

## **ESL or EFL? TESL or TEFL?**

When English language was proposed to be reintroduced as the medium of instructions for Mathematics and Science subjects at three school levels beginning January 2003, this had indeed raised many brows. This had also led to an assumption that our education system had somewhat deteriorated due to the usage of bahasa Malaysia as the sole medium of instructions.

The scenario we have here in Malaysia has much to do with the outcome of our education system. The acceptance of the New Education Policy among others provided steps to be taken in the conversion of the former English schools to national schools. The gradual implementation of the national language policy in the education system of the country took place beginning the year 1970 to 1983 with the annulment of the Lower Certificate of Education (LCE) examination in 1978, and the Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) examination in 1980. An estimated total of 6.3 million students (from the year 1975 to 2002 only) have gone through this national education system up to at least Form Five or SPM level.

It is undeniable that this batch has reaped its harvest. It has produced thousands of professionals, academicians, specialists, scientists, technocrats, leaders and many more who have contributed to the Malaysian state-building. But nevertheless, to a certain extent, something is still lacking. The influential wave of globalisation and information and communication technology is one good reason for a revamp of the national language policy. It is essential to keep in mind that though bahasa Malaysia plays a key political role in creating a culturally homogeneous polity out of a multi-lingual society, English language on the other hand, has a functional role by virtue of its use as an international language of communication in the economy of the nation, particularly for Malaysia to remain globally competitive.

In addition, certain problems were overlooked throughout the nationalisation of the school system. Little consideration was given to students from non-English backgrounds. The syllabus contained the maximum items to be mastered. Being a common content syllabus arranged in a linear format, the emphasis was on complete coverage of all the items at a common pace, irrespective of the students' lack of exposure or usage to the language at home, or their immediate need to learn the language. With the switch to bahasa Malaysia as the one and only medium of instructions at all level of education, the English language, though compulsory for all pupils, is taught as just another subject in the school system.

There is a persistent need to clarify that although English has been accorded the status of a second official language in Malaysia, it is only second to bahasa Malaysia in importance and is not a second language to the definition in applied linguistics. English language may not necessarily be the second language of Malaysian students. It can be the first, second, or even a foreign language depending on among other things, the locality they live in. For most students in rural areas, English is a foreign language based on the quantity of exposure and usage to the language. As a result, those whose exposure and usage to the language were limited to the language classroom became underachievers. Sadly, they would continue to be so as the pace of teaching could not be slowed down. Bearing this situation in mind, it is unthinkable to imagine their oncoming uphill battle as they moved on in their pursuance for academic excellence.

Since that the education system has shifted to using bahasa Malaysia and English language is thus given the status of a subject in the school curriculum with the allotment of 200 minutes a week, one could expect the level of competence to drop. Carrying the status as an essential second language, the role of English language in Malaysia is fast changing from being the language for education and official proceedings to being a tool of communication in limited circumstances. Despite the fact that the role of English in the nation has changed from an official language to that of a second language, there is a continued need for Malaysians to be competent in the language. English is essential for

employment opportunities and for higher education, and English is a necessity for Malaysians of various ethnics to rise up the socioeconomic ladder.

Though much has been done to enhance English as the most important language, it is neither correlative with the intensity of use of the language, nor is it with the level of proficiency attained. There is a steady decline in the standard of English language. The opinion from various quarters that there is a drop in the standard of English among Malaysian speakers is undeniably justified.

Hence, the government has taken a very drastic and radical action to reintroduce English language as the medium of instructions for Mathematics and Science subjects at three school levels to remedy this pivotal unsettling situation. The year 2003 marked the first year that Mathematics and Science subjects were conducted in the English language. By 2008, all assessment instruments for Year 6, Form 3 and Form 5 public examinations for Mathematics and Science subjects would be in English language for all national primary and secondary schools. The recurring question – Is this an appropriate and a timely prescription to address the crucial matter?

The first point for the teachers to ponder: Is English in Malaysia ESL or EFL? When we mention ‘second’ and ‘foreign’ language, most of the time we relate to the breadth of situation in which the language is based and the proficiency level attained by the speakers concerned. A second language covers more domains of communication than a foreign language, and a second language speaker shows a higher fluency than a foreign speaker of the same language. From the point of view of the position of English in the education system of the country and looking at the ELT syllabuses in the schools and universities, we can say that English is still a second language in Malaysia.

A big BUT then, from the point of view of the actual language competence and performance of a sizeable proportion of the Malaysian population at present, we are not entirely wrong to say that English has fast become a foreign language here in Malaysia.

The second point for us to ponder is, how are the differences between a TESL and TEFL situation likely to affect the goals of English Teaching? The ELT syllabuses, being a common content syllabus with items arranged in a linear format and emphasises on complete coverage of all items at a common pace, irrespective of the students' lack of exposure to the language at home or across the curriculum, resulted in a handful of learners being under achievers or not proficient in the language at the end of secondary level. Although children all over Malaysia are very much exposed to the use of English especially when the mass media – electronic and print – has more air time in English than in Malay, this does not mean that English is spoken all over Malaysia with equal frequency. Children in urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur, Pulau Pinang and Ipoh speak English more compared to those in the rural areas of Kelantan, Trengganu and Pahang.

In a TESL situation, all the four skills, reading, speaking, listening and writing will be emphasised. In this situation, the dominant environment is English and the non-native English speakers are expected to be capable to spend a vast majority of their time communicating in English. This would be more manageable when teaching in urban areas where the students are more familiar and more exposed to English.

But this is more of a TEFL situation in the rural areas where lack of exposure and limited communicative use of English Language defeats the whole purpose of ELT. English is seen as serving no function at all once they leave the class.

A TESL and TEFL situation will also affect the learners' attitude and motivation. The students in the urban areas have more exposure to the English Language usage. These students interact in English outside the classroom as a result of being immersed in English speaking environments. As such mastery of linguistic competence attained in the ELT classroom is used to communicate with the world outside. They have more positive attitude and highly motivated to be involved in the language learning. In this TESL situation, emphasis must be placed on linguistic creativity and innovation.

On the other hand, for the under achievers, usually from the rural areas, inferiority complex at times could be overwhelmingly daunting. English language is foreign to them. It has nothing close to associate with them or their surroundings. English is merely a subject, an intimidating one to most of them. 200 minutes a week is not sufficient, moreover, at most time English is taught in their mother tongue. For the Malays, the campaign to use the national language as part of the effort to create a culturally homogeneous polity is used to justify their lack of esteem and motivation and also their negative attitude towards English language learning. This, and in addition to their weakness in the language have resulted them to be left further behind from the higher achievers.

The differences between a TESL and TEFL situation will also likely to affect the classroom procedures and methodology. The Post-1970 Primary and Lower Secondary School Syllabuses subscribed to the structural situational approach. Then, there arose the need to redress the situation when it was proven unsuitable for Malaysians. As such the Ministry adopted a task oriented situational syllabus advocating CLT for the upper secondary level. This CLT based syllabus which emphasized the teaching of communicative competence was based on the assumption that students having concentrated on learning linguistic competence in the primary and lower secondary levels will naturally be ready to develop their communicative competence on reaching the upper secondary level. These two distinct approaches to ELT failed to achieve the desired objectives. It was abandoned when the national curriculum was revamped in 1983. The introduction of the KBSR and KBSM resulted in changes to the ELT syllabuses. Skill based syllabuses advocating CLT were implemented as part of one continuous eleven-year ELT programme encompassing both primary and secondary levels.

In a TESL situation, all the four skills will be used in a variety of ranges from the very informal to the highly formal. The students are likely capable to express in English. But in a TEFL situation, a communicative language teaching would not be feasible. Instead, audiolingual or grammar-translation approach may be employed. Notional-functional

approach could be used for the students who need contact and the topics of discussion should be catchy for immediate student interest.

In conclusion, the big question again... ESL or EFL? TESL or TEFL?

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