

**THE CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY OF A
RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL IN SABAH IN
PROMOTING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING
OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BM	Malay Language
CDC	Curriculum Development Centre
GPS	Grade Point Score
HPS	High performing school
HT	Head Teacher
KBSR	Integrated Primary School Curriculum
KSSR	Standard Primary School Curriculum
LPS	Low Performing School
MCQ	Multiple Choice Question
MoE	Ministry of Education
NEP	National Education Philosophy
NKRA	National Key Result Area
P	Pupil
PTA	Parent-Teacher Association
R	Researcher
SKM	Low Enrolment School
SQEM	Standard Quality Education Malaysia
TED	Teacher Education Division
TESL	Teaching English as a Second Language
UPSR	Primary School Achievement Test

KEUPAYAAN DAN KEBOLEHAN SEBUAH SEKOLAH RENDAH PEDALAMAN NEGERI SABAH DALAM PROSES PENGAJARAN DAN PEMBELAJARAN BAHASA INGGERIS

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini mendapat dorongan daripada Projek NKRA terutamanya dalam isu Sekolah Berprestasi Tinggi. Secara keseluruhannya, kajian ini meneliti jalan hidup sebuah Sekolah rendah, Sekolah X, di pedalaman Negeri Sabah. Pencapaian UPSR Sekolah X adalah sangat lemah terutamanya dalam subjek Bahasa Inggeris. Persoalan utama kajian ini ialah “Sejauh manakah sebuah sekolah kecil di pedalaman berpotensi menjadi sebuah sekolah berprestasi tinggi khasnya dalam Bahasa Inggeris?” Setiap sekolah mempunyai jalan hidup yang tersendiri. Mengikut Kyriakides, Campbell, dan Gagatsis (2000), faktor pada peringkat sekolah akan mempengaruhi faktor pada peringkat bilik darjah, dan faktor pada peringkat bilik darjah akan mempengaruhi pencapaian murid. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kajian lapangan untuk memahami proses dan amalan pengajaran and pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris di Sekolah X. Sekolah tersebut telah dilawati sebanyak tujuh kali dalam tempoh 18 bulan mulai Julai 2009 hingga Mac 2011. Data kajian telah diperolehi melalui pemerhatian, temubual, dan analisis dokumen. Pengumpulan data diasaskan kepada empat domain yang utama: iklim sekolah, iklim bilik darjah, keberkesanan sekolah, dan keberkesanan bilik darjah. Analisis data telah dilakukan ke atas pelbagai sumber agar proses menghubungkan dapatan-dapatan yang diperolehi dapat dilaksanakan bagi menghasilkan isu-isu penting kajian ini. Proses pengumpulan dan analisis data adalah berpandukan kepada lima dimensi pengukuran – *frequency, focus, stage, differentiation* dan *quality* popularkan oleh Creemers dan Kyrialides (2008). Pada akhir analisis, pelbagai sumber data telah dibina semula

berdasarkan pembolehubah-pembolehubah di bawah empat domain utama kajian ini. Dapatan-dapatan melalui proses interpretasi kemudiannya disintesis agar dapat mengenal pasti isu-isu berkaitan keupayaan dan kebolehan Sekolah X dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris. Isu-isu keupayaan sekolah telah ditinjau dari segi kewangan, fizikal/objek, masa, insan dan program, manakala isu-isu kebolehan Sekolah X melibatkan komuniti/ibubapa, guru besar, guru-guru and murid-murid dalam persekitaran fizikal, interaksi, dan program. Penemuan-penemuan kajian ini mencadangkan Sekolah X memerlukan keupayaan asas bagi meningkatkan semangat terutamanya guru-guru dan murid-murid walaupun potensi mereka boleh dipupuk melalui peningkatan kebolehan mereka. Kajian ini menunjukkan Sekolah X kekurangan dari segi keupayaan dan kebolehan. Walau bagaimanapun, yang lebih penting ialah isu pergantungan di antara keupayaan and kebolehan yang dimiliki oleh Sekolah X. Hal ini telah membawa kepada kemerosotan pencapaian akademik murid-murid Sekolah X terutamanya dalam subjek Bahasa Inggeris. Berdasarkan data sintensis yang diperolehi, kajian ini mencadangkan Sekolah X meneliti isu keupayaan insan agar lebih banyak peluang perbincangan dan perkongsian dapat disediakan serta mewujudkan rangkaian dengan guru-guru lain di luar Sekolah X. Ini adalah beberapa aspek genting yang memerlukan perhatian lebih. Ini bukan sahaja dapat mambantu meningkatkan kerjasama akademik tetapi juga membaiki emosi dan inspirasi semua yang terlibat di Sekolah X. Dengan kebolehan interaksi yang lebih baik, ia akan membantu sekolah tersebut memperoleh idea-idea pedagogi bagi mempertingkatkan lagi keupayaan dan kebolehan dalam proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris. Walau bagaimanapun, pengendalian masalah dan penambakaan hanya akan dapat dilakukan

dengan adanya penyasatan yang lebih teliti dan menyeluruh sebagaimana yang dilaksanakan dalam kajian ini.

THE CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY OF A RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL IN SABAH IN PROMOTING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

ABSTRACT

This study was encouraged by the mobilization of the NKRA (National Key Result Areas) Project specifically the High Performing Schools issue. In essence, this is an investigation of the “live-life” of a rural primary school, School X which rested in rustic Sabah, Malaysia. The performance of the school in the *UPSR* (Primary School Achievement Test) had been very poor particularly in the English language. The main question posed for this study was “Does a small bucolic school with all its pastoral and rustic conditions have the potential to be a high performing school especially in the English language?” Every school has a life of its own which makes up of different structures and processes. As Kyriakides, Campbell, and Gagatsis (2000) put it, the factors at the school level were conditional for factors at the classroom level and factors at the classroom level were conditional for pupil achievement. This study used a fieldwork case study approach which aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of these processes and practices of the school. Seven entries had been conducted over a time span of 18 months starting July 2009 until March 2011. The data of the study were obtained through observations, interviews, and document analysis. Data collection was based on four different domains: school climate, classroom climate, school effectiveness, and classroom effectiveness. The data analysis were conducted, triangulated, and then reduced so that interpretative analysis could be conducted to make connections for pertinent issues to materialise. The data collection and analysis of this study was guided by five measurement dimensions – *frequency*, *focus*, *stage*, *differentiation*, and *quality* popularised by

Creemers and Kyriakides (2008). At the end of the analysis, the data were deconstructed and later reconstructed based on the variables specified under each of the four domains of this study. The interpretations were then synthesised and contextualized to discern the pertinent matters surrounding the issues of capacity and capability possessed by School X to promote the teaching and learning of English. The issues of capacity of the school were viewed from the perspectives of financial, physical/object, time, human and programme, whereas the issues on capability evolved around the ability of the community/parents, HT, teachers and pupils on the physical, human, interactional, and programme settings. The findings suggested that School X badly needed the basic capacity to uplift the spirit of the stakeholders particularly the teachers and pupils, although their potential could be nurtured through uplifting the stakeholders' capability. The study showed that Schools X lacked the capacity and capability. However what was more pertinent was the interplay between the two that is, capacity and capability. The interdependence was actually the main concern in School X and this had led to the dismayed academic performance particularly in the English subject. As such, through the synthesis of the data, this study recommended that the school should scrutinise the **human capacity** available so that more opportunity could be provided for better interpersonal discussions and partnership among the stakeholders and create better networking with other teachers of the same district to start with. These were some crucial aspects of **interactional capability** that School X should address. This would help to improve not only the academic collaboration but also emotional and inspirational uplifting among the stakeholders at School X. With the availability of improved interactional capability, it would help the school to obtain more content and pedagogical ideas in relation to the **programme capacity** and **capability** so that

the issues in English language teaching and learning at School X could be reviewed. Nevertheless, better discoveries and subsequently handling of these issues could only be done through systematic investigation as carried out in this study.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter introduced readers to the rudiments and fundamental issues of the study. It centred on the problem of the study, which was basically on the issue of low performing schools (as opposed to high performing schools) and its bucolic connection. As such this chapter provided the background to the problem, stated the problem, tendered the aims and objectives of the study, as well as offered the rationale and significance of the study. It also provided the definition of terms used specifically in this study.

1.1 Background to the Problem

In assessing school performance, there are numerous shortcomings. During the vetting process on short listing the schools for High Performing Schools (HPS) under the National Key Result Area (NKRA) for education, concentration is on the performing schools rather than the underperforming ones. The formers have already achieved the effective school status and the inputs as well as processes are known which make them successful. The life that goes on in those underperforming schools leaves much to be desired. There are many subjective criteria to be considered when assessing school performance. Some of the factors as mentioned by Maslan Borhan and Abdul Aziz Jemain (2009) were the types of school the students enrolled in, the socio-economic factors of the students, the types of catchment areas the students were from and also the competition the schools had to endure to attract quality

students (p. 196). All schools are different in nature and it is fairly obvious that when it comes to HPS they are different in the state of readiness.

The Malaysian government has announced and inaugurated the Six NKRAAs in July 2009 and they have been used to spur the nation to new heights since then.

The NKRAAs are:

- (1) Reducing crime;
- (2) Fighting corruption;
- (3) Improving student outcomes;**
- (4) Raising living standard of low-income households;
- (5) Improving rural basic infrastructure;
- (6) Improving urban public transport.

Through the NKRAAs, the government is committing itself to make the process of transformation through **performance-based management** by using the method of setting and NKRA key performance indicator (KPI) measurement (Bernama, 2009). As for education, the area on “improving student outcomes” should be our main concern. The Minister of Education stated,

Widening access to quality and affordable education is the priority of this Government and my Ministry. We must raise our standards to be internationally comparable while ensuring the achievement gap between the educated and less-educated is closed. The importance of the education system cannot be overemphasised given its role in strengthening the competitiveness of our nation and in building 1Malaysia. For example, to contribute towards 1Malaysia, the status of national schools must be elevated such that they become the school of choice for a broader segment of Malaysians. (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2010, p. 150)

The main aspiration of the NKRA on education is to improve student outcomes in all Malaysian schools and to enable all students to have access to quality education. In this globalized and challenging world, improving student outcomes is crucial so that more competitive workforce can be produced as Malaysia is approaching our national vision to becoming a developed nation by the year 2020. On top of that, making quality education more accessible will ensure more Malaysians gain the chance to improve their standard of living. Henceforth, the current policy is to ensure that young children have access to quality and affordable education so that they can be creative, innovative and competitive in the international arena (Pusat Maklumat Rakyat, n.d.). Achieving universally high outcomes in our educational system is only possible by ensuring that schools deliver high quality instruction to each and every child (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2010, p. 151). Furthermore this NKRA on education is further subdivided into 4 sub-NKRAs namely:

- (1) Pre-school;
- (2) Literacy and Numeracy (LINUS);
- (3) **High Performing Schools (HPS);**
- (4) New Deal/Bai'ah;

In accordance with the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) Roadmap which was launched on 28 January 2010, HPS is defined as “schools with ethos, character and a unique identity that enable students to excel in all aspects of education. These schools have strong work cultures which strive for continuous development in addition to being able to compete in the international arena” (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2010, p. 159).

The objectives of including HPS as part of the NKRA on education are “to raise the quality of these schools, create places for the very brightest students and develop a model for other schools to emulate. The quality of the best performing education institutions is raised by increasing their level of autonomy in running the school and in return, an increased degree of accountability for student outcomes is required. These world-class schools will then become a place for the brightest students, those who meet the highest international standards and who will move on to the best institutions of higher learning and graduate to lead their professions. Moreover, these schools will act as role models for other schools and provide them with support to make this journey through a coaching and mentoring network between schools” (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2010, p. 159).

HPS are for all Malaysian schools that are capable of meeting stringent requirement designated under this programme. In general, the school must have recorded excellent achievement in **Academic** and in at least three (for primary schools) or four (for secondary schools) out of the five annex criteria namely **Towering Personalities, National and International Awards, Linkages to Institute of Higher Learning, Strong Network and Nationally and Internationally benchmarked.**

For the academic achievement, the school should have at least a minimum average score of 80% of the composite score which is based on School’s Average Grade Point (GPS) score (70% of weight) and verified Standard Quality Education Malaysia (SQEM) score (30% of weight). In Malaysia, the assessment of school performance in standardized examination is done by directly computing the School’s

GPS for all the subjects offered. It is obtained “by getting the average score for every subject offered first. Then, the final score will be the average of all the subjects” (Maslan Borhan & Abdul Aziz Jemain, 2009, p. 198). If one of the subjects is performed poorly among the pupils, the overall GPS of the school will definitely be affected. As for SQEM - Standard Quality Education Malaysia (*Standard Kualiti Pendidikan Malaysia – SKPM*), it was known as “High Standard Quality Education” (*Standard Tinggi Kualiti Pendidikan – STKP*) in 2001 and SQEM (*SKPM*) two years later. It is a mechanism established by the “School Inspectorates” (*Jemaah Nazir Sekolah – JNS*) to ensure continuous improvement of educational institutions in Malaysia. The SQEM policy introduces a multi-tier system of standards which is used to rank schools’ performance on a seven-point scale ranging from extremely weak (score 1) to excellence (score 7) based on the four dimensions as indicated below:

- (1) leadership;
- (2) organizational management;
- (3) educational programme management; and
- (4) student performance.

The head teachers and principals of their respective school have to ensure all 12 elements under the four dimensions are employed in their general school management processes. The school inspectorates use the instrument to audit schools including the evaluation for “Potential School Award of the Country” and “Education Minister Quality Award” (Radiah Othman & Fatimah Abd Rauf, 2009) and now as one of the requirement for the awarding of “High Performing Schools” in our country. The School Inspectorates conduct inspections and external school

reviews, which ranges from normal inspections, full inspections and follow-up inspections to special inspections. The instrument is also used by the state education departments and district education offices for monitoring purposes as well as serves as a warning signal of problematic schools for further actions.

So the stage is set where the schools in Malaysia are evaluated based on performance which is heavily depending on the achievement of each and every subject assessed in standardized public examinations. All schools are evaluated based on the same criteria but the playing field may not be level and this could be the problem.

1.1.1 Malaysian Education System

The Malaysian educational governing system is a very structured and centralised and this is evident in the Ministry of Education (MoE). The fundamental basis of all educational policies in Malaysia is provided by the Education Act 1996 (Act 550, Laws of Malaysia) which is a centralised and uniform system for both primary and secondary education. According to Lee (2006), the Malaysian National Education System is a public system characterised by a common language (Malay language), common school curriculum, common public examination, common teaching service scheme and central funding for all the public schools (pp. 150-151). This system is inherited from the British colonial days but a lot of amendments and improvements have since been made. The education in Malaysia is overseen by two different ministries – the Ministry of Education (MoE), for issues related to education up to secondary level, and the Higher Education Ministry which was created on 27 March 2004 to take charge of higher education in Malaysia. The

implementation of our education system is governed by our National Education Philosophy (NEP) which manifests:

Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort to further develop the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens of high moral standards, knowledgeable and competent, and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large. (Educational Research and Planning Division, 2001, p. 21)

1.1.1.1 The Malaysian Education Organisation and Administration

According to the MoE, the structure and organisation of educational administration in Malaysia has four distinct hierarchical levels namely federal, state, district and school which are represented respectively by the Ministry of Education, the state education departments, the district education offices and schools (Educational Research and Planning Division, 2001).

Policies, at the federal level are translated through the coordination of various departments and divisions, into plans, programmes, projects and activities to be implemented throughout the schools in Malaysia. A system such as this necessitates curriculum development system. The MoE, through the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) was given the responsibility to formulate the Integrated Curriculum for primary and secondary schools which take into consideration the cultural diversity of different ethnic groups in Malaysia (Zamrus A. Rahman & Mokelas Ahmad, 2005). In general, the curriculum comprises content and skills, with emphasis on the development of basic skills as well as inculcation of moral values and attitudes. It is hoped that the ultimate outcome of the implementation

would bring about the integrated development of the intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical aspects of an individual (p. 177) which is in line with the NEP.

Our government is generous in allocating sumptuous budget for education in Malaysia. Malaysia has invested substantially in creating an environment conducive to education for all its children, including those living in the rural areas. In the Seventh Malaysian Plan (1996-2000), allocation for education and training amounted to RM10.1bil which showed an increase from about RM8bil in the Sixth Malaysia Plan (The EFA 2000 Assessment: Country Reports). In view of the important role of education to our country's development, a mammoth RM23bil was allocated for education under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) (Kian Ming, 2006). It was truly awe-stricken when the Budget 2010 was tabled in 2009, RM30bil was allocated to enhance primary and secondary education nationwide (Education Talk, 2009).

Based on the Education For All (EFA) 2000 Assessment: Country Reports (2000) for Malaysia, a large amount of the annual funds allocated for education was expended on emoluments and staff compensations. The remaining sum was outright grants to schools for utility payments, academic/non-academic activities and the maintenance of school facilities. Since then, government has been constantly expanding its educational provision for rural schools through programmes incorporated in successive Five Year Plans (Azizah Abdul Rahman, Sharifah Md Nor Halimatun Halaliah Mokhtar & Faridah Halimi, 1992).

Pupils who are from lower income families and disadvantaged areas are provided with financial assistance by the MoE through programmes like textbook loan scheme and supplementary food project. Allocation is also provided for building new schools, additional classrooms and hostel facilities. Hence, physical condition for learning is constantly improved. A portion of the budget is also allocated for the provision of training facilities and housing for teachers. All the facilities and assistance provided by the MoE is to ensure proper operation of the Malaysian Education System.

In order to facilitate more effective administration, management, monitoring and supervision of all matters concerning curriculum, schools, teachers, students, as well as public funds received from the centre, empowerment is channelled to committees at various levels namely state education departments (SEDs), division/district education offices (DEOs) and finally schools (Lee, 2006) which play the decisive role in creating a conducive environment encouraging excellence (Zamrus A. Rahman & Mokelas Ahmad, 2005, p. 181) in all subjects including the English language. Hence, each school, both primary and secondary, is liable to the effective implementation of all educational programmes stipulated by the MoE, ensure the quality of teaching and learning of all subjects including English, monitor and supervise students' welfare with respect to education and establish good bondage with parents and community (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, as cited in Lee, 2006). This is the general scenario of Malaysian educational organisation and administration.

1.1.1.2 Primary School Curriculum and Examination

The primary school curriculum is under constant review and revision to ensure it fits the current demands of the education needs and beneficial to all pupils in this country. Through the initiation of CDC, New Primary School Curriculum (*KBSR – Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah*) was formulated in 1983. In 1993, the initial *KBSR* was revised and Integrated Primary School Curriculum (*KBSR – Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah*) was established. The current curriculum being implemented in all public primary schools is the revised version of the latter *KBSR* and the latest review of this version was done in 2003. Based on the current education development in Malaysia, Standard Primary School Curriculum (*KSSR – Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah*) was formally introduced to all public primary schools in 2011 for all the Year 1 pupils. According to the Director General of Education, *KSSR* was not replacing *KBSR* as the former was still adopting the major principles of *KBSR*. The teaching and learning approaches of *KSSR* is more interactive in nature. It is focussing on 4M (reading – *membaca*, writing – *menulis*, arithmetic – *mengira* and reasoning – *menaakul*) instead of 3M. Apart from that, basic skills on Information and Communication Technology, and the development of the socioemotional, spiritual, physical aspects of the pupils as well as their attitudes and values are too given emphasis (Pusat Maklumat Rakyat, n.d.). These features are quite similar to the current curriculum.

Nevertheless, assessment is still a major part of our education system. As stated by Chiam (as cited in Ong, 2010), public examination results were the major determinants of students' progress to higher levels of education or occupational opportunities and thus, they were considered the only valid measures of academic

attainment by students, teachers and parents (p. 94). At present, standardised public examinations are administered at the end of Year 6, Form 3 and Form 5. They are aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum and provide feedback to planners to improve students' achievement (Zamrus A. Rahman & Mokelas Ahmad, 2005, p. 90). In Jun 2010, our education minister put forth the ministry's proposal to abolish the *UPSR* and *PMR* examinations in order to remove the pressure of an examination-oriented education system on the school children (Hamdan Raja Abdullah, 2010). However, in October 2010, the decision was made that *UPSR* remained but with improved syllabus (Zuhrin Azam Ahmad, 2010). Thus, the decision is finalised that all pupils have to sit for *UPSR* at the end of their six years primary education and English is one of the compulsory subjects. According to Ong (2010), it was the aspirations of the government to provide a general education for at least nine years to all children for them to proceed to three years of lower secondary education (Form 1 to Form 3) after primary school. Hence, the *UPSR* results are crucial to provide information regarding students' achievement at the end of primary education to the lower secondary schools (p. 93).

1.1.1.3 Training of Primary School Teachers

At present, the training of primary schools teachers is solely undertaken by the 28 teacher training institutes in Malaysia. These institutes have been upgraded from teacher training colleges training certificate and diploma level teachers to their present status of Institute of Education producing bachelor degrees and post-graduate diplomas in 2008. All the institutes follow a common curriculum and they are closely monitored by Teacher Education Division (TED). Starting 2010, all teacher education institutes in Malaysia stand as an entity and is headed by a rector. After

the restructuring of the MoE, TED is a division taking charge of teacher professionalism development and responsible for planning and monitoring teacher educational management programmes undertaken by all the teacher education institutes in Malaysia (Bahagian Pendidikan Guru, n.d.). Generally, all institutes conduct pre-service postgraduate diploma and bachelor in teaching programmes to train primary school teachers. For postgraduate diploma in teaching course, it takes a year to complete for graduates with a degree recognised by the Malaysia government. Whereas the bachelor in teaching course, it is a four-year course and the students (*SPM* school leavers) who are eligible to take up this course have to enrol themselves for a one and a half year preparatory course first (International Reading Association, 2008). In addition, teacher education institutes also prepare various in-services courses range from a few days' refresher courses to 14-week long training session for primary school teachers to enrich and enhance their professional development.

In general, the goals, objectives, strategies and practices for teacher education in Malaysia are formulated in relation to the Philosophy of Teacher Education:

The teacher, who is noble in character, progressive and scientific in outlook, committed to uphold the aspirations of the nation, and cherishes the national cultural heritage, ensures the development of the individual and the preservation of a united, democratic, progressive and disciplined society. (Bahagian Pendidikan Guru, n.d.)

As for the training of English language teachers, it is not only in line with the philosophy above but also based on the specifications required in the Primary English language Curriculum. For primary English language teacher training at the teacher education institutes in Malaysia, it advocates integrated teaching of the four

language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. It also focuses on subject matter knowledge related to the linguistic aspects of the English language which forms the foundation for better teaching and learning processes of the language in the classroom (Malakolunthu, 2007). In terms of pedagogical knowledge, it proposes the use of hands-on learning and more interactive strategies like cooperative learning, storytelling and questioning within a meaningful context. It also encourages the incorporation of literary texts like poems and rhymes as well as songs and games.

1.1.1.4 English language Learners

Students who are not using English as their first language are referred to as English Language Learners (ELLs) (Ovando, Combs & Collier, 2006). This term is coined to replace the term Limited-English-Proficient (LEP). This is largely due to the fact the latter is criticized for its negative connotation with the use of the word ‘limited’. Hence, ELL which is more neutral term, is adopted so as to reflect that “the student is in the process of learning English without having the connotation that the student is in some way defective until he or she attains full English proficiency” (p. 14).

Malaysia is a pluralist and multi-ethnic society. Hence, we get students from various ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Malakolunthu, 2007). Even though, English is taught as a second language, a second language to our national language, the Malay language (*BM*), it may not be the second language to all the learners in Malaysia. It can be the first, second, or even a foreign language depending on the locality the learners are in. Learners from

different localities may have different exposure to this language which may subsequently influence their beliefs and perceptions of learning this language.

1.1.1.5 English Teaching and Learning for Malaysian Primary Schools

In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language to all the primary and secondary students. As a matter of fact, the system of Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) is a challenge in itself for the implementers and implementations of the Malaysian English Language Curriculum especially for those in rural primary schools. TESL, according to Ovando et al. (2003), was a system of instruction that enabled students who were not proficient in English to acquire academic proficiency in spoken and written English. This system, when incorporated in bilingual education programs, intends to promote the development of two languages for bilingualism and biliteracy, which incorporates students' first language merely to facilitate a quick transition into English. For the Malaysian Education System, Malay language is the mainstream language.

For English language teaching and learning in primary schools, the MoE through the CDC, has drawn out a comprehensive curriculum for the teaching of English for all primary schools in Malaysia. All Malaysian primary schools, both public and vernacular, must adopt the English language Syllabus which proposes the teaching of English as a second language. It is standardised and aims to equip learners with basic skills and knowledge of the English language so as to enable them to communicate, both orally and in writing, in and out of school (Curriculum Development Centre, 2002).

The aim of *KBSR* is that by the end of their primary school education, the pupils should be able to:

- (1) listen to and understand simple, spoken English in certain given contexts;
- (2) ask and answer questions, speak and express themselves clearly to others using simple language;
- (3) acquire good reading habits to understand, enjoy and extract information from a variety of texts;
- (4) write legibly and express ideas in simple language; and
- (5) show an awareness and appreciation of moral values as well as love for the nation. (Curriculum Development Centre, 2002, p. 2)

In order to accomplish the goals above more effectively, the teaching of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing with the incorporation of the structural form of the English language namely the English grammar, the English sound system, and the vocabulary is manifested. Generally, Malaysia English Language Syllabus is adopting the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach which was drawn up by the Malaysia Curriculum Development Centre at the end of 1974 (Foo & Richard, 2004). Although English is taught within the school context, emphasis is given to its use in the workplace. In addition, thinking skills, values and citizenship education are also incorporated in the curriculum. Since English is recognised as the main language used in this era of Information and Communication Technology, an ICT component is integrated in the syllabus which is carried out by CDC starting 2011 for primary school education.

Apart from that, there are three important initiatives on children's literature to be incorporated in the teaching and learning of English. They are the Structured Early Reading Programme, the Extensive Reading Programme and the Contemporary Literature Programme. All the materials are prepared and given free to all the primary schools. According to the CDC Director Ali bin Abdul Ghani,

The Structured Reading Programme for Years 1 and 2 was aimed at introducing pupils to reading in English at an early age, while the Extensive Reading Programme for Years 3 to 4 required pupils to read about 50 storybooks outside the classroom to encourage the reading habit. Under the Contemporary Literature Programme for Years Four to Six, primary school pupils were given three texts at each level to read and discuss during English lessons in class. (Simrit Kaur, 2008, para. 4-5)

He also added that the Primary Literature Project was meant to spark pupils' interest in the language so that English language learning could be made more fun for primary school pupils.

1.1.1.6 National Key Result Areas and its Importance to Malaysian Education

As discussed in Chapter 1 on the six National Key Result Areas (NKRAs), the third area is devoted to education on improving student outcomes. It is not only formulated to see to the establishment of high performing schools, it also attends to develop quality preschool education and enhance children's literary and numeracy skills. Schools which significantly improve in their performance by taking care of their climate and effectiveness factors for the benefits of their own schools as well as other low performing schools are to be rewarded. It is hoped that the ultimate goal of the Education NKRAs to initiate "broader and more comprehensive transformation of education" (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2010, p. 165) particularly school

transformation can be achieved through constant monitoring and implementing improvement programmes.

According to our Education Minister, the appraisal of HPS on all schools (irrespective of whether they are urban or rural schools) is based on the same performance indicators and inspections conducted by the ministry's officers are in accordance with the revised Malaysian Education Quality Standard (Bernama, 2010). Such standardised evaluation nationwide renders equal chance for all schools to be accorded HPS status. Then, the ultimate selection of the high performing schools with their strategic plans, management structure, academic and co-curriculum programmes can serve as benchmarks for other schools. In such a way, the MoE is trying to speed up actions to narrow the gap of rural schools from their urban counterparts.

Through the brief review on the Malaysian Education System, government is committed in generating concerted effort to ensure equal access to education for all students (irrespective of where and what types of schools they are from) in this country. Nevertheless, "equality of access does not always lead to equality of outcome" (Azizah Abdul Rahman et al., 1992, p. 1).

1.1.2 Geographical Setting of Sabah

Sabah is the second largest state in the Federation of Malaysia with a total population of 3.4 million in 2009 (Sario, 2009). It is located at the northern tip of the island of Borneo. It borders Sarawak at the south-western part of the state, Indonesia's Kalimantan at the south and the Philippines at the east. Most of the

population live in rural and often remote areas. Thus, there are a lot of rural schools in Sabah. The terrain of Sabah which is hilly and undulating and with an equatorial climate makes it impossible to reach many areas during the rainy seasons. Sabah gained its independence from the British through Malaysia in 1963. Since then, it has seen rapid education advancement after joining Malaysia. Nonetheless, most parts of Sabah are still well behind Peninsular Malaysia in terms of educational facilities partly due to the inaccessible terrain. As in other states in Malaysia, there are town (urban) and rural schools in Sabah. Nevertheless, there are three different types of rural schools in Sabah – island, riverside and foothill – due to their geographically setting.

There are about 32 different indigenous ethnic entities in Sabah and they speak more than 50 languages (or dialects and variants from the main languages) (Banker & Banker, 1984). The Kadazandusun language community is the largest in the state – making up about a third of the population (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003). For this community itself, there is a chain of about 30 dialects “running along the west and the interior of the state” of Sabah between the coastal Kadazan speakers and the central Dusun speakers (Lasimbang & Kinajil, 2000). The Bajau who are known as the seafarers, are the second largest group and the Murut who are inhabiting the hilly area, are the third largest group (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003). Other ethnic groups are Brunei Malays, Bisaya, Lun Dayeh, Chinese, Eurasians, and Indians (Rosnah Ismail, 2009, p. 96).

1.1.3 Major Challenges of Schools and Schooling in Sabah

Muhiddin Yusin, the director of the Sabah State Education Department in his official address on 12 January 2010 (Jabatan Pendidikan Sabah, 2010) expressed his concern over the challenges plaguing the education scenario in Sabah. First, Sabah was always ranked the bottom few especially in the academic performance for all the public examinations namely *UPSR*, *PMR* and *SPM*. There were still a lot of poor schools (*sekolah daif*) especially in the rural area which needed new school buildings, additional classrooms, teacher quarters and other basic amenities. Apart from that, most of the schools in Sabah were just too remotely located. At present, there were 1069 primary schools in Sabah. However, only 92 schools were categorised as town schools. Hence, it was difficult for district education officers to conduct monitoring and assessment on the overall school performance especially on those primary schools which were inaccessible by road. It required a large amount of fund to carry out constant monitoring. In view of the current economic crisis, the operational budget had been further reduced and this had thwarted the department from implementing many of the educational programmes. And last but not least, there was a high turnover of teachers between 500 to 800 teachers every year. Sabah was depending a lot on teachers from other states in Malaysia and there was a current ruling that teachers would be considered their transfer after they had fulfilled their three-year service in rural schools. As a result, a lot of primary schools in rural areas were deprived of experienced teachers especially English. These were some of the main challenges faced by all schools particularly primary schools in Sabah. These challenges have also directly and indirectly exerted their bearing onto the teaching and learning of the English language among the rural primary schools pupils.

With the brief disclosure of the geographical setting and the challenges faced in the field of education for Sabah, disparity in terms of ‘outcome’ is expected even though there is ‘equality of access’ to ensure quality education for all in Malaysia. Despite the challenges faced, these rural schools continue to exist and play their part in upholding our nation’s aspiration to provide quality education to all so that more schools can be accorded HPS status.

1.2 The Problem

At present, there are 1069 primary schools in Sabah and only 92 of them are categorized as town schools. Schools at the rural areas are often associated with poor performance in Sabah. Therefore, there are a vast majority of low performing schools (LPS) in Sabah. They are faced with many inadequacies in terms of facilities and infrastructure. Even the Sabah State Education Minister has doubts of the schools’ potential in becoming high performing schools. He said, “Going by the outcome of the selection process (for HPS under the NKRA on education), I can only assume that none of the schools in Sabah merit the status of the high performance schools at this point of time” (Daily Express, 2010, para. 4). He too commented on the obvious reality that Sabah was slightly behind in terms of educational facilities compared with the states in peninsular and Sabah should expect to find it tough to match its counterparts.

As a matter of fact, all the policies, facilities and assistance provided by the Ministry of Education are extended to all states including Sabah to ensure proper operation of the Malaysian Education System, to teach all the subjects including

English and other aspects of children's development so that the ultimate goals as manifested in National Education Philosophy could be achieved.

However, at the end of six years primary education when the pupils are required to sit for a public examination known as Primary School Achievement Test (*UPSR – Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah*), the results are always discouraging in Sabah. Passing *UPSR* means one must get at least a 'C' in all the five subjects namely Comprehension and Composition in the Malay language, Science, Mathematics and English. As disclosed by Muhiddin Yusin, the director of the Sabah State Education Department in his official address on 12 January 2010, Sabah was always ranked the bottom few especially in the academic performance for all the public examinations including *UPSR*. And English was dubbed as the 'killer subject' which pulled down the passing rate for *UPSR* in Sabah each year.

Based on the statistics on the pupils' overall English language proficiency reported in the *Laporan Kajian Keperluan Projek InSPIRE II 2008* (Abdul Rashid Mohamed et al., 2008), the diagnostic test for Year 3 (n=34) and Year 5 (n=71) showed only one out of 105 pupils managed to pass with the score of 46% out of 100% and the lowest score being 0%. The research was conducted at six rural primary schools, two from each of the three different categories of rural schools – island, riverside and foothill – in Sabah. The findings further reaffirmed and created a general picture of how poor the pupils were in their English language proficiency.

The practical problem of this study is – “Does a small bucolic school with all the pastoral and rustic conditions and circumstances have the potential to be a HPS especially in the teaching and learning of the English language?”

As a matter of fact, the issue of competency in the language in Sabah has been debated so often and blames have been targeted everywhere. In point of fact, the act of teaching and learning of English does not happen in isolation confining itself within the classroom context between the pupils and the teachers. Banks and Banks (2003) pointed out the necessity of “conceptualis[ing] the school as a social system” (p.1). In view of such predicament, when I examined the academic performance of the English language taught and learnt in my case school, I had to scrutinize and relate it to the school’s anatomy and life.

Each and every school is different in nature. Raven, Johnstone, and Varley (1985) made their point when describing their work which crosses subject boundaries. There are many skills and qualities which are important parts of educational processes that can subsequently contribute to the academic performance of the pupils. Undoubtedly, the criteria established in the selection process of HPS are excellent indicators. However, the general elements may not render sufficient ‘scope’ for education consumers to understand the actual happenings of a school to suggest appropriate improvement programmes to upgrade the English language proficiency of the pupils. A school has a life of its own which makes up of different organic and mechanistic characteristics such as the administrative and leadership’s make-up, educational programme management structure and student composition. Scientifically, it is referred to as the *meta-system* of a school. All this structures and

processes must be finely tuned or complementary to each other for the school to be productive, viable and operational. Hence, if a school wants to understand and subsequently help the pupils learn the English language better, the contextualized factors and *how* and *why* they are connected should be clearly established around the teaching and learning of that language for that particular school so that the findings can provide an in-depth information vis-à-vis the performance of an LPS in the language. This basically forms the theoretical problem of my study.

1.3 Rationale of Conducting the Study

For every government in the world, providing quality education should be without doubt the single most important factor after basic necessities are met. It is the responsibility of a responsible government to not only provide basic education but also ensure that no one child is left behind. This is especially true in a young multi ethnic and religious nation like Malaysia.

Essential and generally basic education has been met in Malaysia as such the governments should now ensure that the quality of teaching and learning of English is pursued more rigorously so that the nation's objective to remain competitive as an economic power is realized. This is especially true in a much globalized world today. Officially, English is the second language in Malaysia as such it is not surprising that the second language approach is used. Our curriculum and syllabus in English has been developed with the second language issue in mind. However, in reality English can be a first language to some children or even a foreign language to some others in Malaysia. There are still a lot of schools especially those in the rural areas in Malaysia not performing well in the subject.

Such scenario can be obtained by just scrutinizing the *UPSR* results especially of those rural primary school pupils in Sabah. In 2009, the passing rate for *UPSR* was only at 42.76% which recorded a slight decrease of 0.6% in comparison to the passing rate the year before and the English subject was the major contributor to the low passing rate.

In terms of communication, children in rural Sabah are using their indigenous languages to communicate among themselves as well as Malay language (the national language) to interact with other ethnic groups. These primary schools are just teaching English as a foreign language for the sake of it. The pupils' exposure to the language is just limited to within the four walls of the classroom. But then again how much English transpires within the four walls! We cannot begin to understand the problem by just looking at the four walls. We need to look at the larger picture.

In Malaysia, students' academic achievement tends to be the major focus for school performance (Radiah Othman & Fatimah Abd Rauf, 2009). According to Scott (1981), schools – like other organizations – operated in complex environments with multiple internal and external constituents. Such constituents may be different for different schools and may contribute differently to students' learning outcomes. As disclosed by Firestone (1991), researches on effective schools provided just a static picture of what good schools were like and generating a set of general criteria which might be hard or even difficult to achieve for other less effective schools. This may deprive such schools from becoming effective let alone to receive any forms of incentives for becoming one. Dissecting ethnographically the school's