

The Re-Introduction of English Literature Subject in Malaysian Secondary Schools; Urban versus Rural Teachers

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Abstract

The teaching and learning of English Literature in the Malaysian English Second Language (ESL) context has evolved over the time. Literature in English component is introduced since 2000 in Malaysian Education System, with the intentions to develop language proficiency apart from instill reading habit among the students. Then, Ministry of Education Malaysia announced the re-introduction of English Literature subject in secondary schools, starting from the year 2016. This is part of the reformation for the national education system. This invites lots of responses and concerns from various parties. Therefore, this study serves as a means to seek the differences between teachers' level of readiness, teaching in the urban and rural areas towards this implementation. For that purpose, 320 English teachers from two different localities, in the state of Sarawak have been selected as the sample. They were given questionnaires and SPSS Version 21 was employed to generate the findings. The results indicated the existence of significant difference between these two localities, whereby the teachers in the rural area demonstrated higher level of readiness towards this proposal. To sum up, this implies that teachers, despite localities play a major role in nurturing and developing the quality of Malaysian Education System.

Keywords: Literature, Malaysian Education System, readiness, ESL, secondary school

1. Introduction

The teaching and learning of English Literature in the Malaysian English Second Language (ESL) context has evolved from being a core part of the English Language curriculum to a point of near extinction only to re-emerge in the 21st century in a stronger form (Subramaniam, 2007).

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In 1999, the Ministry of Education announced that there would be a major change in the English Language Teaching (ELT). This involves the teaching of English Literature component in the secondary schools level. This component is embedded in the English syllabus as part of the lesson and one period in a week should be allocated for the teaching and learning of English Literature component. In the English language curriculum specifications, the Literature component is classified under 'language for aesthetic use' learning outcome. The Ministry of Education (2003) has stated that the reason of classifying Literature component in the syllabus specifications is "Language for aesthetic purposes enables learners to enjoy literary texts at a level suited to their language proficiency and develops in them the ability to express themselves creatively" (pp. 2).

On 20th August 2012, Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who is also the Minister of Education, has announced the re-introduction of English Literature subject in secondary schools. This is part of the reformation in the national education system. The reason leading to this is to increase the standard of English in Malaysia and to raise the level of English proficiency among the Malaysian students, enabling them to communicate and master the second language in Malaysia. However, this proposal has brought along loads of reaction and response among the Malaysians. The Parents Action Group for Education Malaysia (PAGE) wants the Government to ensure the availability of trained teachers who could teach the subject before English Literature is re-introduced in the education system (News Strait Times, 24 August 2012). The president of PAGE claimed that the teachers' ability to handle the subject is important as English Literature is not a 'light' subject. In addition, she even argued that sufficient resource materials should also be considered before this plan is to be executed. This is followed by the president of National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP), Hashim Adnan who held the opinion that a more in-depth study was needed before the plan was to be implemented (Borneo Post, 24 August 2012). He further claimed that since getting students to be interested in Malay Literature is even difficult, what is more with English Literature.

Therefore, it is essential to examine the matter in a more critical study as Malaysian education system is not in favour to encounter another effect similar to the 'Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains & Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris (PPSMI)' or English for Teaching Mathematics and Science (ETEMS).

In relation to this, the Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz Ungku Abdul Hamid in a newspaper interview suggested that the study of literature in the national education system should not only focus on English Literature as the education system should instead promote the study of literature in all of the world's languages (The Malaysian Insider, 24 August 2012). He further mentioned the English culture portrayed in their literature was not like that in the past and it was possible their language and culture would lose importance in the world in future. To further strengthen this proposal, it is documented in Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025. This aims to expose the students to English language via English Literature module, whereby it involves the increase of 15% to 20% of the exposure to the language. This plan is scheduled to be executed in the second wave of Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 (2013).

Hence, this article serves as the platform to investigate the level of readiness among the English teachers, focusing on those in the urban and rural areas. There are three aspects to be investigated which are the pedagogical skills, proposed activities and attitudes on the Literature lesson towards the re-introduction Literature subject in secondary schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 What is Literature?

Literature is an expression of life through the medium of language and in the ESL classroom and it is often seen as an authentic means of learning the target language (Sidhu, Chan & Kaur, 2010). In Malaysia, there are three different reading programmes which have taken place in the education system for over the last three decades. The first one, the English Language Reading Programme (ELRP) was implemented in 1983, and then followed by the Class Reader Programme in 1993. The third programme is the integration of the Literature in English component in the English Language syllabus in the year 1999.

To date, the Literature in English component in the English Language paper is considered to be the most successful reading programme because the texts taught and read in the classroom are a tested component in the public examinations (Vethamani, 2004).

Carter and Long (1991) stated that there are three models of teaching literature:

- The Cultural Model is a traditional approach of teaching Literature where learners need to discover and infer the social, political, literary and historical context of a specific text. It reveals the universality of thoughts and ideas and learners are encouraged to understand different cultures and ideologies in relation to their own. This model views Literature as a source of facts and it is teacher centred where the teacher passes knowledge and information to the students.
- The Language Model is an approach that offers learners an opportunity to access a text in a systematic and methodical way. This approach allows teachers to apply strategies used in language teaching such as cloze procedure, prediction exercises, jumbled sentences, summary writing, creative writing and role play to deconstruct literary texts in order to serve specific linguistics goals.
- The Personal Growth Model is an approach that focuses on the personal development of the students including emotions and personal characteristics. It requires students to relate and respond to the themes and issues by connecting them to their personal life experiences. It is influenced by both cultural model and the language model where focus is on the particular use of language in a text in a specific cultural context.

2.2 The Study of Literature in Malaysia

There are many studies conducted in relation to the teaching and learning of Literature component in the Malaysian education system. Among those include Hwang and Embi (2007) who investigated the approaches employed by the teachers in teaching literature component in selected secondary schools in Sabah. The study involved 112 English teachers. It was revealed that paraphrastic approach was employed the most and it also drew the attention to the fact that teaching approaches are largely influenced by students' language proficiency, attitudes, the exam-oriented culture, the prescribed literary materials and the number of students in the classroom.

Malaysian English Language Teaching Association cited in Aziz and Nasharudin(2010) stated that literature learning provides space for critical engagement with issues, themes and text constructions that are authentic and relevant in the real world. In fact, it helps in broadening and widening students' viewpoints upon reading other cultures and world views.

Hence, literature component enables students in improving their language and to improve their thinking skills. On the other hand, Rashid, Vethamani and Rahman (2010) conducted a study involving less proficient students of Form 1 and Form 2 in 18 secondary schools in Kelantan. Via their study, it was found out that the most popular approach employed by the teachers is the information-based approach. This is due to the students' inability to comprehend English language which then forces the teachers to spoon-feed the students, apart from employing mother tongue as the medium of instruction. This may somehow contribute to failure in developing students' language and thinking skills.

Then, Sidhu et al. (2010) in their study regarding the instructional practices of English teachers and the challenges faced by them revealed that in Contemporary Children's Literature programme, teachers spent a lot of time on individual comprehension work with little emphasis given to comprehension instruction and higher order thinking skills. Furthermore, the study also concluded that the integration of literary elements was minimal and teachers lacked creativity in organising learning tasks. Finally, Noor, Mahamod, Hamat and Embi (2012) studied the students' perceptions in the use of Computer Assisted Teaching and Learning (CATL) multimedia software in learning the Bahasa Malaysia novel. The study involved 122 Form One students in Johor and the respond gathered from the study indicated that the multimedia software meets the students' needs in learning the novel. In fact, the study also revealed that the students' motivation increased and their understanding could be enhanced by using the multimedia software.

In addition, Yunus and Suliman (2014) in their study found out that students liked learning Literature in English although it is difficult and hard to be understood. On the other hand, they also revealed that the teachers in their study were still relying much on conventional method in teaching Literature such as asking students to copy down notes, merely giving explanation in the class and employing answering comprehension questions technique.

2.3 Role of Teachers

The quality of teachers is the most significant school-based determinant of student outcomes (Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025, 2013). This indicates how important the role played by teachers.

This is further concurrent to Idris, Loh, Nor, Razak and Saad(2007)stating that teachers are at the heart of the educational process. The teachers' job by definition would be successfully imparting knowledge (Gore & Begum, 2012). Teachers function in dissemination knowledge to the students. Due to that, teachers are seen as equipped with the knowledge and as claimed by Gore and Begum (2012), the teacher should be able to bring the updated knowledge to the classroom and also should have the expertise to impart it. Here, the teachers function as a role that could facilitate the students' learning and they should maximise their potential to the utmost, considering the fact that they possess the required knowledge in themselves.

Teachers are dominant in the process of teaching (Huijie, 2012). Teachers function in planning the course, choosing the materials, preparing the lesson to be taught, systemizing the teaching process and also evaluating the students. In a language class, the teacher tries to promote the students' efficacy, skills in using the language to the maximum by urging students to join him in the learning process (Huijie, 2012). The is also applicable to the Literature class. Teachers need to ensure that the students will feel excited and fun in learning Literature. Thus, this is associated to the focus of this article, to investigate the teachers' readiness in embracing this reformation.

2.4 Differences between Urban and Rural Area Teachers

It should be noted that the environment in which the teacher teaches may somehow affect the way the teaching and learning process occurs. The same goes to locality aspect, involving the rural and urban areas. It is investigated that most rural teachers are relatively young and they have just graduated from school (Yang, 2014). In fact, these young teachers lack of work experiences and need to improve their teaching capacity to meet the students' demands. On the contrary, Khattri et. al. cited in Freeman &Anderman (2005) claimed that urban schools recruit more highly qualified teachers and provide greater curricular variety and educational resources.

In greater comparison, Trentham&Schaer (1985) drew a conclusion whereby rural teachers seemed to draw more satisfaction from their students and peers. On the other hand, urban teachers were happy to have good facilities and the opportunities for social/cultural development offered in the urban setting. Despite the fact that rural area may be lacking in certain aspects, the teachers in that area may benefit in other aspect. The same goes to those in the urban setting.

They might have better facilities, but there will be some aspects which demotivate them in their teaching process. On top of that, rural teachers seem to be somewhat less concerned with teacher load than do urban teachers (Trentham&Schaer, 1985). This notion might not be true as current situation seems to put emphasis on both the teachers in rural or urban areas. Their study on attitudes and self-concepts between the teachers in rural and urban areas came to a conclusion in which rural teachers were more satisfied with rapport among teachers and teacher load. On the other hand, their counterparts were more satisfied with curriculum issue and teacher salary.

Lin (2011) argued that many rural teachers were said to be unaware of the importance of spending time on careful preparation for class using professional techniques, but instead worked in a very mechanical and arbitrary way. This might be due to the fact that lacking in facilities contributing to teachers employing more traditional approach in teaching. However, realising the fact that rural area should not be neglected, efforts have been made to better the condition.

In discussing the teachers in rural areas, US Department of Education cited in Hudson & Hudson (2008) indicated teachers in rural and remote schools can feel isolated and may require support through mentoring, modelling and counselling. This also means that the advantages of rural service must be highlighted to potential beginning teachers by targeting the pre-service teachers level. Furthermore, World Bank cited in Marwan, Sumintono and Mislán (2012) reported some facts about situation in Malaysia rural schools whereby there is a high turnover of teachers in schools as well as shortage of teachers in English, Mathematics and Science. This shows that the condition is rural schools in Malaysia is also worrying and actions need to be taken to curb this issue.

3. Methodology

This is a quantitative study, employing the use of questionnaire as the research instrument. The items in the questionnaire are adopted and adapted from Hwang and Embi (2007) and Abdullah, Zakaria, Ismail, Mansor and Aziz (2007). The questionnaire is based on the four-point Likert scales, which are strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree. The pilot test was conducted involving 30 English teachers.

Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was calculated to test the reliability of the instrument and the value obtained was 0.963, indicating that the questionnaire was reliable. As for the validity of the instrument, the questionnaire was examined by an expertise in TESL field.

For the purpose of the study, cluster sampling was employed and 320 English teachers teaching in the state of Sarawak were involved as the respondents. The sample size is obtained via Krejcie and Morgan (1970). These 320 respondents are divided equally between those in the urban and rural areas. The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents and after a week, the questionnaires were collected to be analysed. The questionnaires were analysed using T-test, in order to seek the difference between those teaching in the urban and rural areas.. The data analysis utilised was the Statistical Package Social Science (SPSS) version 21.

4. Findings and Discussions

This study was monopolised by female teachers (74%) while only 26% male English teachers were involved. 91% of the respondents were majoring in English. In terms of qualification, majority of the respondents were bachelor degree graduate (n=259), followed by diploma level (n=41), and the least is master's degree (n=20). Finally, 57% respondents claimed they received training in teaching Literature while 43% teachers (42.8%) did not receive the training.

Table 1: Independent T-test Result for Pedagogical Skills

Construct	Locality	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t-Value	Sig
Pedagogical Skills	Urban	15	3.156	0.098	-6.273	0.000
	Rural	15	3.241	0.119		

The above table are the results from conducting the independent T-test for the first dependent variable. Based on the result, the mean score for the rural area group is slightly higher than the urban area group. The mean difference recorded is 0.084. The urban area group records the mean score of 3.156, with standard deviation of 0.098 as compared to the rural area group with mean score of 3.241 and standard deviation of 0.119. This is further denoted by the t value = -6.273 and sig. = 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). Thus, there is a significant difference in the pedagogical skills between the teachers in the rural and urban area, based on 95% significance level.

Table 2: Independent T-test Result for Proposed Activities

Construct	Locality	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t-Value	Sig
Proposed Activities	Urban	13	3.037	0.184	-3.816	0.002
	Rural	13	3.119	0.215		

Table 2 displays the results from conducting the independent T-test for the second dependent variable. Based on the result, the mean score for the rural area group is slightly higher than the urban area group. The mean difference recorded is 0.082. The urban area group records the mean score of 3.037, with standard deviation of 0.184 as compared to the rural area group with mean score of 3.119 and standard deviation of 0.215. This is further denoted by the t value = -3.816 and sig. = 0.002 ($p < 0.05$). Thus, there is a significant difference in the proposed activities between the teachers in the rural and urban area, based on 95% significance level.

Table 3: Independent T-test Result for Attitudes towards Literature

Construct	Locality	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t-Value	Sig
Attitudes towards Literature	Urban	14	2.961	0.253	-12.366	0.000
	Rural	14	3.118	0.252		

Table 3 indicates the results from conducting the independent T-test for the third dependent variable. Based on the result, the mean score for the rural area group is slightly higher than the urban area group. The mean difference recorded is 0.157. The urban area group records the mean score of 2.961, with standard deviation of 0.253 as compared to the rural area group with mean score of 3.118 and standard deviation of 0.252.

This is further denoted by the t value = -12.366 and sig. = 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). Thus, there is a significant difference in the attitude towards Literature between the teachers in the rural and urban area, based on 95% significance level.

In comparing the readiness between the respondents in rural and urban area, it was found out that there is a significant difference exists in all the three dependent variables; teachers' pedagogical skills, teachers' proposed activities and teachers' attitudes towards Literature.

For the first dependent variable, the rural area respondents have higher mean score than the urban area respondents. This implies the teachers in the rural area possess higher level of readiness in terms of their pedagogical skills towards teaching Literature in English subject. Perhaps, the teachers in the rural area are usually those novice teachers who have just been posted for the first few years as argued by Yang (2014). Due to that, they might have many new ideas and suggestions on ways to teach and conduct the Literature lesson. Unlike the urban area teachers who are more dominated by the senior teachers as claimed by Khattri et. al. cited in Freeman & Anderman (2005), they might employ more traditional pedagogical skills in their teaching.

The same goes to the second dependent variable, the teachers' proposed activities in Literature lesson. It appears that the rural area teachers have higher mean score than the urban area teachers. This denotes that they are more ready towards teaching the subject, equipped with the proposed activities to be conducted. Although rural teachers seem to be somewhat less concerned with teacher load than do urban teachers (Trentham & Schaer, 1985), this might not be applied in this study. As discussed earlier, those in the rural area who are usually the novice teachers might have more creative and innovative activities to be conducted in the Literature lesson. They usually will try to search and invent more interesting activities to be employed in the lesson, as part of their experiment. Therefore, it results in the rural area respondents scoring higher mean than urban area respondents for this construct.

The third dependent variable demonstrates similar results like the previous two. There is a significant difference between the two localities. Having said that those in the rural area are the novice teachers, they might possess more positive attitude as compared to the urban area teachers. In fact, these rural area teachers might possess more excitement in teaching Literature as they are still fresh and new in the system.

This findings somehow contradict to Lin (2011) who argued that many rural teachers were said to be unaware of the importance of spending time on careful preparation for class using professional techniques, but instead worked in a very mechanical and arbitrary way. Thus, the rural area teachers seem to possess more positive attitudes towards the teaching of Literature subject.

In conclusion, there seems to be a difference in terms of the readiness in teaching Literature in English subject among the teachers in the urban and rural area. This is measured by the three dependent variables, which are the pedagogical skills, proposed activities and their attitude towards Literature. Teachers from the rural area seem to be on the upper hand as compared to those in the urban area. This seems to deny what US Department of Education cited in Hudson & Hudson (2008) has claimed that teachers in rural and remote schools can feel isolated and may require support through mentoring, modelling and counselling.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The findings have shown that there is a significant difference between the respondents teaching in the urban and rural areas in terms of their readiness in teaching English Literature subject via the three dependent variables. The respondents in the rural area seem to have denoted higher level of readiness as compared to their counterparts in the urban area. This somehow implies that the rural area respondents are more positive towards this transformation. Indeed, it is crucial to prepare the teachers in order to embrace the change that will take place later. Teachers are the catalysts who are in the role of aspiring and nurturing the future generation. They have an important responsibility in working towards the improvement of the Malaysia English Education.

This study may serve as an eye-opener in which teachers servicing in the urban area should be more prepared towards this implementation. In fact, the Ministry of Education needs to ensure the teachers, regardless of their location are ready in taking the responsibility towards this proposal. A point to remember is that this proposal will be very fruitful on condition that it is well-designed and the teachers are fully-prepared to meet to the needs of the Malaysian education system. When this has been fulfilled, then only this proposal can take place without any issue or confusion.

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