Headteacher noted that the importance of extra-curricular activities, as he focused on the overall excellence for his school, but despite this, priority was given to the examination.

2.1.4 Frequency of tests

Apart from the UPSR, school-based assessment; that is, formative assessment, has been given a formal status in the policy. In practice, however, there was a heavy reliance on external standardised tests in all primary schools under study. One of these numerous tests is the UBB, a bi-monthly summative test, which is a common practice in the three case study schools. It is designed as a part of an academic excellent strategy for the primary schools, gearing towards the UPSR. It is organised and monitored by the Head Teachers Council, which manages the questions and distributed (sold) them to the schools at the state and district levels. The UBB would normally replace the school's monthly or term tests, and it is meant to standardise the questions for the primary schools. It is in fact a centralisation effort aiming to improve the quality of education, namely, the examination results.

Questions for the UBB were modelled along the UPSR English language paper especially for the Year Six pupils. The questions were used to drill the pupils for the actual examination. Consequently, therefore, the test questions for the other years (and pupils) tended to follow that UPSR format, too.

As previously noted, all pupils in all years had to sit for the test, which could be up to five times at least per calendar year. This would include the Year One pupils, too. They had to sit for the test as scheduled by the schools.

2.2 Teaching to the Tests Phenomenon in ELT

Effective English language teaching in the primary school, therefore, was judged by the attainment of the examination results. ESL teachers were indeed worried and very concerned over the inputs, i.e., the pupils they had to teach. The concerns over examinations in the primary schools has inevitably led to 'teaching to the tests' (Norris, 1993; Nutall, 1995a).

"When teacher performance is judged in terms of pupil performance on attainment tests teachers will tend to protect themselves against the consequences of low scores and teach to the test." (Norris, 1993;p.35)

This concern with the teaching the pupils to pass the tests and examinations, instead of teaching to be intelligent has resulted in the stereotyping of teaching and learning approaches. These would involve using the first language, rote learning and teaching, pattern drillings of questions

2.2.1 Teaching English language in Bahasa Malaysia

In all the three schools, Bahasa Malaysia, the first language, was used freely in the English language classrooms through the use of translation method. The use of the first language was a common practice among all ESL teachers (Malay and non-Malay alike) in the schools. Some ESL teachers claimed that Bahasa Malaysia had been used to a maximum of 70% in the weak classes, and 30% in the better classes. However, it was not uncommon to see 100% use of Bahasa Malaysia in the weaker classes; it would be an uncommon phenomenon to witness a 100% use of English in all the classes.

The ESL teachers gave two main reasons for this practice. Firstly, the shortage of trained ESL teachers had resulted in the deployment of non-trained ESL teachers to teach English in the primary schools. Apparently, some ESL teachers lacked the language proficiency and the pedagogical knowledge to teach the language. Some claimed they were not confident in their language proficiency. In fact trained Malay ESL teachers admitted that they lacked the competence and confidence to use English. ESL teachers who were proficient in the language, needed pedagogical knowledge to teach English. The examination concern; i.e., passing the examination as an end product of schooling, was the second reason. Experienced ESL teachers, believing that their pupils would not be able to understand fully if they were taught in English, conceptualised the translation method as the most effective way to teach English language in the primary schools. The non-trained ESL teachers shared the same pedagogical beliefs. The school administrators concurred (some ESL teachers claimed that that was what the administrators wanted) as they themselves considered high examination results as the end product of education.

However, a third reason, as one Headmaster and a Deputy Head observed was the reluctance of the ESL teachers to make their pupils use the language. They would consider that as a waste of time and the effort made would not pay off. To them, the easiest way to make the pupils understand what they wanted to the pupils to learn was through the translation method. Economy of time was the main factor. Expectation of the teachers towards the pupils' achievement in the English language would be another. The ESL teachers believed that the pupils found that English was a difficult subject to learn.

Teachers' language in the classroom, as I have noted, serves as a good modelling effect on the pupils' learning especially if the English language classes were the only opportunity for them to listen to the language. As Cook (1991) argued:

The teacher's language is particular importance to language teaching...using the first language for classroom management and instructions deprived genuine examples of language use and set a tone for the class that influence much that happens in the second language activities... The whole context provides language ... includes the patterns of interaction between teacher and the class and between the students in the class down to the actual gestures used. The input that the students are getting is far more than just the sentences they encounter." (Cook, 1991, p.99)

In addition she mentioned:

"Students learn what they are taught ... students learn by listening methods turn out to be better at listening; students taught through the reading are better at reading. The best major source of language available to the learner is what they encounter in the classroom...their language input affects their language in broader terms." (ibid, 1991, p.100)

2.2.2 Rote learning, pattern and question drillings

Typical instructional techniques used in the ESL classroom were rote learning and pattern drillings. Rote learning; i.e., the teaching the rules of the language, was especially applicable to the learning of grammar, which was an important component of the UPSR English language paper. In spite of Curriculum Development Centre's aspiration that grammar instruction to be

implicit and covert through the use of language context (KPM, 1995), the teaching of grammar in the primary classroom had its own twists and turns. Grammar had to be taught, explained, memorised and used in sentences for examination purposes.

Pattern drillings, similarly, propelled the pupils towards the examination. Familiarity of the examination questions was the centre of the technique; pupils were drilled with past examination questions. Repetitions were common as most teachers found that their pupils could easily forget what they had learnt previously.

The familiarity of the questions had even extended to Year One pupils. They would teach the pupils the language items which would likely come out in the examination (i.e., the UBB, in this case). Hence, a change of paper format would set a commotion amongst the ESL teachers (e.g. the case of Trial Exam and the introduction of Thinking Skills in the English language paper). The English language learning and teaching had been synonymous with teaching to the examination or test paper.

2.2.3 Focus on literacy skills, neglect of oracy skills

The ELT curriculum explicitly states that the oracy (listening and speaking) skills should be focussed in the primary education, especially in the early years. (KPM, 1995). The pupils would be able to pick up and learn the language in a meaningful way, and later they could be able to use that in reading and writing. It is important therefore that pupils should be provided with the language before they are expected to produce it. They must also be given opportunities to try out the new language in controlled practice sessions where they have very little opportunity to make mistakes. Gradually control can be released as they are given the opportunity to use the language freely. (KPM, 1995).

However, as oracy skills (listening and speaking) were not tested in the examinations (UBB or UPSR), the skills had practically been neglected in the schools. The ESL teachers claimed that the school and education authorities did not bother with the development of oracy skills in the primary schools. What counted were the literary skills, which constituted major components in the UPSR English language paper.

2.2.4 Learning English is fun, a mere slogan?

Learning English, as envisaged in the KBSR, should be pupil-centred in order to meet the varied pupils of different abilities. As indicated in the three cases, English language in the three case study school contexts was considered as a foreign language. In fact pupils rarely had the opportunity to use the language; the culture of the state was rather antagonistic towards the learning of the language itself.

The KBSR English language curriculum, in principle, attempts to ensure that the pupils would acquire knowledge and skills through direct experience in learning the language skills. As such the major features in the teaching and learning strategies include:

- Learning is to be managed through a variety of grouping; a class, small group, pairs or individuals, appropriate to skills to be taught and the diverse abilities and interests of the pupils.
- Greater diversity and flexibility is to be applied in the selection of the body of knowledge and skills to be taught in a particular lesson.
- More attention to be given to the individual needs and interests of pupils through remedial and enrichment programmes.
- Utilisation of available local materials and resources to enhance the teaching and learning process.

However, the KBSR faced several implementation setbacks. The goals have not been fully achieved. It was, an Afternoon Supervisor observed, a 'paperwork culture'. It was beautiful on the paper. Apparently, the theoretical aspects of the language have been neglected. When the examination became the main concern, stereotyping of teaching and learning of the language occurred, and classroom situations became unattractive. Pedagogy has become dry and too structured.

"It is the early years of school that liveliness, delight, a sense of magic in existence, beauty, laughter, whim and a capacity for utter foolishness are most essential and when they are present, most contagious ... I urge them to be teachers so that they can join with the children as teacher collaborators in a plot to build a little place of ecstasy and poetry and gentle joy." (Kozol, 1996; p.xi)

3.0 English Language Teaching Policy in Primary Schools

3.1 The Status and Relevance of English Language in Malaysia

The policy clearly states that English language is still a strong second language in Malaysia. The primary English language syllabus, for instance, declares:

"In keeping with the National Education Policy, English is taught as a second language in all-government-assisted schools in the country at both the primary and secondary levels of schooling." (KPM, 1995, p.1)

It further states:

"Despite the decision to introduce Bahasa Malaysia as the main medium of instruction in Malaysian schools, the government however was committed to a policy of maintaining English as a 'strong second language', in that it would be the second most important language in the country, in international relations and in the economic area. This is attested to by the decision to have the English language taught as a subject from Year One of the primary school in all national primary schools and Year three of Chinese and Tamil schools. Also various government documents continue to stress the economic, international and political value of English. The Third Malaysian Plan specifically spelt out the role of English saying: While the government will implement vigorously the teaching of Bahasa Malaysia, measures will be taken to ensure that English is taught a strong second language. This is important if Malaysia is to keep abreast with scientific and technological developments in the world and participate meaningfully in international trade and commerce (Government of Malaysia, 1976, p. 384)

The policy also seeks to balance the need to preserve Bahasa Malaysia and to enhance the importance of the English language. On this, Pillay (1995) wrote:

"The Cabinet Report, whilst reinforcing the position of Bahasa Malaysia as the national and official language of the country, also emphasised the teaching and learning of English as an important tool for the purpose of gaining knowledge in the field of science and technology." (Pillay, 1995, pp. 8-9)

The importance of English lies in its economic significance

"... that Malaysians might not only lose its economic competitiveness but also find progress in the industrial and technical field retarded if its workforce was not competent in English." (Mahathir Mohammad, 1991)

The Education Act of 1996, which was introduced to replace the Education Act, 1961, reaffirms the position of English as a second language in the country (MOEM, 1997) and "a compulsory

subject of instruction” (MOEM, 1996) in all schools. This was further strengthened in the Mid-term review of 7th Malaysian Plan, 1996-2000.

What is the status of English in Malaysia? Is it a second language, as perceived by the policy-makers, or a foreign language, as seen by the ESL teachers in the primary schools? A foreign language is not the official language of the country. It may still have a significant role to play in the country: as an important school subject, a pre-requisite to enter the university or the language of certain course at the university - in tourism, business and civil services (Richards, 1985). A second language, on the other hand, is “not the mother tongue of the majority of the population, (but it) still functions as an official language; i.e., the sole or major language of law, government, education, business and media ... It is used alongside the other languages, but it is commonly the most important language of education, government and business ... It is often regarded by its users as a local rather than a foreign language. (Richards, 1985, p.2).

I believe the status of English language in Malaysia has changed, and that English language no longer has the status of a second language (as it had ten to fifteen years ago). As my cases have indicated, English language is most appropriately seen as a foreign language. It is just another language to be learnt besides the first language, Bahasa Malaysia.

3.2 The Aims of English Language Teaching in Primary Schools

English language, as a second language in the country, has a dominant role to play in the broader education scenario in Malaysia.

“English is a means of communication in certain everyday activities and certain job situations. It is also an important language to enable Malaysia to engage meaningfully in local and international trade and commerce. At the same time, it also provides an additional access to academic, professional and recreational materials.” (KPM, 1998b, p.2)

ELT in primary education, therefore, aims at equipping pupils with the basic English language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and knowledge of grammar to enable them to communicate (orally and in writing) in and out of school for different purposes, and different situations.

“English language ... is being taught at all levels of primary school to equip the pupils with the fundamental (basic) language skills. (This is) to enable them to use the language to communicate in certain situations. Hence, the English language programme focuses on the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.” (KPM, 1995, p.iii; translation)

It is an integral part of the whole National Education System, which is based on the National Education Philosophy. It acknowledges that knowledge is the key determinant of the destiny and survival of the nation. The purpose of education is therefore to enable the Malaysian society to have a command of knowledge, skills and values which are necessary for a highly competitive and globalised society, arising from the impact of rapid development in science, technology and information.

The English language syllabus for the primary schools specifies the aims:

“To equip pupils with the basic skills and knowledge of the English language so as to enable them to communicate, both orally and in writing, in and out of the school.” (KPM, 1995, p.1)

It further outlines:

“By the end of the primary school, pupils should be able to:

- i. listen to and understand simple spoken English in certain given contexts;
- ii. speak and respond clearly and appropriately in familiar situations using simple language;
- iii. read and understand different kinds of texts for enjoyment and information; and
- iv. write for different purposes and in different forms using simple language. (ibid, 1995, p.2)

With the introduction of the Smart School programme, where certain primary schools in Kuala Lumpur were selected as pilot study schools in the year 2000, the aims of English language teaching and learning remains unchanged. The emphasis is still on the acquiring the four fundamental language skills to meet the new orientation of modern technology.

“(It) is to enable pupils to acquire proficiency in the language so as to equip them with positive communication skills and knowledge of English that will enable them to widen their networks of interpersonal relations and have direct access to information for general knowledge and leisure-based purposes.” (KPM, 1998c, p.viii)

By the end of primary education, pupils should be able to:

- Establish and maintain interpersonal relations through the sharing of information, ideas, opinions, attitudes, feelings, experiences and plans; participate in social interaction related to solving problems, making arrangements, making decisions with others, and obtaining good services and information.
- Obtaining information from a variety of sources, and use the information appropriately for various purposes;
- Give information in spoken and written forms;
- Listen to, read or view and respond to stimuli;
- Be involved in spoken or written personal expressions;
- Apply learning skills and take responsibility for their own learning. (ibid, 1998c, p.vii)

The English language syllabus at the primary school level, therefore, comprises the teaching of both the aural-aural skills (listening and speaking) and the literacy skills (reading and writing skills). A close lateral link is maintained for the four language skills. (KPM, 1995).

“Proficiency in the four (language) skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing is made possible through the acquisition of specific skills delineated in each skill component. These skills are to be taught in context through selected topics together with the sound, grammar and vocabulary which form the language content. The scope for the selection of topics is specified ranging from what is immediate and familiar to the pupils’ knowledge and experience to what is remote and unfamiliar. This is designed to foster pupils’ interest in the English language as well as to develop a positive attitude towards it ...It is emphasised that the skills, sound system, grammar and vocabulary stipulated should be taught taking into account pupil ability and rate of progress. Teachers may go beyond the stipulated requirements if their pupils are capable of handling them.” (KPM, 1995, p.3)

A total of 240 minutes was allocated for English in Years 1 to 3 and 210 minutes per week in Years 4 to 6.

3.3 Assessment in English Language Teaching

Assessments in primary education consist of two components: formative and summative (see Chapter One ‘Assessment Policy and Practice in Primary Schools’). Formative assessment, a school-based initiative, is a continuous effort on the part of the ESL teachers and the school to ensure that ELT and learning (i.e., the learning of the fundamental language skills) takes place. The summative assessment, in the form of UPSR English language, aims to assess “the

attainment of an individual at the end of a course of study” (Murphy and Broadfoot, 1995, p.36); i.e., at the end of the primary education.

The UPSR English language paper aims to assess pupils' ability in the reading, and writing. The 1997 UPSR English language paper, for instance, had the following features:

- It consisted of three sections, A, B, and C with 22 questions. Section A consisted of ten questions ; Section B another ten questions, and Section C two questions on writing skills.
- Section A (Questions 1-10) comprises two multiple choice questions based on two comprehension passages. Passage 1 was based on a school notice and passage 2 on an informal letter. The comprehension questions asked covered a variety of reading sub-skills, namely the main idea, specific/major details, cause and effect relationships, predicting outcomes, drawing conclusions, vocabulary, and inference.
- Section B (Questions 11-20) was on Vocabulary and Language Usage. For Questions 11-13, three conversations were given (in the form of picture strips). The pupils were asked to choose the most suitable sentence/response (provided) to fit the situation in each of the picture. The knowledge of social functions in normal every day situations and context would be essential. The pupils were required to study each picture carefully to understand the situations and then selected the right response for the sentence given. Questions 14-15 assessed the pupils on the correct use of vocabulary in a given situation. They were required to choose the correct relationship/word as indicated by the dialogues with the word provided. Questions 16-20, were also picture-dependent, was a 'modified' cloze procedure. The pupils were required to study the pictures carefully and then they had to complete the text provided by writing one word for each blank. There were five blanks.
- Section C, which assessed the pupils' writing skills, comprised of two questions, Questions 21 and 22. Question 21 was an information transfer exercise. It required the pupils to read and understand a form of text (a notice) and transfer the information into another form of text (an announcement).The transfer would be at word, phrase and sentence levels. Question 22 was a guided picture composition on a beach scene. There were three picture strips, each describing an event: planning, preparation and at the beach, with key words provided to help the pupils to make good sentences (and they had to use all the words). Writing was mainly at sentence or paragraph level.
- Grammatical items were not tested discretely, but they were tested in context (cloze, and writing). (KPM, 1998a)
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The English language paper did not assess pupils on listening and speaking.

The formative and summative assessments in primary education, in principles, are mutually complementary. In practice, however, they are not. The concern over the external public examination, the UPSR, seems to be the ultimate aim of primary education in Malaysia.

4.0 Policy And Practice of ELT in Primary Schools

Policy and Practice of ELT in Primary Schools, an Empty Commitment?

As I see it, the ELT policy in the Malaysian context is well laid and documented. It is clear and explicit. English language, as I have noted in the above discussions (Sections 2.0), enjoys a profound status - a strong second language, at least in policy – and privileges in the Malaysian education and society. A great emphasis has been given to the language; English language is still relevant and important in the Malaysia's quest for economic development and international recognition.

However, language performance among the pupils in the primary schools, has not improved tremendously, even after the English language panels have been in the primary schools for almost 18 years. As I have indicated in Section 2.0 (ELT Scenario in Primary Schools), English language has always been a subject of debate (and of interest, too) in the education circle, seminars and workshops, but pupils' performance has not improved dramatically in one way or another. Literacy skills (reading and writing), as the teachers claimed, seemed to improve (as indicated by UPSR results). Pupils could read and comprehend passages; they could write simple isolated sentences based on the examination format (see Section 3.3), at least for examination purposes, but they are not able to speak. Oracy skills (listening and speaking) have always been a major problem among pupils in the primary schools. The listening and speaking skills have not been given the emphasis that the curriculum places on them.

Why was there a neglect of oracy skills in the primary schools? It is clear that policy document emphasises the four language skills in primary education. Is the over-riding concern for examination results, and its related variable – teaching to the test phenomenon - the cause for this neglect of oracy and the dominance of reading and writing? It is a straight forward argument, but it is plausible. The relationship could be a causal one, but there must be more to it. Could English language teaching and learning in the primary schools in Malaysia be an “empty commitment” (Black and Wiliam, 1998)?

The issue here is fundamental: What are the goals of ELT and learning in Malaysia? What constitutes pupils' performance in learning English? Thomas (1987) claims that the ultimate goal of teaching a language is to develop the learner's mastery of the language in question. Language mastery on the other hand involves the development of his language competence (Chomsky, 1965) and communicative competence (Hymes, 1972).

Could the government aspirations have not fully reached the ground level, the primary schools? If not, what are the probable causes? What could have gone wrong? English language teaching is everybody's concern; the policy is right; the status it enjoys is strong; yet English language teaching and learning has always remained 'marginalized'. This is especially so in the rural areas.

The interview data from my cases indicated that, while the policy stressed the learning of language skills, classroom practice focused on the attainment of excellence in the examination. While on the one hand, the policy emphasised learning and mastering the language skills, on the other there is a practical emphasis on the attainment of examination results in UPSR. There appears to be a mismatch between the stated curriculum, implementation and evaluation of ELT curriculum in the primary schools. What is practised in primary schools in reality is a 'test-driven; curriculum, a curriculum emerging from 'test-based accountability as a policy'; i.e., holding schools and teachers accountable through public examinations (Lim, 1997). Lim wrote:

“ The policy ... arises from the centrality given to the performance indicators to measure the 'quality' of education as outlined in the Education Vision reforms ... To be sure, given the policy makers' emphasis on public examinations as suggested by the concerns they have expressed in the printed media and official reports as well as by the teachers have said, such a policy seems to be in existence even before the reform was announced...With the reform, the policy, now couched in corporate management concepts such as 'Zero-defect' appeared to be given more urgency ... the policy is underpinned by the notion of 'zero failure' where no failure in examinations is perceived as an indicator of quality education.” (Lim, 1997, p.180)

Looking at the ELT scenario in Malaysia as a whole, the relationship between policy and practice has always been an issue. The two, the stated and the actuality, do not match. What the policy makers, designers and implementers at the Ministry of Education (MOEM, and its divisions) aspire to seems almost meaningless at the implementation level. For instance, the government has always asserted the importance of English as a language of the international

trade. Malaysia's quests for globalisation and industrialisation, a prerequisite for the development of the multimedia supercorridor (MSC), and international recognition (e.g. ISO 9000 and the attainment of world class education standard) indicate the need for a certain attainment of English language proficiency as mandatory for the success of the reforms. However, the problem is not simply a mismatch between policy and practice only. As I have demonstrated 'accountability' policy shapes practice. Hence, there appears to be contradiction built into the policy contexts.

Kozol (1996) noted:

"Children are viewed less frequently as children than as a future cog within a post-industrial machine: little pint-sized deficits or assets, some of whom may be of no real worth to our society. Others of whom may have marginal utility... Childhood is something more than preparation for later stage in life that my children in my inner cities will not even reach because so many lost within the toxic miseries and illness that plagued our cities now, will never live to become adults. Childhood has, or need to have a precious value in itself, for what it is, and not for what it is supposed to lead to." (Kozol, 1996, p. x)

A balance has to be struck between the interest of the individuals and the interest of the state if English language teaching is likely to be effective. In fact in language teaching, the individual needs should pre-empt the state needs. When the pupils are motivated, when they find learning English interesting and meaningful, then the state agenda can come in. Practically it means going back to the basics of learning the language skills.

"Sprinkling information over students' heads and then testing them to see what they caught has little to do with real learning or with teaching at its best. Teaching at its best requires knowledge of students, knowledge of hopes, dreams, aspirations, skills, challenges, interests, preferences, intelligence, and values they bring with them to the classroom. Teaching at its best is first an act of inquiry, investigation and research in the lives of the children." (Ayers, 1995, p. 6)

4.2 The Effects of Assessments on ELT

From the interviews, I discovered that one of the issues that dominated the whole ELT scenario in the primary school workplace culture, was role of assessments, i.e., tests and external public examination. They have created a voluminous impact, especially UPSR, on the teachers (their beliefs and workplace culture, their perception and expectation of pupils' achievement, their pedagogical practices, their professional development) and the culture of the school as whole.

Assessments seemingly have been a pre-occupation, the prime mover, the booster, in shaping up the school excellent culture. Tests and examinations have been an over-riding concern in the primary schools.

Nuttall (1995a, p.33) asked:

Why this massive volume of examining, that might almost be termed as industry? Why are schools, teachers and parents prepared to see virtually the whole of every school holiday devoted to examinations, which disrupt the normal activities of the school?

To this I would add the following questions:

Why were parents prepared to spend a lot of money and time sending their children to tuition? Why were parents expecting schools to organise extra classes for their pupils? Have the schools been virtually changed into tuition centres?

As I have noted in my cases, ESL teachers' concerns in the ESL classes became the concerns and worries to get as many pupils as possible to pass the English language paper in the public examination or the monthly standardised tests. As a consequence, they "employ teaching methods which are underpinned by a behaviourist view of learning; attempt to complete the syllabus as early as possible to leave room for revision before the UPSR; used UPSR revision workbooks; and conduct supplementary lessons where pupils are given extensive practice on the kinds of questions that will be tested in the UPSR" (Lim, 1997, pp.182-183).

The backwash effects of the dominant pursuit of examination in ELT can further be observed in the following:

- Nuttall (1995c, p.197) noted the effects were to "narrow learning opportunities ...sustained exposition of the teacher and extensive note-taking by pupils to limit oral work ... writing tended to be stereotyped and voluminous – the result of the widespread practice of dictated or copied notes".
- Prodromou (1995) argued that:
 "Professional neglects of the backwash effect (what it is, how it operates and its consequences) is one of the main reasons why new methods often fail to take root in language classes. Many teachers trapped in an examination preparation cycle, feel that the communicative and humanistic methodologies are luxuries they cannot afford. When the market call for on teachers and institutions to produce quantifiable results, it usually means good examination results. Sound teaching practices are often sacrificed in an anxious attempt to 'cover, the examination syllabus, and to keep ahead of the competition. In summary, negative backwash as experienced by the learner means language learning in a stressful, textbook bound environment." (Prodromou, 1995, p.14)
- The examinations have narrowing and distorting effects on the curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 1991; Madaus, 1991; Madaus and Kellaghan, 1992; Sheppard, 1991; and Smith, 1991). They tended "to turn the minimum curriculum, as expressed by the examination content, into the maximum" (McLaughlin, 1991). As indicated in the three primary schools, the school heads claimed that some primary schools have, to certain extent, resorted to cheating in the examinations in order to score as many A as possible.
- Another effect, as the cases indicated, was the 'trickle down' effects (Madaus, 1991). The concerns and worries over the examination in the examination classes (Year Six) spread down to the other pupils in other years.
- A classroom climate dominated by testing and examinations
 "will give students the impression that what matters in language learning is the mark they got, not only in tests, but also for classroom performance, assignments, and homework, even though these may have no direct connection with the final examination."(Prodromou, 1995, p.19)
- Prodromou (1995) also noted that overt backwash of the examination meant
 "... doing a lot of past papers in class as preparation for an examination, it may involve replicating, from past papers or the textbook, the exercise types favoured in the particular examination students will be taking: multiple choice, transformation, or gap filling. ... presentation of the text followed by questions similar to those in the examination. This 'text + questions' formula is a crude mirror-image of what happens in most conventional examinations. (Prodromou, 1995, p.14-15)

Black and William (1998) also argued that :

- (a) Teacher's tests encourage rote and superficial learning where teachers say they want to develop understanding - and many seem unaware of the inconsistency.

- b) The questions and other methods used are not discussed with or shared between teachers in the same school and they are not critically reviewed in relation to what they actually assess.
- c) For primary teachers particularly, there is a tendency to emphasise quantity and presentation of work and to neglect its quality in relation to learning.
- d) The giving of marks and the grading functions are over-emphasised while the giving of useful advice and the learning function are under-emphasised.
- e) Use of approaches in which pupils are compared with one another, the prime purpose of which appears to them to be competition rather than personal improvement. In consequence, assessment feedback teaches pupils with low attainments that they lack 'ability', so they are de-motivated, believing that they are not able to learn.
- f) Teachers' feedback to pupils often seems to serve social and managerial functions, often at the expense of the learning functions.
- g) Teachers are often able to predict pupils' results on external tests because their own tests imitate them - but at the same time they know too little about their pupils' learning needs.
- f) The collection of marks to fill up records is given priority than the analysis of pupils' works to discern learning needs; furthermore, some teachers pay no attention to the assessment records of previous teachers of their pupils.

Nuttall (1995b, p. 44) noted that examination results as “one of the very few quantitative measures of the success of education, both for the individual and for the system as a whole,” hence making them “to carry a load they have never been design to bear” (ibid 1995b, p.46). To Nuttall (1995b, p.45), examinations are designed to “report how well an individual student has fared at the end of a course of study prescribed in a syllabus”. To him, the examination results lacked comprehensiveness as a measurement of standard, and most examinations did not attempt to assess social or moral development.

Elliott (1998) observed

“Children ... too young to cope with the stress of testing ... testing intruded on teaching time in classroom ... unmanageable nature of the procedure they have to follow ... Teachers knew that increasingly they were being required to teach for the tests. Rather than the test being used to support the curriculum and validate teachers' judgements about independent defined learning outcomes, they were used to define such outcomes and replaced the teachers as agents of assessment. (Elliott, 1998, p.19)

5.0 Conclusion

As I examined the stated and the expected, and as I looked at the reality, the practice, as portrayed by my three case study schools, I discovered that there was a policy-practice mismatch; the policy as envisaged in the ELT curriculum could not be implemented in the primary schools. The reason was obvious and a direct one, but a significant one - I discovered that tests and external examination were the over-riding concerns – and they led to teaching to the test phenomenon in the primary schools. This concern; i.e., the over-riding concern for examination in the primary schools apparently turned out to be one of the dominating factors shaping the context in which the English language teaching is been done in primary schools.

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