

THE REMOTENESS OF ENGLISH

Sabariah Morad
Abdul Rashid Mohamed (PhD.)
Universiti Sains Malaysia
E-mail: rich@usm.my

Abstrak Artikel ini adalah berdasarkan suatu kajian yang telah dijalankan di sebuah sekolah yang terletak di sebuah pulau yang terpencil jauh daripada arus pembangunan. Kajian ditumpukan kepada penguasaan bahasa Inggeris dan pendedahan terhadapnya. Ia merupakan satu kajian kes yang mempergunakan pendekatan kualitatif disebabkan penulis ingin maklumat dan pengetahuan yang mendalam tentang subjek dan fenomena yang sedang berlaku. Kajian ini membuka mata kita tentang apa yang sedang berlaku di sekolah-sekolah pedalaman. Kajian ini mungkin melibatkan hanya segelintir pelajar tetapi perpatih Melayu ada mengatakan sedikit-sedikit lama-lama jadi bukit. Ini mungkin sedikit tetapi banyak lagi bukit-bukau dan pulau yang melalui masalah yang sama dan kita perlu perihatin akan fenomena ini agar ia tidak menjadi masalah yang membukit.

INTRODUCTION

Pulau Tuba is one of the more populated islands from a string of islands that make up Langkawi, (101 in low-tide and 99 islands in high-tide), Malaysia. Pulau Tuba is located to the south of the main Langkawi Island with a population of about 3000 people.

The island has three schools, a secondary school (Langkawi Secondary School) and two primary schools (Pulau Tuba Primary School and Selat Bagan Nyior Primary School). The secondary school has started their operation in January of 2001. As for the primary schools they have existed since the 1930s. Exposure is of crucial importance in enhancing first language (L1) acquisition and holds equally true for second language (L2) learning. From the quotes by Lado (1964-57), Jarvis (1968 :336), Krashen and Seliger (1975 : 173 -183), Krashen (1976 : 157 -168), Swain and Allen (1984 : 5-8), Stern (1992: 180), Spolsky (1998 : 148) it is rather obvious that exposure to the target language is not only necessary but vital to the acquisition of the target language. If children are exposed to the L2 in the same way as they are exposed to the L1, greater success will be achieved. This is because in the natural L2 learning situations, the pressure to acquire the target language is tremendous. Exposure enhances language learning. The more the learners listen to the TL, the more they read and speak in the language, the higher the degree of contact to the TL they receive and the more competent he is likely to become in the language. In other words, the higher the exposure to the target language, the higher the chances the pupils will be competent in the TL. Unfortunately the pupil is very often not;

"... exposed to 'primary linguistic data' in the sense that an L1 learner is, but rather to carefully graded language items presented in smaller doses for a few hours a week."

Ravem (in Chandrasegaran 1979:132)

Thus, the pertinent questions to ask at this point in time are; how much exposure do the pupils of Pulau Tuba receive and what kind of experience do the teachers have.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research and in particular an ethnographic study. And like most qualitative research, the research questions are usually meant as a guide for the researcher to start and develop the research. More often than not these initial research questions are over taken by more important, relevant and pertinent questions as the researcher learn more about the research. Nonetheless, for the sake of continuity and consistency in report, the initial research question will still be used albeit as a bait to entice the flow of the more relevant enquiries. Often these questions form part of the answer to the initial research questions.

Several techniques of qualitative method are believed to be the most appropriate to ensure an in-depth exploration of the phenomena involved. Qualitative method gives us the opportunity to voice feelings and thoughts about which they otherwise may remain silent. By methods, the researcher means as Cohen et. al. (2000:44) describes as the; *range of approaches use in educational research to gather data which are to be used as a basis for inference and interpretation, for explanation and prediction.*

MAIN FINDINGS

In looking at the findings it would perhaps make more sense to look at the preliminary study findings first. This is because in the preliminary study, the initial questions were used and it enticed other more relevant questions. These new questions shaped the findings of this study.

Preliminary Study

After several visits, the researcher found out that English was mostly exposed to the pupils in class. The only English words they came across while touring around the island is; KEEP LANGKAWI ISLANDS CLEAN in bold capital letters on a crumbling signboard near a house beside the road.

Based on the initial research questions in the preliminary study, the following are some of the relevant findings;

- The teachers, including the English teachers and the pupils communicate in Bahasa Melayu almost at all times outside the classroom. No labels or signposts in the school or outside school demonstrate the use of the English language. Thus, the pupils on the island were hardly exposed to English at all in their environment.
- English language is hardly used in the school except in the classroom during English Lessons. Thus, the main source of English language is the English teachers in Pulau Tuba Primary School (PTPS) themselves.
- All the pupils in PTPS are from Malay ethnic group and mostly from low SES. Most of the parents are fishermen.
- All three English teachers are qualified teachers but only two are trained as English teachers from their teacher training colleges.

Thus, the researcher felt that, her study should be re-focused and concentrated to English in the classroom. In addition to that, the initial research questions also need to be re-looked into. Hence, the research questions were re-focused.

The Main Study

It is often stated in law that "Justice must not only be done but must be seen to be done". What the study has shown the researcher is, the job has to be done and if it is done, then it is a bonus. For example, a teacher's job is not only to teach but must also be seen teaching. There are procedures and processes that must be followed to ensure that teaching is seen to be done such as preparing the annual, weekly and daily scheme of work in their record book. In other words, the tangible things must be done. The record books are filled. The exercise books are marked. The teachers entered the class. The lessons are conducted. The job is done. So, what is wrong?

In the case of PTPS, the data revealed a lot of things are seen to be done. This remote school has sufficient teachers to run the school. The administrators were over and above what is expected of them. The Local District Education (LDE) officers are very concerned especially regarding the PTPS pupils' performance in English language. In the unanticipated outcomes the data revealed that the LDE officers even sent a specialist teacher from another school to aid the English teachers in PTPS in the teaching of English Language, which had never been done before with any other schools in Langkawi. Apart from that, a big official visit was organized and carried out. The big question that arises at this juncture is why are all these done now? But more importantly, what are the outcomes?

Despite the list of what had been done, this study revealed the following findings;

- i. Teachers - Freshly posted teachers from college with very little experience in teaching, poor competence and unmotivated to teach in PTPS.
- ii Administrators - perceived PTPS only as a transit for a more permanent posting later
- iii Very concerned LDE officers who perceived teaching in PTPS a hard task.
- iv Pupils - Poorly competent pupils from low SES with almost no English language exposure
- v A small remote school which lacks facilities and materials for teaching.

Synthesis of Findings

As it was the case, the study found out that the main source of exposure the pupils received were from their English language teachers. Thus this article would concentrate only on the instructors and their instruction.

a. The Instructors

Who are the instructors? It is only logical to ask who the instructors are because almost all the exposure to English the subjects received were in school. In such a situation the instructors are the main source of exposure. The researcher found out that there are only three trained teachers but only two are ESL trained. The other teacher was 'converted' to an ESL teacher after undergoing a 14 weeks English Conversion Course in one of the teacher training colleges. Most of the teachers in the school have lived there for at least three years, some even eight years. They are not happy to be there and they have poor command of the language.

What kind of qualification do they possess? All the English teachers possess SPM qualifications and are trained in local Malaysian teaching colleges. The question is, do the qualification they possess reflect their true abilities in their classroom performance? **How much teaching experience do they have?** Apart from qualification, experience plays an eminent role in teaching practice because what is taught is not just a matter of theories learnt in teaching colleges. Teachers with no or very little experience would feel vulnerable and exposed in much the same way as an inexperienced entertainer or performer. Skinner (1968:254) asserts that *experience*

would assist teachers to better achieve a wide range of goals deriving from a wide range of conditions. Experienced teachers normally have better control in classroom management and in delivering the instruction.

In terms of experience in teaching English, they are at par with one another. This would tell something about their teaching in school but what about their experiences outside school?

"Experience?!..., I'll tell you my experience... I had fallen into the sea... on my way to school... and that is an experience... my Nokia 3210 was ruined."

TC had fallen into the sea a few months ago while travelling on a boat to PTPS. Due to the strong current, he and a few other passengers in front and at the sides of the boat except the boatman and a few others seated at the back, were thrown into the sea. He was saved but some of his belongings were ruined. The question here is where do this kind of experience fit in, in terms of the English language teaching in PTPS? Even though at the surface level this experience does not fit in terms of the English Language teaching in PTPS, deeper insight showed connections to what is happening in the classroom. TC later revealed that this kind of experience does not de-motivate him from entering the class and teaching English to the pupils. However, would he want to have a second or subsequent encounter with this kind of experience? What assurance does he have, to ensure that it would not happen again? What if he was traveling with his family especially his infant baby that day? These questions plus the 'hardship' in their daily routines give rise to his existence as an English teacher in Pulau Tuba. He is even more determined in his appeal to be transferred out from Pulau Tuba. The researcher wondered, if he is so determined to get out from Pulau Tuba, would he still be motivated to teach in PTPS?

What are their attitudes towards;

- i) ESL teaching in PTPS?
- ii) ESL learners in PTPS

One would think that the young teachers might begin their careers with a favorable attitude towards their profession and their students. During the interviews conducted in the exploratory study, the teachers revealed the following;

TA – *"It's bad here, no entertainment... no night life ... slow learners... no motivation... no spark at all..."*

TB – *"What would you expect? Well.. beggars... can't be choosers... we are the grassroots... We don't have cables (influential people)... to block our posting.. or... our transfer here."*

TC – *"(while at the Family Clinic - bringing his infant for medical treatment) Teaching is okay, but... when it's time like this..it sucks."*

T15 – *"I was in Mayang Gedang... a remote school in Sarawak...half Dayak... half Malay community...You see... some of the old folks in the long-houses... they are mostly fishermen... they can communicate in English... the pupils are better of (in terms of English language) there... than in PTPS"*

With regard to the learners, the teachers agreed that the pupils are quite slow in catching up with the language as compared to the other primary school students back on the mainland. They suggested that one of the main reasons might be due to lack of exposure to the language itself. The situation also means that the teachers in

PTPS have very little opportunity to use and practice the language. The only time they use the language is during the English lesson, which are usually taught through the translation method with Malay as its medium.

In terms of guidance, the three teachers agreed that their pupils are not prepared to be given autonomy in pursuing educational tasks. They feel that their pupils need a lot of guidance in pursuing any educational task. The teachers strongly believe that their pupils interest are important, therefore, English language tasks given to the pupils must be suited to and interesting enough for the pupils.

The researcher also noticed that very few of the teachers make full use of the extra time in the afternoon and evening to mix around with the locals or get involved in sport activities or other academic activities except the compulsory night classes (as explained in the unanticipated outcome) for the year six pupils where only a few teachers were involved. When asked, many cited the lack of interest as the reason. The locals on the other hand often mentioned that they felt shy to make the first move. Therefore they often end up sticking to their compound. Nevertheless the researchers found the locals to be very hospitable and are always willing to offer a helping hand in any situation if needed.

How motivated are the teachers to teach in PTPS?

TA : *"I'm still not used to the place... its hard to adjust...once... I was down with food poisoning early one night... I had to wait the next day to go to a clinic in the mainland... by that time... I was vomiting green... and no strength even to pull a muscle.. I thought I was dying... it was so scary.. I pray it won't happen again.*

TB : *"I love seafood... there are tons of it here... fresh fish, crabs, prawns...sometimes... given FOC by parents of pupils... now I'm diagnosed with gout...got to control myself now... doctor asks me to take more green vegetables... that are scarce here... guess I should start planting some..."*

TC : *One of the motivation of teaching in Langkawi is because of its duty-free status... cheap cars..., electrical appliances...interesting places... etc... what do we have here... so near... yet... so out of reach... that makes it even more depressing..."*

T8 : *"I'm mad about fishing...There's ample fishing spots... and I've built my tukun also"*

T12 : *"Orchids... you should see the orchids, some are very rare species... very expensive and hard to get... Got to climb those hills at the back (of the school)... there's some that I've planted in the school compound... have a look sometimes... we have got quite a collection... my favorite is sugar-cane orchid... the one near to the gate..."*

In PTPS, on one of the researcher's visits, they saw that most of the teachers including the headmaster except for few local teachers filling in forms asking for transfer out of the island.

T6 : *"We realise the contract says... we must stay at least... five years... who would want to wait that long".*

On other visits, the researcher had witnessed the teachers filling in forms, asking for a place in the local universities and teaching colleges to further their studies, if not for short courses. During the researcher's inquiry on this matter, one of the teachers respond is:

TA : *"I'm not that motivated to learn... one way or the other... I just want out..."*

b. The Instruction

How is ESL conducted in PTPS and How is practice given to the class? These questions were posed because the main source of exposure of the English language for the pupils was in the classroom setting. Thus, the way the instruction was planned and delivered to the pupils play an eminent role in the learning and acquisition of the language.

How does the teacher plan their instruction? A plan in instruction means what we have thought about what we are going to do in class during a particular period of lesson/s. According to Fisher (1995:32) *a plan is a set of steps or sequence of thoughts and activities that we believe will lead to success in a task*. Some researchers regard planning as the most important of cognitive methods that can be used in the classroom. However, a plan does not need to be in a set order of steps. Planning helps teachers to be best prepared and helps pupils to deal with any exposure in an organized and systematic way. In planning, teachers consciously recognize that certain actions are necessary to achieve a goal. In delivering exposure in class, plans are an important 'blueprints'. So, how do teachers in PTPS plan their instruction?

TA: *"As instructed by the Ministry... we use the syllabus... we do yearly plan... weekly summaries and daily records... they are all in the record book..."*

In planning their instruction, English teachers in PTPS are aware of, who is to be taught, what is to be taught and how much is to be taught. They claim that they mostly plan their instructions according to the syllabus using materials i, ii, iii or vii as described in Section 4.4. The teachers have a generally positive view of the syllabus. They see it as flexible, up-to date and relevant. It is also evident that the syllabus gives due emphasis on skills and pupils' existing knowledge, as well as providing pupils with basic knowledge. They feel the major weakness of the syllabus, however, is that they find it difficult, if not impossible to deliver it comfortably within the given time.

In sum, the validity of the syllabus is widely acknowledged by the teachers, with the exception of one aspect: its density. This aspect of the syllabus is crucial as it may jeopardize the implementation of the intended innovation. In their rush to cover the syllabus, teachers were forced to resort to the traditional approach (chalk and talk). More often than not, what is written in their record book was not transferable to real teaching.

What are the stages in the instructional process? In PTPS, the researchers were given the privilege by the administrators to observe as many lessons as they wanted. From the data gathered the researcher found several patterns in the instructional process:

- Tasks are given to the pupils through textbooks or worksheets.
- Teacher reads in English and explains in Malay and the pupils are asked to complete the tasks;
- Copying exercises written on the board in the exercise books.
- Sometimes teacher reads and explains the tasks and;
- Reading aloud exercises where pupils take turns to read the given sentences, paragraphs or passages.

The data also show that stages in the instructional process of a single period (30 minutes) English lesson are generally carried out as illustrated in the Table 1 below:

Table 1 : Stages in the Instructional Process

Characters	Start (5 minutes)	Introduction (10 minutes)	Practice (10 minutes)	Evaluation (5 minutes)
Teacher	Class Management Checking attendance, cleaning the board	Introduces tasks Explains what is to be done. Models what is expected	Instructs pupils to do the given tasks	Discussion on the given tasks
Pupils	Seating. Very high concentration level	Watching with high degree of intensity. Quiet	Some quietly carrying out the tasks. Some restlessly whispering and some copying friends' work.	Restricted to very few pupils while the rest are unresponsive.
Materials used		Blackboard	Textbooks and other materials	Textbooks and other materials

Teachers are aware of the fact that they try to organize the lesson to several segments in the sequence of events. However, their sense of timing was not very clear. In one lesson, they seemed to talk too long, while in the other they either talked too much, not enough or they let some given task go on too long.

It was found during interviews conducted with the teachers in PTPS that the most important consideration that influences teachers' choice of approach is pupils' level of ability. However, during the observations made, the effectiveness of approaches selected and the teachers' confidence in carrying it through is doubtful. Below are some responses on the practice activities conducted;

T4 : " Discovery learning? Bahh... Forget it!

T11 : "As usual... teacher delivers... pupils do... some would do... some would copy... some would be not interested at all."

T17: " We are too old to use teaching aids... they (teaching aids) are for teacher trainees only... or when the inspectorate are around..."

Society such as ours shares certain cultural assumptions about the relationship between teaching, learning and talking. We do not only expect teachers to talk to pupils much of the time but also assume that pupils show what they have learned by answering teachers' questions. According to the observation, the classroom discourse is characterized by its threefold structure: the teacher asks a question, the pupils reply, then the teacher evaluates their answer. Since the questions are not genuine ones, (asked by somebody seeking information) this indicates a kind of teacher control.

Reliance on rules and routine is also part of a teacher's survival kit, since most pupils come to accept what occurs regularly as part of the school day. Direct instructions or commands obviously show the teacher's authoritative position. Any pupil who is told that it is not a good idea to be so noisy knows quite well that they have to keep quiet or else they would be in trouble. There is no question of them disagreeing. The nature of interaction is indicated so clearly as it is and pupils have to ask permission to speak or only speak when asked. Such intervention indicates very clearly who is in control.

Differentiated teaching strategies are the very basis of the child centred philosophy where each child is encouraged to work at his/her own pace. ESL teaching in PTPS is tackled as the whole-class process. The findings for differentiated teaching such as group work and individual tasks are alarming. In addition to that the teachers feel that a change of policy is required which will create more time for teachers to prepare differentiated materials.

In order to observe instruction delivered to pupils in PTPS, among the first move made by the researcher was to notify the intention to the teachers involved. Given the consent from teachers, another move made by the researcher was to study their record books (with their permission). The record book is studied for several reasons. Some of the reasons are;

- To prepare the researcher before observation is made.
- To study the teaching plan for the lesson, the pupils previous lessons, hence the pupils previous exposure.
- To identify the topic, skills, objectives and tasks that shall be presented on the particular period.
- To analyze the 'blueprints' (teaching document)

Planning a key process for effective learning should involve a systematic application of a sequence of thoughts and activities. Clearly, the data revealed that the teaching plans do not reflect the conscious effort to develop plans. There is an awareness to reach a goal at the end of the lessons, but the activities were not listed out. Apart from that, there are differences even between the teachers in the manner of recording their daily scheme of work. These differences indicate that no discussion of that matter has been carried out. Thus, this indicates that the English Panel of PTPS, which of course involved all these teachers, did not meet to discuss instruction matter. This conclusion is made because as stipulated by the LDE office, among others, one of the most important agenda in the first panel meeting annually should be to plan the teaching for that year. This initial conclusion is further confirmed by interviews with teachers in PTPS.

In short the teachers seem to choose an approach based more on the syllabus and textbook considerations rather than its effectiveness or their ability to employ it. Perhaps this evidence signifies the strength of the top-down approach adopted. Teachers seem to have been "programmed/ brain-washed" not to question the effectiveness of approaches recommended by the Ministry of Education. Instead, they need to concentrate on implementing what is required with the kind of materials and facilities available at hand. This leads to the question of what kind of facilities and materials do PTPS have?

Their superiors and colleagues often judge teachers by the severity of the threat they impose. They are good teachers if they make their pupils work hard, regardless of how they do so. In terms of PTPS, the data revealed that there is no severity of threat in the types of practice activities conducted and in the roles of teachers and pupils in these practice activities. Thus, does that make them incompetent teachers?

CONCLUSIONS

In light of the above findings and discussions, exposure in remote schools such as PTPS deserves further attention and inquiry by educational researchers. There is need for further research not only on the issue of exposure to the English language but also on various other issues suppressed in this remote school. This need becomes even more compelling as English language has now become the medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science. Future studies will have to be conducted nationwide, which covers a wider scope of pupils from various age groups before any conclusive results can be achieved. It is hoped that this study would be an eye-opener especially to academicians and educators to re-evaluate and make changes to their methods, approach and even the philosophy of learning especially for remote school pupils such as PTPS. Perhaps, to compensate for the minuscule time allotted to the teaching and learning of the English language, the teaching of math and science in English came into being.

In addition, with the fact that the pupils in this study are 100% Malay, the findings can provide some vital information and interpretation with regards to Malay pupils in remote schools. A better understanding of how remote schools such as PTPS could initiate better performance in the English language will therefore provide better insights for designing suitable resources, instructional approaches and learning environments for pupils in remote schools.

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