

Analyzing Malaysian English Classrooms:
Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening
Teaching Strategies

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Abstract

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This paper firstly examines the historical context of Malaysian curriculum in regards to the teaching of English, and moves on to dissect the present context of Malaysian English classrooms. This paper is primarily focused on analyzing English classrooms in three Malaysian schools: National School, National Chinese Type School, and National Tamil Type School. The analysis is planned out by looking at how teachers teach reading, writing, speaking and listening English in each classroom and proposes a revision of said teaching strategies. The outcome of this paper proposes that there should be a much deeper approach to teaching English by creating more meaningful English lessons rather than the surface level approach of teaching by rote memorization and repetition. Finally, in order for Malaysia to become a contender in the global workforce, global academia, and global economy, Malaysia students need to be sufficiently proficient in the English language first through meaningful English lessons in schools.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Background	
Historical Context	8
Curriculum & Language of Instruction	11
Current Malaysian Schools	15
Method of Research	16
National Primary School	18
National Chinese Type School	23
National Tamil Type School	29
Limitations	34
Analysis	
Rational	34
Reading	35
Writing	42
Speaking & Listening	44
Conclusion	49
References	56

Introduction

Malaysia consists of a conglomerate of three main races: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. While it boasts its cultural diversity and tolerance for accommodating so many religions and cultures, the schools are largely divided between the races. According to Tan (2008) in “Chapter 6: Cross-Cultural Views of Teacher Commitment in Malaysia,” Malaysian society is unique because the characteristics of its society: “The characteristics of Malaysian society, and its social and cultural groups, exist side by side in the same political domain and still maintain their distinctive cultures and traditions” (Tan, 2008, p.105). These social and cultural distinctions amongst the people in Malaysia have resulted in an interesting, post-colonial education system that revolves around National Schools and National Type Schools where culture and the language of instruction differ: National School, National Chinese Type School, and National Tamil Type School.

Some of the major differences in these schools are the language of instruction and the historical background of each school. The decision to send children to a specific school usually lies on the importance of mother tongue language maintenance as well as personal cultural and racial identity be it Malay, Chinese, or Indian. Schools that have an integration of all three races remain primarily in National Primary and National Secondary Schools. In terms of the language of instruction, the Malay language is used as the language of instruction in all national schools excluding national type schools such as the Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina and Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil (National Chinese Type and Tamil Type Schools). In the National Chinese Type Schools, Mandarin Chinese is used as the primary language of instruction whereas Tamil is used in National Tamil Type Schools.

Malaysia has had these three main branches of schooling for the past fifty-six years after gaining its independence from the British in 1957. Consequently, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil schools were formed from the curriculum, ideas, and traditions of many countries, leaders, and cultures from the local Malay people in Malaysia, to Chinese people from China, and Indians from India. As a result of that, the English language has taken a back seat in classrooms to maintain the mother tongues of the three major ethnicities in Malaysia: the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians. In 1991 however, Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad initiated *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020, Ibrahim, 2008), which in summary represents a list of nine vision and challenges that Malaysia as a nation would achieve by the year 2020, many of which pertain to a "futural role imagery" (p. 9) as follows:

"...schoolchildren...during the 1990s when Vision 2020 was formulated will be the people running and leading the country... the curriculum together with the content knowledge, learning processes, and life experiences undergone by these students, prepares them adequately to become leaders who will be responsible for their own future and the future of the nation and humanity (Ibrahim, 2008, p. 9).

As a result of that, Malaysia has been striving to rise forward in educating its citizens into becoming responsible future leaders of the nation and for the future of humanity.

One of the ways the Malaysia Ministry of Education has gone forward to increase its recognition in the global world through Vision 2020, and through improving the Malaysian Education Curriculum was to create a preliminary report on the "Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025" (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2012) which states that the education curriculum should increase bilingual proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language) and English (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2012). Therefore, the idea of bilingual proficiency subsequently

makes the English language an important factor to moving the nation forward, shifting all schools to embrace English as more than a colonial language, but as an “international language of communication” instead (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2012, p.10).

From a global point of view, Malaysia has not been ranked highly in terms of its educational achievements. According to the recent PISA rankings in 2009+, Malaysia was ranked lower than the international average and the OECD average (OECD, 2009). Therefore, even though Vision 2020 was implemented twenty-two years ago, the Malaysian education system is still far behind more than 50 other countries in the world in terms of educating its diverse citizens. As a nation aiming to compete in the global society, Malaysia has to devise a curriculum that will enable its nation to push forward and achieve success at a global level. If English is still regarded as an international language of communication, Malaysian schools will have to make sure that students are given an education of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in English that will be of equal standards with other successful education systems in the world.

In this paper, I aim to explore three English classrooms in three different school systems that have roots in Malay, Chinese, and Tamil Schools founded after the colonization of the British. Thus, I will take a closer look at an English classroom setting in a Malaysian National Primary School, National Chinese Type Primary School, and National Indian Type Primary School. I have observed English teachers at each school, and have had conversations with these teachers to better understand how English is used and taught in the present Malaysian English education context. Furthermore, I aim to analyze these three different English classrooms in terms of how reading, teaching, speaking and listening English are taught by these teachers in these distinctive schools. I have broken down and analyzed each English lesson from each classroom into these three categories - reading, teaching, speaking and listening English – to closely

examine how each classroom is achieving the nation's Vision 2020, and to better understand how effective these three teachers are in progressing forward with the Malaysian Ministry of Education's goal of teaching English as an international language of communication, and providing the necessary teaching strategies to equip students to be bilingually proficient.

Background: Historical Context of Malaysian Schools

It is vital to explore the historical roots of the Malaysian Education system in order to understand the basis of creating National Schools and National Type Schools in Malaysia. Therefore, this section is dedicated to exploring and understanding the historical context of the Malaysian schools and the curriculums that were born out of it.

The Malaysian education system was formally founded during the British Rule and the British prided themselves in the promotion of the English language and public school philosophy in each British colony:

The British believed that the success of their colonial mission depended upon the creation of an elite class of English-educated natives, and to this end they promoted the English public school ethos, especially its sports, in the countries they colonized (Ibrahim, 2008, p. 264)

Accordingly, English schools in the late 1700s, such as the Penang Free School, which was established by elite Christian missionaries from Great Britain, were established to cater to the upper middle class of Malaysian society and British expatriates (Ibrahim, 2008). Schools such as the Penang Free School were mainly established in urban towns where British ambassadors and Chinese ethnic groups usually lived. The Chinese who lived in these urban areas were part of an elite social class and chose to abandon the Vernacular Chinese schools—where the majority of other Chinese people attended—to join the elite British schools instead.

Due to Malaysian's conglomerate of cultures, and plenty of disagreement with the British ethos from each individual culture, Chinese and Indian Vernacular schools were established to accommodate students whose parents did not wish, or could not afford for them to attend British schools (Ibrahim, 2008). As for the Malays, this group of people formed their own school, but primarily founded these schools in rural areas where they lived. Village personalities became teachers and focused on expanding Islam as a religion by primarily emphasizing fluency in reading the Qu'ran (Ibrahim, 2008, p. 156).

The more elite group of Malays, who were privileged to work in urban areas under the British Rule, primarily sent their sons to either the English schools, or the Malay College of Kuala Kangsar. The Malay College Kuala Kangsar was modeled after Eton College in the United Kingdom and offered preparatory classes in the English language, along with classes involving etiquette. Malay daughters of the elite social class were sent to the Malay Girl's College, also modeled after Eton College in the United Kingdom (Low & Azirah, 2012). Again, these two select schools were part of an elite social class, and therefore, the English society, and the English language were associated with a higher, elite social class.

As a result of that, Malay citizens who were not part of an elite social class took it upon themselves to set up Malay Vernacular Schools. Malay Vernacular Schools adopted the philosophy that Islam should be the main focus of school emphasizing on moral endeavors and the sustainment of their native language-Malay.

Chinese Vernacular Schools on the other hand, were rooted in Confucianism, a philosophy passed on by immigrants influenced by the education in Ancient China (Ibrahim, 2008).

The Chinese in Malaysia during the early 1900s formed primary, national-type secondary schools, and Chinese Independent Secondary Schools (CISS) where the curriculum revolved

around Chinese history, geography, and the language of Mandarin Chinese. Later on, due to political and historical tensions amongst the British and the three main racial groups, the *Razak Report* in 1956 was drafted. This report was drafted by Malaysia's second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, who decided that Chinese schools, as well as Tamil/Indian schools should be more focused on Malaysia embracing its richness in diversity and cultures as a united country, and Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language) as Malaysia's true national language (Ibrahim, 2008). The *Razak Report* was accepted by the Chinese because of its "basic spirit in maintaining mother tongue education for all races" (p. 98). Therefore, today, Chinese Vernacular Schools still use Mandarin Chinese as their main medium of study, but also include Malay and English in the curriculum to appease the Ministry of Education, as well as keep up with the global world. Therefore, Chinese schools, now also known as National Chinese Type Schools for the purpose of this paper, developed a philosophy of education that valorized Chinese, and only later agreed to add the Malay and English language to receive government funding (p. 100).

In the early 1900s, Tamil/Indian schools were founded by the British because of the sudden influx of immigrants from India who came to Malaysia to labor in the coffee, sugar, and rubber industry during the 1900s (Ibrahim, 2008). The foundation of the Tamil school education curriculum is rooted in the Big Church Missions who founded an Anglo-Tamil School in the state of Malacca. However, these schools did not survive for long because the British did not show much interest in the education of Indians (p. 115). The Malaysian government, later on, did set up Tamil schools, which were primarily made up of Indian students who were sons and daughters of the labor workers in Malaysia. Teachers who had emigrated from South India taught these students in the Tamil language. Later, Malay as a national language, and English as a second

language were implemented as mandatory subjects to be learned in these schools, now known as National Tamil Type Schools (p. 115-116).

Private schools, on the other hand, are still maintained by the British and other foreigners such as the Americans and Australians, and are administered by its own administrators. These schools are free to use their own curriculums and are also free to employ whomever they please as these schools are not bound by government rules and regulations (Ibrahim, 2008).

Background: Curriculum & Language of Instruction

Since Malaysia gained its independence from the British in 1957, there have been about four decisions to change the medium of instruction in National Schools from English to Malay and vice-versa (Normala & Govindasamy, 2009). During the British colonization days, it was an “obvious reason” for the language of instruction for National Schools to continue to be conducted in English because Malaysia “had no choice but to carry on with the prevailing system of education, as the country’s top management had only nation-building in mind” (Normala & Govindasamy, 2009, p. 223).

Between 1957 and 1970, the “newly independent Malaysia had a major agenda...that is national unity, [therefore], a national language was seen as the binding element to ensure a smooth transition from the ‘divide and rule’ policy implemented by the British” (Selvaraj, 2010, p. 54). At this time, three types of instructional methods were applied in English classrooms such as: grammar translation, direct method, and situational approach methods (Asmah, 1984). According to Selvaraj (2010), these approaches mainly helped students learn English by drilling them to acquire rote memorization skills on grammar rules which in turn did not help students connect the language to “real life situations” (Selvaraj, 2010, p. 55). During this time, English was the established language of administration, but the change from English to Bahasa Malaysia

(Malay Language) in National Schools was implemented in 1983, twenty-six years after the nation gained its independence (Darus, 2009). In May 1969, severe racial riots broke out in the nation, which “catalyzed a change in the education system where all English medium schools were instructed to phase out” (Darus, 2009, p. 21).

In 1970, thirteen years after gaining independence from the British, Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language) became the “official language of administration, but English was widely used in high courts, diplomatic services...[and] in a social context...gained popularity among the upper and middle class people from urban areas” (Selvaraj, 2010, p. 55). At this point in time, English was slowly becoming a language taught in accordance to the emergence of global educational beliefs and the focus of teaching English shifted from rote memorization of grammar rules to “effective communication” (Selvaraj, 2010, p. 56) meaning that,

“Language was seen as a system for the expression of meanings, and linguists began to analyze language as a system for the expression of meanings, rather than a system of abstract syntactic rules” (Nunan, 1999, p. 9)

In 1970, according to the National Language Policy implemented by the Ministry of Education, English was “formally accorded the status of second language” meaning the content syllabus used in elementary schools would have to be revised to include more hours of instruction on the English language (Darus, 2009).

National Chinese Type and National Tamil Type schools in 1970 during the shift of language of instruction from English to Malay began to adopt the new National School syllabus, putting English as a second language to the Malay language. The medium of instruction for these Type Schools however, still remained Tamil, and Chinese and “English was introduced in Primary 3 as a subject only” (Darus, 2009, p. 22). In 1983 however, New Primary Schools

Curriculum (Kurikulum Baru Berspadu Sekolah Rendah) was implemented resulting in the fact that English language teaching was more than a subject, but also the “acquisition of the 3 R’s namely basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic” (Darus, 2009, p. 22). Therefore, in National Primary Schools, Malay language was the medium of instruction and English was taught from Primary 1-3, for 240 minutes per week, and Primary 4-6 for 210 minutes per week; an increase from the previous years. In National Chinese Type and National Tamil Type Schools however, Mandarin and Tamil were still used as the medium of instruction. At these National Type Schools, English was taught from Primary 3 for 60 minutes per week, and Primary 4-6 for 90 minutes per week (Darus, 2009).

In 2002, the Malaysian Prime Minister at the time, Dato’ Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad introduced the idea that National Schools would shift its medium of instruction from the Malay language to English “if the people [wanted] it” (Darus, 2009, p. 24). Subsequently, Dato’ Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad introduced the policy of teaching Science and Mathematics from Bahasa Malaysia to English stating that it was meant to raise students’ proficiency in English, and to raise proficiency in the understanding of Science and Mathematics (Darus, 2009). Much to the chagrin of opposing critics at the time, this policy followed through. However, this policy decision was challenged by critics on the basis that teaching Science and Mathematics in English would “not the answer to the challenges of either raising English standards or uplifting Mathematics and Science proficiency among Malaysian students” (Darus, 2009, p. 24). Regardless of the many critics at time, this change occurred and the English language was again pushed to the forefront as a second language of acquisition that students should be proficient in along with the national language of Bahasa Malaysia.

In 2009, the current Education Minister, Tan Sri Muhiyiddin Yasin announced “that the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English will be phased out from 2012” (Darus, 2009, p. 25). This decision to phase out the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English was based on a “1-year assessment and public consultation” (p. 25). To rectify and uphold English as a language all students should be proficient in, the Malaysian Ministry of Education decided to recruit up to 14,000 English language teachers as well as specialist teaching assistants to help smooth the transition from English to Malay by the end of 2012 (Darus, 2009). Therefore presently, there are many English language teachers and specialist teaching assistants who are in a number of National Schools who equip teachers with teaching strategies that will enable students to achieve proficiency in the English language.

According to Mukherjee & David (2011), language policies that revolve around the choice of a national language can generate discrepancies especially in a diverse society such as Malaysia as evidenced in the shifts of language of instruction between 1957 and 2012. The use of English has been pushed back and forth resulting now in Malaysia regarding English as a international language of communication which seems to push back the idea of achieving national unity through the national language of Bahasa Malaysia: “globalization has encouraged many Malaysians to focus on the English language; indeed, the position of English as an international language has resulted in English, and not Bahasa Malaysia being used as the principle language of communication, especially in the urban areas and among middle and upper class Malaysians, especially non-Malays” (Mukherjee & David, 2011, p. 22). In the present day, National Schools have reverted teaching all subjects with the exception of the English language, to Bahasa Malaysia. It is then important to understand how English is taught today in this context to see if the teaching of English still resonates with enabling students to use English as an international

language of communication when the emphasis on English has been minimized to make room for the national language of Bahasa Malaysia.

Background: Current Malaysian Schools

Presently, National Schools, and National Type Schools are still established in Malaysia. Students are required by the Malaysia Ministry of Education to go to at least six years of Primary School in National Primary Schools or National Type Schools. A parent of a certain type of ethnicity would usually choose to send their children to National Primary Schools or to a National Type Primary school according to what ethnicity they belong to. For example, a Chinese parent may choose to send their child to a National Primary School, or a National Chinese School. Students would then move on to Lower Secondary, then to Upper Secondary, and may choose to continue their education at a Post Secondary or Higher Education facility. A general idea of a Malaysian student’s educational track is as follows:

Diagram 2: Structure, Age Ranges, and Types of each Educational Sub-sector in Malaysia (MOE, 2008, p. 18)

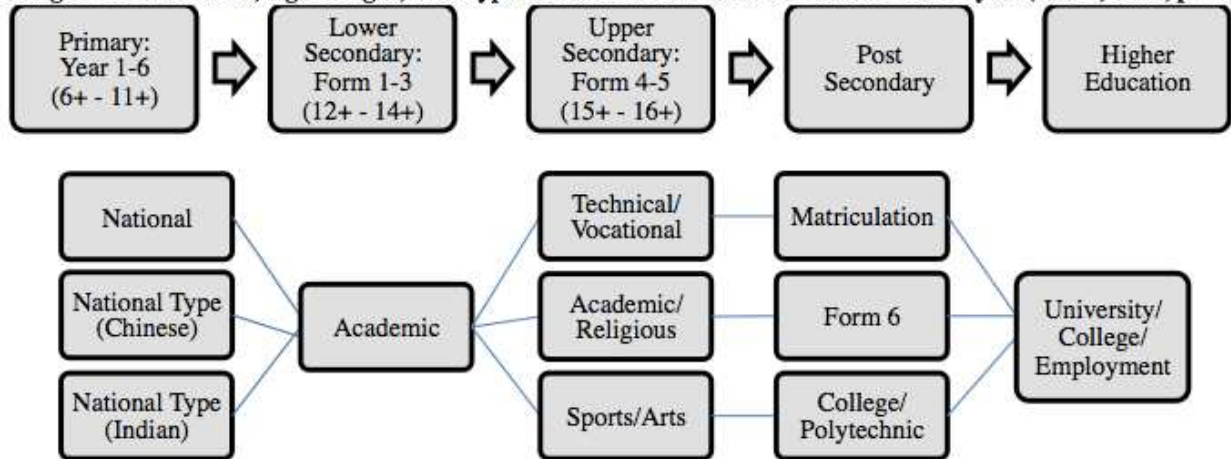


Fig. 1 General Malaysian Student’s Academic Journey

In the present day, all Malaysian children are required to attend primary school at the age of seven. These students take a national exam in Primary Six (UPSR: Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah) and move on to lower secondary school. In general, most Malaysian students will either

go to a national or national type school with the exception of many upper class elite, foreign-educated families who would send their children to private schools or homeschool institutions. Students who complete lower and upper secondary will either do post secondary schooling such as matriculation, Form 6 or attend a technical/vocational school or Polytechnic. Students who have performed well in examinations, or have the money to do so will further their education at a university/college.

For the purpose of this paper, it is vital to note that English is still not taught from Primary 1-3 in National Type schools. However, English is taught from Primary 1-6 in National schools. Therefore, students in Primary 4-6 are in their foundational years of learning English in a National Type school setting, whereas students in Primary 1-3 in a National Primary school will be learning English at a beginner level. Learning English at these levels, regardless of National or National Type Schools, mostly does not include subject contextual learning, which is usually taught at the Lower Secondary school level.

Method of Research

Throughout this study, I have conducted a qualitative study of three teachers' pedagogical methods in teaching the English language and observed whether the teaching of English resonates with the Ministry of Education's blueprint goal of having students become bilingually proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and the English language, and for students to participate in using English as an international language of communication at a global level. I have initially set up these four questions to guide my observations of each classroom in terms of how each teacher implements culture into their lessons. Furthermore, I have aimed to see how English is portrayed and valued as a whole in each classrooms, asking the question as to whether English is seen as important for succeeding in examinations and the social context of Malaysia. I have selected the following

questions to interview each teacher in regard to the value of English and the inclusion of each student's culture in these particular classrooms in alignment with whether English is viewed as an international form of communication:

1. What teaching practices do you use to include the three major cultures into your English lessons?
2. What types of assessments do you use to evaluate your students?
3. How is English viewed and valued as a whole in this school?
4. What is the uniqueness of teaching in this school with these particular sets of students?

I developed these questions to determine the atmosphere of the classroom, as well as to understand the basic ins and outs of a typical English classroom in each school. I also sought to understand the justification behind each teacher's planning and conducting of lessons in terms of including or disregarding major Malaysian cultural factors. In addition to having conversations with these teachers, I have also spent an entire week in each school observing one class that these three teachers teach in. In each school, I have written copious notes as to what I have noticed and paired it with the interviews I conducted with each teacher after completing my observation.

The three teachers I conversed with teach in different public schools in a suburban town of Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. These schools represent different groups of children who come from all classes of society, and racial backgrounds. The children represented in this study comprise of ten to twelve year olds in Year 4 and Year 5 who are preparing to take the Year 6 National Exam: Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah.

For each teacher in each school, I was given permission to observe their English classrooms for a week. Each week, the government allots two hours of English classes per week in National Type School; half an hour 2 out of 5 days a week, plus one hour on one day of the week; and two and half hours of English classes in National Schools; one hour twice a week, plus one hour on one day of the week. I usually sat at the back of the classroom and kept a close watch

on the teacher as she taught, and spoke to the students only when they asked me for additional help. I did not interview any of the students, nor did I include any of their names in my research.

For the purpose of this paper, I have paid close attention to this particular age group of students at this academic level because it is usually where the foundation knowledge of English is built before these children are sent to take the national exams. I have also explored why certain students from different National or National Type Schools succeed in reading, writing, and speaking fluent English, and why other students are weaker at reading, writing, and speaking English by the time they are of age and grade to take the Primary Six National Exam (UPSR). These national exams are also an important factor as the exams will subsequently determine if they will further their education at a secondary school level, and eventually at a tertiary school level.

Sekolah Kebangsaan – National Primary School Findings

School Context

School M is situated in a suburban neighborhood in Kuala Lumpur. The students come from the surrounding neighborhood, which is predominantly made up of Malay communities. Most of the students in the particular class observed came from the low cost apartments next to the school. All subjects in School M are conducted in the Malay Language with the exception of English. As a consequence of that, the importance of speaking and writing the English language fluently is secondary to reading, writing, and speaking the Malay language.

It was a week before the Muslim holiday, Hari Raya Aidilfitri. The attendance in school was low because some students had already gone to visit their families in their parents' hometowns.

Two classes were observed in School M. Classroom M1 consisted of twenty-three students who were of the Malay ethnicity. Classroom M2 consisted of twenty-two students made up of predominantly Malay students with the exception of two Indian Muslim students. These students usually sat in prearranged rows before Miss M entered class. During class, Miss M would put them into groups to enhance her lesson.

Teacher: Miss. M

Miss M has been teaching in School M for the past fifteen years. During my interview with Miss M, she discloses that she is tied to the government-mandated curriculum, so she has to make sure her students are ready for the National Malaysian examinations: Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (Loosely translated: National Elementary School Examination). However, this mandated curriculum does not stop Miss M from including supplementary materials to enhance her class lessons. Miss M is ethnically Indian herself, unlike her students who are mostly of Malay ethnic backgrounds. Nevertheless, the atmosphere in the classroom is one of respect and all of her students are at ease with her teaching style. Miss M also reminds me that she has spent years building her teaching career and gaining her students' trust and respect by following the curriculum as well as using her graduate degree education to improve her students' English proficiency levels.

First Observation

Miss M told me before class that she aims to make sure her students are able to create original sentences using adverbs accurately. She wants them to make sure that they understand what adverbs are, and how to use adverbs so that they will be prepared for the national exams they will be taking in Year Six. Miss M starts off her first English class in Classroom M1 this week by using a grid chart on a large sheet of paper to help students understand, identify, and

break down sentence structures. She purposefully prearranged her twenty-three students into small groups of three to four to get them to brainstorm each grid chart. As each group fills up the grid chart with the accurate subject-verb agreement sentence, they also make up new sentences based on examples already written on the blackboard by Miss M. After each group is done with their own grid charts, Miss M asks each of them to face the front of the class and discuss each of their answers in a larger group.

When it is time for each group to present their work, Miss M posts each group's poster on the blackboard so that all their work is visible to the entire class. She also asks each student to sit in a semicircle towards the front of class so that each student is able to see everyone's posters. Then, Miss M asks the entire class to read aloud each sentence on each group's poster. While the students read aloud from the blackboard, Miss M listens carefully to each student for any errors in pronunciation, and is quick to correct any student who is incorrect. All of the students willingly read the sentences aloud with much enthusiasm, even if they are unsure of the pronunciation of any word.

Next, Miss M diligently checks their work and rectifies their errors by pointing out mistakes made on each poster. For example, when a student writes "Ali is smile at the girl across the street," Miss M asks the students to find the error in terms of the verb, and corrects it as a class: "The correct answer would be 'smiling' not smile, correct class?" Miss M further encourages her students to add adverbs to their verbs to create more complex sentences so instead of "Ali is smiling at the girl across the street," Miss M asks them to write, "Ali is smiling *happily* at the girl across the street." Miss M goes through each poster on the board and spends about ten to fifteen minutes per poster. This activity takes the entire class hour to complete.

Towards the end of class, Miss M asks each student to help clear the blackboard, asks them to practice learning and memorizing new vocabulary words, and leaves the classroom.

Second Observation

For the second observation, Miss M is still aiming to get her students to understand how to use adverbs accurately in a subject-verb agreement sentence. Miss M is in Classroom M2, which is considered to be a higher-level classroom of ten-year old students. First, Miss M starts the lesson by tapping into students' prior knowledge about adverbs. She asks the students if they could provide her with examples of adverbs. Next, the students each gave Miss M an example of an adverb and Miss M writes down each example on the blackboard. Miss M proceeds to conduct the same activity with Classroom M1 in this classroom and the set up is similar. When Miss M asks the students to move from their smaller groups of four to a larger group, the activity goes by faster than it did in Classroom M1. Again, students are asked to read each sentence aloud and the students correct mistakes together as a class. This activity is used to make sure students pass a section of the *UPSR* where sentence building is crucial in helping students achieve top scores in the examination.

Finally, Miss M hands out a piece of paper with *UPSR*-type questions containing various pictures and asks each student to build a sentence describing said picture. Each student works quietly in groups of four to finish the task and this activity takes up the rest of class. In the next class, the following day, Miss M would go through each picture with the entire class and ask students to give their own examples of sentences they had built.

Conversation with Miss M

Miss M was kind enough to give up some of her time for a short conversation and answered the three main questions I had about teaching English in a Malay classroom. For the

first question, “What teaching practices do you use to include the three major cultures into your English lessons?” Miss M explains that she has to use a lot of group work and modify a lot of the lesson plans in the set curriculum to meet her students’ level of understanding English. In terms of cultural inclusiveness of the three major cultures, Miss M tells me that she has to change the names of children in some of the textbooks (e.g. Anna to Anisah) so that students would relate better to the text. She also explains that some of her students would think that the English names were English words, so she changes these names to avoid confusion among the students.

For the second question, “What types of assessments do you use to evaluate your students?” Miss M tells me that all of her teaching is directed towards getting her students to achieve passing marks in the national and school examinations. She also says that she is pressured to make sure her students perform well for the school and national examinations. Furthermore, she is unable to take the luxury of crafting lessons that she thinks would benefit the her students to better learn the English language because of the mounting pressure of examinations. Miss M therefore uses national examination-type questions that she cuts and pastes into an exercise book. She then makes sure that the students are familiar with the exam format, and also helps them understand each section of the exam weeks in advance. Miss M also assesses her students’ conversational English by getting them to talk about their holiday plans in a think-pair-share activity. She encourages a lot of small group discussion and collaboration to create a comfortable and safe environment for her students.

Finally, for the third and fourth questions, “How is English viewed and valued as a whole in this school?” and “what is the uniqueness of teaching in this school with these particular sets of students?” Miss M tells me that she has to wrestle with students’ families not supporting their education. Most of her students’ parents are labor workers or blue-collar workers who do not

believe that English is a necessity to living a successful life in Malaysia. In addition to that, Miss M's students are constantly absent near the holiday season of Ramadhan so Miss M has to constantly modify lesson plans, and get students up to speed when they return. Therefore, the challenge she faces in this school primarily revolves around getting support for students from their home environment when it comes to their education, and learning English.

Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina – National Chinese School Findings

School Context

School C is also located in a suburban neighborhood of Kuala Lumpur. The students come from the surrounding areas that are made up of middle-class, Chinese families. All subjects are taught in Mandarin Chinese with the exception of English. Just like the National schools, as a consequence of having all subjects in Mandarin Chinese, the importance of speaking, reading, and writing English is secondary to Mandarin Chinese. Also, there are more Mathematics periods in the school than English, which therefore stresses the importance of being able to do well in Math rather than reading, speaking, or writing English.

After getting permission from School C's principal, I was sent to a Year 5 classroom consisting of 46 students. These students are considered the top students in the school and therefore, the teacher expects the students to have almost perfect points in school and national examinations in English as well.

Teacher: Miss C

Miss C has been teaching at School C for the past 21 years. She enjoys coming to school and teaching her students every day. She was also very welcoming and hospitable and allowed me to sit at the back of the classroom for a week to observe her students. She is knowledgeable of technology and uses it to enhance her English lessons. The class I observed in School C holds a

high standard for high achievement on the English national exams, so Miss C is strict when it comes to getting students to participate in class, and complete their homework.

First Observation

Miss C starts off her lesson by getting her students to busily complete short grammar lessons in their workbooks. Some of her students are late from coming in from a prior physical education lesson, so the official lesson starts later than planned. The classroom is filled to the brim with desks and chairs, and each student obediently sits in their rows facing the front of the class. For today's class, and the rest of the week, Miss C is attempting to introduce a unit on "transportation." Miss C is also aiming to make sure her students speak grammatically correct sentences, and to make sure her students understand transportation vehicles have different English names and purposes. Miss C's overall objective is to ensure her students are exposed to different topics that may come up in a conversation in English, and also to make sure students are prepared to take the Primary Six National Examination (UPSR).

Miss C proceeds to start her lesson on transportation by asking the following question: "How do you come to school?" Students raise their hands and answers Miss C with full sentences such as, "I got to school by bus." This activity takes up about ten minutes as Miss C rectifies any grammatical mistakes, or incomplete sentences answered by a student.

Next, Miss C explains different types of transportation that are available in Malaysia, and also includes different types of transportation found in other parts of the world. She directs each student's attention to the screen in front of class where she has prepared a picture presentation of different types of transportations. She shows pictures of the usual transportation found in Malaysia such as a car, truck, train, etc. After that, she asks the students if they know of any strange or uncommon types of vehicles.

Finally, Miss C displays an array of foreign and uncommon vehicles from different parts of world such as vehicles pulled by cows from India, modified racecars in the United States, and vehicles drawn by robots, and proceeds to ask students to talk about each vehicle among themselves. Miss C uses the word, “awesome” to describe certain vehicles that are uncommonly seen in Malaysia. After getting the students to finish talking among themselves, she asks them to give her their opinions on the odd types of transportation. While students speak, she constantly reminds them to use full sentences and makes sure that each student talks loud enough for the entire class to hear. It is difficult to hear each student’s response because it seems that the students are too shy to speak loudly. However, Miss C is encouraging and manages to help students speak up more in class by providing prompts and guidance as they speak.

Finally, at the end of class, Miss C asks each student to go home and find an “awesome” photo on the Internet to print out and bring to school. She expects each student to bring one photo and talk about his or her photo at the next lesson.

Second Observation

Today, Miss C starts the lesson by playing a game called, “I Spy,” but making sure that students add examples of transportation instead of random words. She begins with her own example, “I spy with my little eyes, an aeroplane” and then asks her students to continue by adding “and” to the end of her sentence. She begins with the first row of students and asks each student to speak loudly, and clearly so that their peers can hear them. The students then proceed to continue the activity until all the students have had a turn.

Next, Miss C proceeds with a spelling exercise with her students through dictation. She recites ten different sentences with each sentence pertaining to the unit of transportation. As she recites each sentence or word, her students are expected to write the entire sentence down in their

exercise workbooks quietly and accurately. While Miss C explains this next activity, a student who has forgotten her book interrupts her. Miss C asks the student to apologize for interrupting the classroom and asks the student to sit down quietly and write her answers in a different book. She then continues with her explanation of the activity. This activity takes up a total of five minutes of class time. The list of sentences and words dictated by Miss C is as follows:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Fly a jet | 6. Vehicles |
| 2. Row a boat | 7. Getting off the bus |
| 3. Parked a car | 8. Drive a motor car |
| 4. Around the world | 9. Sailor |
| 5. Moving slowly along the road | 10. Sail a yacht |

When students are done writing their answers, they systematically arrange and collect their books row by row and pass up the books to the front of the class.

After the spelling activity, Miss C continues with a read aloud activity where the students sing a song that is in their National Type School textbook entitled, “Country Road.” The song depicts the geography of the country and focuses on open landscapes and farm life that is different from city life where the students in the classroom live in. Miss C then talks about the “Wright Brothers” in the next section of the textbook and tells the students that these pair of brothers invented the first aeroplane. She then encourages the students to go home and search for more facts on transportation on the Internet.

Next, Miss C moves on to another page in the textbook where there is a picture of a cell phone with a message on it. She asks the class to read the message together out loud. The message consists of a “friend” who is asking the students for help to move house. She then asks the students if they have ever moved from one location to another and a few students raise their hands to answer. Miss C then listens to students’ examples of moving from one place to another and then proceeds to talk explain the concept of a house-warming party. Most her students have

not heard of this concept so Miss C explains that they might have heard it on the radio or seen a housewarming party on television.

Miss C then moves on to talk about the different types of houses in the neighborhood such as a double-story house, a terrace house, an apartment, etc. She then asks the students to use the message in the book as a guide and create their own message to invite their friends to attend their own housewarming party. She also makes sure that each student reads the definition of a housewarming party out loud together.

Finally, Miss C moves on to the next part of the textbook and asks her students to complete a grammar exercise on prepositions. Students orally give their answers in unison while Miss C listens for any mistakes. Next during the remaining five minutes of class, Miss C writes a few words and sentences on the board and asks her students to write them down to learn for the next class. She goes through the words and sentences with the students and clarifies that the word “circuit” has two meanings; one as electric and one as a race car route. The list of words connects to the textbook material and is as follows:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Skillful racer | 6. Events |
| 2. Rides a motorcycle | 7. Exhibition |
| 3. Finishing line | 8. Stream |
| 4. Drummer | 9. Country road |
| 5. Circuit | 10. Highway |

The bell rings, and Miss C promptly ends class, asking her students to do their internet search on transportation facts, and to also learn the new words and sentences she has written on the board.

Conversation with Miss C

I briefly met with Miss C after class and asked her the three questions. For the first question, “What teaching practices do you use to include the three major cultures into your English lessons?” Miss C tells me that she makes sure she covers the units mandated by the curriculum set by the government. In addition to that, Miss C tells me that she does not talk too much about other cultures because all of her students are of Chinese heritage. Miss C also has a very neat book filled with lesson plans that she follows very closely to make sure that her students are up to par with other students in other schools. Along with that, most of the lessons she creates are crafted for the purpose of getting students to succeed in the Primary Six National Examination (UPSR).

When Miss C answered the second question, (What types of assessments do you use to evaluate your students?) she told me that she usually gave them a lot of homework, graded it every week, and made sure all the homework given would help students understand the content of the English textbooks. She also told me that she constantly checks and listens to students’ conversations in the classroom to assess their fluency in speaking English. Finally, Miss C tells me that most of her assessment is based on midterm and final examinations that are created by the school and government to help gauge students’ track towards the Year Six national exam.

Thirdly, Miss C explains to me that English is not as important for students to master as Mandarin Chinese and Malay is to the students and parents. While there is some importance in learning English, many parents who send their children to a National Chinese Type Primary School, do so with the purpose of maintaining their mother tongue. Therefore, English is only introduced to students when they are in Primary Three or Four instead of Primary One because the school positions its mother tongue and the national language as more important than the English language.

Finally, Miss C tells me that it is unique to teach in School C because she finds her students to be hardworking and at ease with each other. Most, if not all, of the students in School C are of Chinese ethnicity therefore all the announcements and assemblies held in School C are given in Mandarin Chinese as opposed to the National Tamil Type Schools and National Primary Schools. Furthermore, lots of assemblies and motivational speakers are invited to come to the school to motivate the students in their mother-tongue, so there seems to be a lot of support for students during the stressful examination periods as the school wants each student to achieve success.

Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil – National Tamil School Findings

School Context

School T is located in a suburban town of Kuala Lumpur, albeit it is surrounded by a society made up of various social classes, races, and cultures. The school itself comprises of primarily Indian ethnic students and teachers with the exception of a few Malay ethnic teachers who were employed to teach Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language). All subjects are taught in Tamil with the exception of English. In general, the students at School T are more talkative and animated; therefore these students are more fluent in English than Schools M and C. Even though all subjects are taught in Tamil, there seems to be a hidden curriculum whereby speaking English is also important.

Teacher: Miss T

Miss T has been teaching in School T for the past 5 years. She enjoys teaching her students and is always very willing to learn more strategies to improve her English classes. She encourages her students to participate in activities that encourage them to speak, and so she develops lesson plans around English games such as charades. Her students seem to enjoy being

in her classroom. Miss T is ethnically Indian herself and is able to speak Tamil and English fluently. She admits that she sometimes uses Tamil in her English lessons to get her point across to students. She also tells me that her students seem more comfortable with her because she comes from the same cultural background, and speaks the same language as they do at home. She upholds and respects Tamil as a language, but also maintains firmly that English is an important language to learn in order to succeed in life.

Observation

Miss T aims to prepare her students to understand and practice creating sentences with irregular verbs. She also aims to make sure that students speak grammatically correct sentences in their conversations with each other and with her. Miss T aims to make her lesson culturally relevant by including Indian names in her sentence examples. Miss T starts off the lesson by playing a game involving charades with her class of twenty-three students. Her students are boisterous this morning and are very willing to participate in the activity. Miss T has already prepared strips of paper containing verbs that students can pick out of a hat and act out. These words are as follows:

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| 1. Feel | 4. Write |
| 2. Drink | 5. Draw |
| 3. Drive | 6. Go |

The students would stand in front of the classroom and act out the verbs without saying anything.

Next, Miss T manages to get her students to sit down quietly using a mixture of Tamil and English. She also uses some Malay terms such as “*ulang-ulang*” which means “repeat.” She then asks students to repeat the verbs out loud together in sentences such as: “Rajesh drinks water.” She lets the students repeat this sentence twice before moving on to the next student. Miss T also proceeds to write each word on the board after a student is done acting out the verb.

Next, Miss T shifts the activity from charades to getting the students to practice identifying irregular verbs. Miss T writes the irregular verbs on the board along with example sentences. She expects students to copy down the irregular verbs and examples, quietly, in their own exercise workbooks. One of her examples is as follows:

1. verb: run
past: ran

a) He ran (verb) yesterday (masa¹/time)

Next, Miss T stops writing examples on the board and asks her students to contribute with some examples of their own. The students eagerly give Miss T examples using names that they are familiar with instead of pronouns, and Miss T writes these examples on the board. Miss T also rectifies any errors made by any student as a class, and makes sure that all the students understand why there was an error. While Miss T turns to face the whiteboard, the atmosphere of the classroom becomes a little chaotic as students start to speak, in English, on top of their voices to each other. Miss T quickly calms her students down by giving warnings for misbehavior in their mother tongue language, Tamil.

Finally, when the students are done with their work, Miss T asks them to put their books away and proposes to play another game. The students are ecstatic and sit in their seats quietly. Apparently this game has been played before, and a student is asked to come up to the front of class and whisper in Miss T's ear. The game is a guessing game, so students would have to guess what the student in front is thinking of by asking yes or no questions. Some of the questions are, "What is Student S's favorite color?" and "What is Student S's favorite football player?"

¹ *Masa* means "Time" in the Malay language

Students go through the game very well and cheer loudly when they get the correct answer. The bell rings, and class is over.

Second Observation

I was not able to sit in on the classes the second time because they were having their midterm examinations right before the major Ramadhan holiday. Miss T tells me that her lessons usually go on the same way: lots of language and grammar games, and modified lessons from the mandated curriculum to get students ready for examinations.

Conversation with Miss T

I met with Miss T after she was done conducting her classes. At this time, she was bubbling with ideas to improve her classroom lessons. She seems eager to learn and divulges her desire to further her teaching skills at a higher education facility. Miss T was slightly confused when I presented question one to her (What teaching practices do you use to include the three major cultures into your English lessons?). According to Miss T she says that she mostly focuses on getting students to understand the Muslim holidays that happen in Malaysia and also make sure that they are comfortable using their mother tongue. Miss T tells me that the school prides itself in maintaining its mother tongue – Tamil, and also making sure that the students are fluent in the national language – Malay. English seems to come in third place, as a subject that is driven by examinations. In addition to that, Miss T tells me that she usually changes the names in books and handouts to names that are Indian so that her students would be able to relate to them better.

Secondly, Miss T says that most, if not all of her assessment is based on the midterm and final examinations. She says that she also checks the work that students do in class, and also listens closely to their conversation in class. However, she is not as strict about fluency and

accuracy of speaking, as she believes it is easier to communicate with her students in a mixture of Malay and Tamil when she teaches English.

Next, Miss T expresses that English is an important language to learn, according to the parents of students in School T. Miss T explains that most of her students’ parents would want their children to seek higher education in foreign, English-speaking countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom, so they make it a point to try and speak English at home. A few of her students who belong to blue-collar families on the other hand, do not value English as much as Tamil and Malay, which means that these families believe it is adequate for their students to have a good future in Malaysia without having to speak English. In addition to that, Miss T says that her students generally are in a space where Tamil is spoken 95% of the time, so English does not take a front seat in the school when it comes to student conversation.

Finally, Miss T believes that teaching in School T is unique because there is a sense of community in the school amongst the students and teachers. Miss T tells me that students are in their comfort zones so it is easier to build community and also practice perfecting the reading, writing, and speaking of Tamil. She also tells me that her students are generally always boisterous and ready to speak up in class so that teaching them English is an easy task.

Teacher/School	Pedagogy/Belief	Classroom Learning Culture/Student Heritage	Larger School Context
Miss M/School M	Uses various pedagogical techniques to overcome language barriers	Students talk less, write less. Usually talk more when in large groups. Most students are of Malay ethnicity	Government, Public school located in a suburban area, with pockets of blue-collared labor worker families.
Miss C/ School C	Uses various techniques, uses technology, by the book and by the curriculum. Geared to getting students exam ready.	Students are less talkative, book smart, exam-ready. All students are of Chinese ethnicity.	Retain Chinese culture through assemblies. Lots of motivation through assemblies to get students motivated for exams

Miss T/ School T	Various exam, spirit of fun, exam ready as best as possible	Fun, riveting atmosphere. Not a lot of writing, but a lot of speaking. All students are of Indian ethnicity	Holds a lot of respect for its mother tongue- Tamil, and creating community.
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Table 1. Summary of School Contexts and Teachers

Limitations

I faced many limitations when I set out to conduct research for this paper. First, I could only interview the teachers, not the students, as the school administrations of each school would not allow me to conduct any interviews or prolong my observation longer due to each school’s strict rules of conduct. I also was not able to observe classes for more than a week in certain schools because of each school administration’s reluctance to house me for more than week. Therefore, I was not able to observe a complete unit taught by each teacher. I was also not able to make a second observation with School T as they were in the midst of the exam season, and the holiday season.

Furthermore, I was not able to enter many schools in each school’s surrounding areas because it was difficult to get permission from any other school administrator. If I were a student teacher at a local university in Malaysia, I would have been granted more access. However, since I am a graduate student from a foreign university, it was hard to gain each school administrator’s trust in allowing me to sit in on their English teacher’s classrooms.

Analysis Rational

Based on the observations I have made in these three schools, and its three English teachers, I will attempt to analyze each observation within three subcategories: reading, writing, speaking and listening. I have chosen these three subcategories in alignment with the Malaysian

Ministry of Education's three categories of improvement needed to reach the nation's *Vision 2020* implement by fourth Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamed in 1991, as mentioned in the introduction.

Analysis: Reading English in Malaysian Classrooms

In "What the West Can Learn from the East," Watkins, (as cited in Tan, 2008) hypothesized "that across different cultures, deeper more achievement-focused approaches to learning will be associated with higher academic achievement and greater student self-esteem and an internal locus of control" (p. 70). Therefore, in regard to schools M, C, and T, in this suburb of Malaysia, the assessment based on achievement tests such as the Primary Six National Exam is justified as a means to getting students towards achieving higher success in higher academic institutions.

Furthermore, it seems that School C in particular has adopted the same views as its Chinese counterparts in adopting a strategy of rote memorization and careful exam-taking skill such as the students in a recent study of Hong Kong students who are of similar ethnic origins as Malaysian Chinese students:

Typically Hong Kong students are prone to rote learning and lack creativity...this view is supported by findings of recent international comparisons of educational achievement in science and mathematics students do comparatively well in mathematics and just above average in science compared with other developed countries. However, they are comparatively weak in solving items involving more real-life problems and verbal explanations (Tan, 2008, p. 68)

This phenomenon is paralleled in School C and on occasion in schools M and T, where students are so exam-focused that they have not been taught the ability to read at a deeper level where real-life problems and verbal explanations are needed. When the teachers such as Miss M, C, and T are pressured to produce high-achieving exam takers, these teachers are more likely to produce students who adopt a “surface approach” where they “memorize details or key terms in order to be able to answer subsequent questions,” instead of a deeper approach; “understand[ing] the message that [a] passage is trying to impart” (Tan, 2008, p.69). These schools want to produce students who are high achievers in all aspects of education through surface approaches of reading English, but at the same time are providing a great disservice to students by not equipping its students with the deeper approach to reading English.

In these three schools, there is a lot of emphasis on grammar and vocabulary. Not much reading is expected at a Primary 4 or Primary 5. At this level, students are only expected to read a few paragraphs at a time from their textbooks, suggesting the focus of English is emphasized primarily in having students master grammar exercises and vocabulary lists. During my observations, all three classrooms barely read texts that were more than a paragraph long per class. Therefore, teaching strategies on reading English rely heavily on building vocabulary and grammar, not developing reading comprehension that revolves around cognitive strategies and skills.

In Afflerbach, Cho, Kim, Crassas & Doyle’s (2013) article, “Reading: What Else Matters Besides Strategies and Skills?” these writers examine a group of successful third graders who are skillful readers. They pinpoint this group of students’ success as follows,

These successful readers are metacognitive. They plan their reading in relation to specific goals, and they monitor and evaluate their reading as it progresses. These readers are

motivated and engaged...these successful readers have high self-efficacy. (Afferblach et al, 2013, p. 440)

The article goes on to explain that “the best strategy and skill teaching will be unsuccessful when students are unmotivated and unengaged or when they don’t believe that they can succeed” (p. 448). Hence, as a way to broaden strategies to create more successful readers in Malaysia, teachers should shift their focus from teaching grammar and vocabulary skills that align with standardized examination questions, to broadening cognitive strategies and skills by increasing engagement, motivation, and providing opportunities to “construct new knowledge,” (p. 441) as well as to help students become self-efficacious. Instead of having students read aloud together, and form sentences

Therefore, the “nature of teaching, memorization, motivation, and attributions for learning need to be reconceptualized for Chinese learners,” (Tan, 2008, p. 72) along with Malay, and Indian learners, which means that the culture of exam-taking has to take into account the deeper approach to understanding English comprehension rather than the surface approach in order to create well-rounded students who will succeed at a higher level academic institution. While some students may not think that they are cut out for white-collar jobs due to their home environments, such as in some students in School M and School T, it is still vital to equip students with the skills to verbally explain deeper meanings in text when it comes to real-life situations, rather than to constantly drill them with exam-taking strategies on reading comprehension. A deeper approach would then be to employ and modify methods suggested by Probst: teaching students how to plan their reading with specific goals in mind, evaluate students’ progress, and provide the necessary motivation to get students engaged in reading English comprehension.

In a study of Malaysian students conducted by Musa, Khoo & Azman (2012), these authors note that at a tertiary education level, Malaysian “students are not prepared for the reading demands imposed on them at [a] university [level]. Additionally, learners at tertiary education are found to have limited vocabulary knowledge and weak at understanding long sentences or sentences with difficult words” (Musa, Khoo, & Azman, 2012, p. 40). At a primary school level, it is evident that students in School M, C, and T will face similar issues if these students decide to pursue their studies at a higher education institution unless these students are given the tools to handle the English language from an early age.

In terms of School M, School C, and School T, I propose that students could be given longer pieces of texts from local authors as well as foreign authors to look at. “When students’ engagement and motivation are strong, reading instruction improves students’ reading comprehension,” (Afferblach, et. al., 2013, p. 441) which means that teachers have to engage their students through relevant texts before students’ reading comprehension can begin to improve. In School M, C, and T, much of the motivation for students to participate in any activity lies in motivating students to do well in their examinations (as in School C), or by playing a game (as in School T). Overall, however, these three schools house many struggling readers who are steadily being fed rote memorization skills worksheets that are based on standardized national examinations.

While verbal repetition and group read-alouds might not fade away from the regular classroom teaching of these teachers, I believe that a move towards think-alouds may create better readers in these three schools. In Lapp, Douglas, & Grant’s (2008) study on think-alouds, these authors propose that a “gradual release of responsibility” (p. 372) from teacher to student is optimum in allowing students to eventually read text on their own. The idea of an interactive

think-aloud stems from Vygotsky (1934/1978)'s theory of a student's zone of proximal development meaning that students will be provided "with adequate time to supportively and interactively observe, recognize, emulate, adopt, practice, and self-regulate these metacognitive strategies" of think-aloud (p. 372). Since Miss M, Miss C, and Miss T are already confident in using getting their students to read aloud together, a step forward would be to introduce the idea of think-alouds next by first bringing in longer texts that are appropriate to the students' reading level, and secondly, being model examples of how to read and navigate text.

This method of think-alouds also signifies that the teachers themselves are expert readers. Teachers in these schools then need to ensure that they are reading a broad range of text, and avidly reading these texts, before building an example model of how to navigate texts given in the classroom, to their students. Therefore, there would be a lot more responsibility for teachers to ensure that they are expert readers, and are given the skills to create an optimum think-aloud activity in each of their classrooms. This method then reaches a deeper approach of reading English that is far more meaningful than getting students to memorize vocabulary lists and repeat grammatically correct sentences.

Furthermore, Miss M, C, and T need to focus their attentions on not only preparing their students for the Year Six National Exam, but also to help their students become better readers of English in order for them to be proficient in the language and fluent in reading the language. According to Allington (2013), "No research has demonstrated that test prep actually improves performance on standardized tests of reading development, much less fostered improved reading behaviors" (p. 527). Therefore, instead of focusing on "isolated lessons targeting specific skill deficits" (p. 527), teachers should instead provide more "meaning focused lessons" (p. 528). Even though the teachers in these three schools still have to provide skill-focused instruction to

their students in order to master the language, these teachers should also design lessons that includes a “steady diet of high quality reading lessons, lessons in which they have texts they can read with an appropriate level of accuracy and in which they are also engaged in the sort of work we expect our better readers to do” (p. 527).

In addition to that, if Malaysian students were to be thoroughly prepared to compete with other students in the world, Malaysian curriculum developers cannot deny the rise of the Internet as a reading, and writing device. According to Coiro and Dobler (2007),

What differs from earlier models of traditional print comprehension is that online reading comprehension is defined not only around the purpose, task, and context but also by a process of self-directed text construction that occurs as readers navigate their own paths through an infinite informational space to construct their own versions of the online texts they will read. (as cited in Leu, Gregory, Ian, Kiilli, & Zawilinski p. 3)

Therefore, students during this technological era have to learn traditional reading comprehension, but will also have to learn new reading comprehension skills such as Leu, Reinking, Carter, Castek, coiro, Henry, Malloy, Robbins, Rogers, & Zwalinski (2007) have researched, by being able to “locate, critically evaluate, synthesize, and communicate information with the Internet” (as cited in Leu et al., 2011, p. 4).

In School C, resources such as television screens, and computers are available for teachers and students to access the Internet. In that case, it is important for Miss C as well as the students in her classroom to actively locate, and evaluate websites pertaining to the day’s lessons. Instead of asking Miss C’s students to return home and search for pictures, it would be more meaningful for Miss C to teach students how to safely discern Internet sources and articles to improve their reading comprehension levels. While there has not been much evidence to

creating a curriculum that would teach “new skills and strategies to successful online reading comprehension” (Leu, et al., 2011, p. 4), it is still important to tap into investing in curriculum or a lesson plan that would equip students with the knowledge and skills to navigate through the “infinite information space” (p. 4) of the Internet as technology continues to be a tool to educating students around the world.

Furthermore, students who learn how to navigate and discern valuable sites online will be able to inherit “critical evaluation skills on the Internet, especially when it comes to search engine results” (Leu, et al., 2011, p. 4). In a recent study conducted by Fallows (2005), it was revealed that,

Adults also appear to lack critical evaluation skills... The Pew Internet and American Life Project found that whereas 92 percent of adults were confident about their searching abilities, 62 percent were unaware of the distinction between commercial and non-commercial results, and 68 percent said that search engines provide a fair and unbiased source of information. Clearly, many segments of our population have yet to acquire a full complement of online reading comprehension skills and dispositions to enable them to be effective... (as cited in Leu, et al., 2011, p. 4)

It is then evident that Malaysia should invest in teaching the next generation to use critical evaluation skills and new strategies to reading and finding online texts in order to be a contender in the global academic world. Moreover, Malaysia should invest in supplying the necessary resources for students to access the internet, especially for schools such as School M, and School T where reading comprehension is confined to test preparation materials instead of texts that are culturally and socially relevant to the students' lives.

Therefore, in order for Malaysian students to keep up with the world and rise above the OECD average on PISA rankings, it is important that Malaysian teachers provide high quality reading lessons, instead of isolated skills-based lessons, that will get these students up to par with the readers of countries who are above the OECD and international average. Without the basic skill of understanding and appreciating text, along with expert guidance from English teachers, students will be at the mercy of their lecturers at a higher tertiary level, or at the mercy of someone else who is far more competent in the language. Furthermore, teachers and education administrators should invest in teaching students how to use the Internet as a source of learning and reading. Only when the reading levels of Malaysian students rise will they be able to grasp English as an international language of communication, and be completely proficient in the language, which in turn will then enable these students to compete with others at a global level.

Analysis: Writing English in Malaysian Classrooms

In School C, while many students do not generally verbally express themselves in the English language, there is a lot of time allotted during the week for writing exercises. In School M and School T, rote memorization of vocabulary words, as well as repetition are key strategies to improving students' vocabulary and writing skills. However, just like its reading comprehension counterpart, the teaching of writing in these three schools seem to take a more surface level approach rather than a deeper level approach.

According to Graham and Perin (2007):

Writing well is not just an option for young people – it is a necessity. Along with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy. (p. 3)

Therefore, writing is considered a necessity in a larger context of life beyond the classroom, not just another section that will come up in the context of a standardized national examination.

While it is definitely important for teachers like Miss M, C, and T to equip their students with writing skills that will help their students achieve success in national examinations, it is also important to prepare students to be equipped for the workforce and for the global economy. Even in the United States there has been a lament that students are not writing enough (Gallagher, 2011), and that students are limited to “prescribed school writing requirements” instead of “stretching [students] into areas that can be readily applied in the real world” (p. 7).

Gallagher (2011) grants two premises to the remediation of the limitations of writing in schools which are important to think about: “1)...we must move our writing instruction beyond a “cover the state standards mind-set by introducing our young writers to additional real-world discourses, and 2)...we must provide them with authentic modeling-modeling that comes from both the teacher and from real-world texts” (p. 8). Teaching students how to write should not be limited to making sure students are able to scrape through the writing portion of a standardized examination. Instead, writing instruction should start with teaching students why they should write, then showing them how.

If becoming a real-world writer is a predictor of academic success, students need to understand why they must write with real-world writing purposes: “how boring – how limiting – writing would be if we didn’t consider the various purposes behind great writing” (Gallagher, 2011, p. 10). In Gallagher’s article, the author suggests practical ways to motivate students to write by providing stacks of local newspapers for students to peruse and hunt for various purposes of writing that each journalist has used to convey their news story since “not all writing is the same” (p. 11). This way, the author is providing a practical means for students to locate the

different purposes of writing while giving them examples of what good writing would look like for each of those purposes. Next, it would then be ideal for the teacher to model their own writing process to help guide students in their own writing processes. For example, teachers could create their own topic charts, or outlines in front of the students to help them go through the arduous process of writing something. In terms of School M, C, and T, teachers would have to adjust texts according to their students' writing levels, but the premise is still the same: when students are given a purpose for writing, along with an example of good writing paired with expert modeling from the teacher, the writing process becomes clearer.

In Schools M, C, and T, most of the writing students did were usually limited to copying down sentences written on the board, as in School T, or writing a housewarming letter to an unknown neighbor, as in School C. In order to push for better proficiency of English in Malaysia, teachers and curriculum developers need to push for a better writing curriculum; a curriculum that involves meaningful writing exercises with expert guided examples for teachers to model. I propose that teachers themselves need to, again, take the responsibility of becoming expert writers before modeling ways to write better to their own students.

Analysis: Speaking and Listening to English in Malaysian Classrooms

There has been a glaring disparity between the talk times of students between School T, and School C and School M. In School T, students are boisterous and ready to talk even when they are not asked to speak. In School C and School M however, the teachers find it difficult to get the students to utter a single sentence without first giving them a prompt. Culturally, have the Indian ethnic groups always been more talkative? Have the Chinese students been bombarded with so many warnings of misbehavior that they dare not speak in class for fear of getting punished? Do the Malay students not have enough language skills to enable them to speak up

during class? Based on my observations and interviews with each teacher, the answer for each question is a resounding yes.

In School C, students in Miss C's classroom only speak when they are asked a question. Miss C also provides each student with a prompt; "I go to school by...? Miss C also diligently corrects any mistakes they make while the student is talking which results in stunted, rehearsed, rote speaking instead of authentic dialoguing. In terms of listening skills, the students seem to be listening, but there is no real assessment as to whether these students are listening and retaining the information being said at the front of class from Miss C. In School M, the scenario is almost the same. The teacher offers a prompt and all the students read the prompt aloud as a group. Again, their listening skills seem good in terms of repeating whatever Miss M says, but there is no real assessment or objective to teach the skill of listening. Therefore, students in School M hardly have the skills needed to communicate in a meaningful dialogue in the English language, or the appropriate assessments on speaking and listening to.

According to Kember, Asian students, particularly students of Chinese heritage such as those in Hong Kong, are "rote learners, which is associated with poor academic outcomes in Western universities" (Kember, 2000, p. 100). However, Kember goes on to argue that these "rote learners" have achieved success in examinations such as mathematics and certain language tests. While I agree that Asian, primarily Chinese students have been stereotyped to achieve well on their examinations, I worry about how their speaking skills are being honed in the process. In School C, the culture of learning through rote memorization, and being quiet in the classroom has been stamped into each student the moment they start school. This is evident when I observed hours of class where students only spoke one or two sentences of fluent English throughout the whole week. While these students produce written work that is up to standard

according to national standardized examinations, they do not receive enough support in terms of learning to speak and listen well.

In Western societies, such as the United States, talk is considered to be a vital part of education and teaching. In “Tom Sawyer, Teaching and Talking” the authors talk about how common classrooms “expect [talk], and...depend on [talk]” (Beers et al., 2007, p. 45), and later argue that education has not thought about teaching talk enough; “...but we don’t teach it...rather, it is a way to teaching something else” (p. 45). If talk is a way to deepen the learning of English, schools like School C and School M should invest more into teaching students how to talk. Not only should School C and School M invest in getting their students to talk more in classes, but they should also recognize that honing the ability to speak fluently in an international language would also help students to succeed in explaining their thoughts accurately. For example, a student may be brilliant at solving mathematical equations in class, but when asked to present his or her findings in a larger context, it is always better if said student can speak fluently in English rather than fumble through grammatical errors of speech and decorum.

Beers, et al., offers an unconventional way of teaching talking by emphasizing that teachers, especially English language arts teachers, need to accept that responsibility and make the teaching of discussion a significant part of the curriculum...it is important for us to try because at least some of the conversations our students will undertake in the future may shape the society in which we all will live. If they are to participate in those conversations effectively, productively, and for the common good, they have to develop the predispositions, the habits, and the standards that will make such participation possible. (Beers, et al., 2007, p. 45-46)

Therefore, Beers et al., suggests that teaching to talk is vital in granting students the tools to participate in a larger context of society, and hopefully contribute to building a better society.

Finally, Beers et al., also reiterates that, “we need to teach our students to use conversation to build better ideas collaboratively than any of us will come to on our own” (p. 59). While teaching students how to read and write well in English may seem like the most important task to teaching English, I believe that teaching these students to convey their ideas well through talk, and to listening well to talk, is also an important task that is glaringly neglected in schools like School C and School M. In School T, while a lot of talk goes on in the classroom, it is not being guided and directed purposefully. In other words, students need to be taught how to hold meaningful conversations with each other, ask quality questions, and produce creative, quality answers that build on thoughtful, meaningful ideas.

Furthermore, In Malaysia, the ability to speak and converse in English fluently is one of the factors, which can upgrade the social status of a particular social group. This may be an important drive, which could encourage certain groups to take risks in acquiring English as their second language (Low & Azirah, 2012). In the recent study of “Risk Taking,” conducted by Normala & Govindasamy (2009) the study explains that students who are risk-takers generally have the confidence to speak and converse frequently in the language than students who are not risk-takers. Risk-takers are students who dabble in the language and risk losing self-confidence or self-esteem by speaking a second language. In the study it is revealed “that students who are exposed to the English language from a young age will display more risk-taking behavior” which explains how the home support is vital for students to develop into more fluent English speakers (Normala, & Govindasamy, 2009, p. 66). Moreover, the study displays that,

...variations in the level of risk taking in language learning between two different groups.

Indian students have a good command of the language and are better at taking risk in language learning. Besides, factors such as frequent usage of the English language at home help to increase students' confidence in risk-taking. (p. 66)

With that in mind, it will be beneficial for Schools M, C, and T to encourage the parents to value speaking English at home in order for them to be better speakers of English.

In addition to that, in order for students to speak more fluently and with more ease in classrooms, teachers need to recognize the need to teach meaningful dialogue in the classroom; teachers would need to shift the culture of remaining silent to participating in meaningful dialogue. Dialogue would mean creating a meaningful environment for students to interact by speaking and listening in on conversations that are culturally inclusive, while using accurate English sentences. While I understand that the national examinations do not emphasize on students' verbal English speaking skills, I believe that students are not receiving the full opportunity of learning the language when they are not given the appropriate skills and tools to participate in meaningful talk. These schools would be shaping students in a one-sided manner and missing the opportunity to create a balanced English education where reading and writing skills are saliently joined with speaking and listening skills.

	Reading	Writing	Speaking & Listening
National Primary School/School M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repetition • Rote memorization of vocabulary words • Read alouds • Aligned with Primary Six National Examination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group work • Sentence building aligned with sample questions from standardized exams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are constantly encouraged to speak, but usually will speak in a unison as a group • Limited speaking skills – students usually converse in English mixed with a lot of Malay language • Students seem attentive during lesson

<p>National Chinese Type School/School C</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read alouds • Repetition • Textbook oriented • Aligned with Primary Six National Examination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dictation for vocabulary words • Textbook exercises • Supplementary book exercises • Drills and grammar based sentence building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are encouraged to speak grammatically correct, full sentences • Students are usually silent during class unless called upon • Very attentive when teacher is speaking
<p>National Tamil Type School/ School T</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repetition • Sentences mixed with Tamil and Malay words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-led while students copy • Repetition of sentence building exercises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lot of talking in the classroom that is on task and off task • Most conversations are held in English mixed with the Tamil language • Students are less attentive when the teacher is speaking

Table 2: Summary of analysis

Conclusion

School M, School C, and School T are glimpses of the results of an education system that is prevalent in Malaysia today after years of struggling between the importance of a national language, Bahasa Malaysia, and the importance of English as an international language. First The Ministry of Education has tirelessly tried to unite the diverse races and cultures present in Malaysia using Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction. Secondly, Dato’ Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, wants the nation’s youth to compete at a global level using English. Finally, in the Ministry of Education’s Blueprint goal (2013-2025), we have the goal of educating students to be operationally proficient in both Bahasa Malaysia, and English. Hence we can understand the ambivalence with regards to the teaching of English in Schools M, C, and T.

Overall, while School M, C, and T cannot be generalized as the sole examples of English teaching in Malaysia, it offers a window into the many shortcomings of English education in Malaysia in terms of teaching students to read, write, speak and listen in English. In addition to that, the teachers in these three schools do not in any way represent all Malaysian English teachers, but they still offer narratives of their own that reflect some of the problems of English

education in Malaysia. Generally, the teachers in each school seem to be confined to lesson plans that are focused on getting students to excel in school and national standardized examinations.

While it would be difficult for teachers to be free of standardized examinations for the rest of their teaching careers, it seems more challenging for school administrators and the curriculum itself to grant teachers adequate time and resources to go past teaching surface-approach skills and enter a deeper approach to teaching reading, writing, listening and speaking. It is also a huge task to provide resources such as computers, Internet access, and laptops for each school to embark on learning new technological skills. However, imagine what Miss M would be able to do if she were given more freedom and creativity to explore English in broader texts and literature with her students, or how Miss T's students would flourish in future board meetings when they are equipped with good conversational skills, or how many good research, analytical, or narrative papers Miss C's students would be able to produce in higher education institutions if they were given good purposes and the right skills to excel in writing. It would only be to the detriment of the nation itself if Malaysian students continue to learn English only to pass mandated standardized examinations, instead of learning English as a tool to create opportunities for themselves, and enable the country to fulfill Vision 2020's goals of enabling youths to succeed in a global technologically advanced academic system. Moreover, Malaysia has to tap into equipping its citizens with more knowledge of how to navigate and use the Internet as an education tool by investing in providing the resources to teach those skills. Only then, will Malaysia begin to rise ahead and become a global contender in the academic world.

While Bahasa Malaysia is now the official language of instruction for National Schools in Malaysia, after much rise and fall of different political opinions, it is important to remember that English will still continue to be an international language, not just a language inherited from

past colonization years, meaning that “no nation can have custody over it...It is not a possession which [they] lease out to others while still retaining the freehold” (Widdowson, 1994, p. 385).

With that in mind, it will continue to be important to equip students with the skills necessary to be proficient in the language on a global scale, and on a technological scale. If Malaysia is to achieve its goal of being a global contender, it needs to start by teaching students the importance of English as an international language, and hone their language skills to transfer to other areas of education since according to the Malaysian Ministry of Education, “languages provide students with a medium to absorb other knowledge such as Mathematics, Science, History and Geography” (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 108).

Additionally, more work and study has to be done on how Bahasa Malaysia is taught in schools. Students will not be able to master a foreign language if they do not first understand and appreciate their own native languages. Therefore, languages that are not focused on in national curriculums such as the indigenous peoples’ languages in East Malaysia also deserve more research and revision. This is to ensure that all students in Malaysia are able to be proficient in their native language before they can appreciate English as an international language. For example, if Malaysian teachers expect their students to transfer their knowledge of a language from the language classroom to a Science classroom (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 108), teachers will first have to “prepare students for flexible adaptation to new problems and settings” (Bransford, 2000, p. 77). Hence, teachers will have to first ensure that their students understand and are aware of the skills learned in language classrooms, before teachers can train their students to adapt those skills to new problems and settings in different subject areas.

In addition to more research and revision on language classrooms outside English, a deeper examination of the teacher preparatory courses in Malaysia would be vital in producing

teachers who would be effective in teaching English at a deeper approach rather than by the traditional methods of rote memorization and repetition evident in Schools M, C, and T. I have not included a deeper research into the teacher colleges in Malaysia, and cannot generalize that all Malaysian teachers only use rote memorization and repetition. However, the prevalence of these traditional methods in all three schools observed make me wonder if Malaysian teachers have the expert skills and strategies to teach lessons that are not exam-based. While there are merits to including rote memorization and repetition in these schools, students would benefit more from understanding reading, writing, speaking and listening skills rather than merely memorizing and repeating sets of information to be competent in a national examination.

Only through understanding how to read, write, speak and listen in English will students be able to transfer what they have learned into other subjects in school and other areas of life. According to Bransford and Stein (1993), “students who only memorize facts have little basis for approaching...problem solving tasks,” (as cited in Bransford, 2000, p. 56) and “transfer is affected by the degree to which people learn with understanding” (p. 55). Therefore if teacher preparatory programs in Malaysia can focus on equipping their teachers with the appropriate expert skills and strategies to help students understand how to improve their reading comprehension, writing, speaking and listening English skills, Malaysian students would be able to produce work that would go beyond national mandated examinations. Students cannot begin to improve their English skills unless teachers themselves are proficient English readers, writers, speakers and listeners outside a national mandated examination context.

Recently, a non-profit organization called Teach For Malaysia (TFM) modeled after Teach for America (TFA) has planted its project to end all education inequity in Malaysia through appointing selective individuals to teach in rural areas. As cited in their home website,

Teach For Malaysia is an independent, not-for-profit organisation with a mission to end education inequity in Malaysia. The Teach For Malaysia Fellowship is a two-year, full time and fully paid leadership development programme modelled after the extremely successful Teach For America initiative. We seek outstanding leaders who are passionate about making a lasting impact in the lives of students in the country's most underserved areas. (Our Model for Change, n.d., 2013. Retrieved from http://www.teachformalaysia.org/About_Us-@-Our_Model_for_Change.aspx)

While any movement for change in terms of ending education inequity in Malaysia is valiant and necessary, I believe that the nation still has to focus on teacher preparatory colleges. Hence, Malaysia should invest in the people who are already training and thinking of a career in teaching in these preparatory colleges and build a strong foundation of teachers who will teach for the long term, collaborate with school administrators, and continue to advance their teaching skills. Teach for Malaysia has started to pave the way for national teachers to improve their classes, but teachers who have built their career on teaching such as Miss M, Miss C, and Miss T should also be given the necessary support, training, and resources to do their jobs better. Therefore, Malaysia should invest in training their teachers sufficiently well, and providing teachers with the resources to become better teachers in order for Malaysian students to succeed in a global context.

In the recent preliminary report on the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) it states that, "the aspiration of the education system is to create students that are at least operationally proficient in both Bahasa Malaysia and English" (p. 108). I believe however, that the nation requires students who are more than just "operationally proficient" in both languages, and would push for students to become completely proficient in reading, writing, speaking and

listening Bahasa Malaysia and English by the time they complete their upper secondary education. The nation cannot begin to contend with the global economy, global academic advances, and global workforce if its people are only equipped with surface level, operational language skills. Finally, I propose that the nation shifts more of its focus on the training of teachers and teacher preparatory programs. If Malaysian teachers are not given the resources, skills and strategies to effectively teach English beyond examination based preparation, Malaysian students will not be able to achieve proficient levels of English in schools. Therefore trained teachers should be able to teach reading, writing, listening and speaking skills that are more meaningful to the students and the global academic and technological world by focusing less on reaching standardized examination goals, and focusing more on the proficiency and fluency of English of their students.

Additionally, school administrators and curriculum developers in Malaysia have to work with present and future trained teachers in creating more space for teachers to use their expert set of skills. It seems that in School M, C, and T, these teachers do not push the boundaries beyond test preparation teaching. For example, Miss M conveyed that she would have taught her lessons a lot differently had she not been constrained to getting her students exam-ready. Even if Miss M was armed with different sets of skills to teach English in School M, the administrators and people above her have not given her the room to use to expert skills to the students' best advantage. Therefore, besides providing teachers with training that is parallel to teacher training in developed countries, school administrators, curriculum developers and people in power in the Malaysian education world have to collaborate with teachers to create an English curriculum that balances test preparation and deeper approach levels of teaching.

In Schools M, C, and T, much work has to be done to improve the English education teaching strategies and curriculum to prepare students for the larger context with which English is used. Overall, if the English classrooms in these schools give a perspective to the larger context of Malaysian schools, more focus has to be shifted to creating classroom environments where subjects are taught meaningfully with teacher expertise. Only when teachers are prepared to transfer their expert skills to their students will Malaysia thrive as a nation and reach its Vision 2020 goals. The late Nelson Mandela was famously quoted for saying that, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” (Nsehe, 2013). Before Malaysia can become a global contender or even consider changing the world for the better, Malaysia has to focus on its education system. Hence, in order for Malaysia to succeed in becoming a global contender by the year 2020, Malaysia has to shift its focus on revising and utilizing its most powerful weapon: education.

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