SOME INSIGHTS FROM ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS AT FOUR AGAMA RAKYAT SCHOOLS IN THE STATE OF PERAK

Nurulhayati Ilias[*,1] and **Che Ton binti Mahmud**[2]

Kolej Poly-Tech MARA, Ipoh, Perak, MALAYSIA
Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjung Malim, Perak, MALAYSIA
[*]*Corresponding author: nurulhayati@gapps.kptm.edu.my*

Abstract

This article presents some qualitative findings extracted from a larger scale research on how English is taught at few Agama Rakyat schools (SAR) in Perak. Four English language teachers; Teacher A, B, C and D, teaching at four different SAR schools were interviewed. An in-depth, semi-structured interview questions were developed as a mean to gather data. The excerpts from the interview sessions reveal that all the teacher participants are not certified as English as a Second Language practitioners and rarely attend professional development courses. As a result, not only they lack in the basic of teacher teaching knowledge, the schools financial constraints also has led to the classrooms not having enough IT facilities to assist their teaching. Despite all the teachers show their deep interest and passion to teach English language, the constraints and challenges faced by them have somehow deter them from demonstrating their best teaching competence. We hope that these preliminary observations from our study will lead to more research efforts in order to understand the realities and complexities of teaching English language at the Agama Rakyat schools in Malaysia.

Keywords: Agama rakyat schools, teaching practices, classroom behaviours, pedagogical content knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Islamic Schools

The history of the establishment of all of the religious schools in Malaysia is very much associated with the emergence of Islam in Southeast Asia in the 14th century. The spreading of the religion by the Arab merchants who came to trade in this country has led to the establishment of the first type of education existed in the Malay Archipelago. The history of education in the Southeast Asia started with the Islamic education whereby the young citizens were taught to worship God, studying Al Quran and reciting the daily prayers. At first lessons were carried out at the houses of the priests or teachers. Later, when the houses became too crowded, 'Pondok' and 'Madrasah' schools were built (Ahmad Kilani, 2003).

Islamic Schools during Colonial Period

During the British colonization, the British education system was established and it remains as our country's main education policy until now. It underwent rapid development which led to many English medium schools built. In fact, the colonials also took charge over some of the Islamic schools by giving full assistance provided with one condition; the religious school agreed to infuse the

academic subjects into their educational system besides the religious instructions. This is the time whereby we witness the establishment of the government 'Malay vernacular schools' which offered academic subjects such as reading, writing geography and mathematics. However, the Islamic studies and Quran reading were excluded from the official school schedule and were taught in the afternoon in the same building (Mohd. Roslan & Wan Tarmizi, 2011).

Islamic Schools after Independence

Aware of the society's needs which placed the highest need on religion, the Razak Report (1957) and the Abdul Rahman Talib Report (1960) have submitted a proposal which was subsequently approved that any schools which have the least 15 Malay student enrolment, will be allowed to infuse the Islamic Studies in their school schedule with the time allocated was initially 120 minutes a week. Later in 1988, it has been increased to 240 minutes a week (Mohd Roslan & Wan Tarmizi, 2011).

Meanwhile, the remaining non-governmental religious schools continued to operate as usual as private Agama Rakyat Schools (SAR). Each school has its own school board committee represented by non-governmental organizations which are responsible for the management, financial breakthrough, curriculum development and others.

In the 1970s the private, SAR schools began to become less well received due to improper system of administration and lack of infrastructure. Therefore the Ministry of Education consulted each state government to propose the religious schools to adopt the administration system and curriculum of the national secondary school. Soon, the establishment of the Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama (SMKA) began to take place with the acquisition of the eleven SAR schools by the Ministry of Education in 1977. The number has then increased from 11 schools to 56 schools to date (MOE, 2012).

Later, in 2006, the Ministry of Education established a new scheme which offers a range of assistance to the SAR schools such as trained teachers, teaching facilities, textbooks, scholarships and infrastructure development. The SAR schools which have agreed to accept the offer were registered as Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan (SABK) (MOE, 2012). The above events in sequence were the starting point to the foundation of different types of religious schools in our country. Based on a study made by the Advisory Board for the Coordination of Islamic Education or Lembaga Penyelaras dan Pendidikan Agama Islam (LEPAI, 1998) as cited in Ahmad Kilani (2003), in general there are three types of Religious Schools in Malaysia:

1. The Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama (SMKA) which are solely managed by the Ministry of Education.
2. The Sekolah Agama Negeri (SAN), managed by the State Department of Religious Affairs.
3. The Agama Rakyat Schools (SAR) and which are operated and managed by the non-governmental organizations.

Background Problem

Within the Malaysian national education system, all the above schools are required to fully subscribe to the national standardised academic curriculum proposed by the Malaysian Ministry of Education. The main reason for this is to allow all Malaysian students to sit for national standardised examinations such as the PT3, SPM and STPM. However, although the Malaysian national education system has instituted standardised practices and legally-binding policies among all schools which subscribe its curriculum, the teaching and learning of English in the SAR schools is without flaws. Lately, the society in Malaysia has raised the issue of the moderate performance of the English language subject in the SAR secondary schools, within the national standardized examinations framework. Although some of the SAR students have been able to demonstrate praiseworthy performance in the English language subject as a whole, it is still showing some decline compared to other schools within the Malaysian system (MOE, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several factors have been reported leading to the overall decline in the students' performance. According to Nor Raudah, *et al.* (2013), the management of SAR schools in Malaysia is facing a lot of major problems, among all, the limited financial resources which leads to the school development

problem. Without the initiative of the school to obtain financial resources other than from the students' fees, the schools cannot provide better school infrastructure for the students. It was found that some of the school libraries do not have enough equipment and adequate resources. The classrooms are uncomfortable in which some of the classes are separated by barrier boards. At the same time, the security of the students' dormitory is not up to the standard of building construction specifications. Besides that, most schools are incapable of preparing enough money to meet the minimum wage requirement for the teachers, which is RM950 per month, as announced by the federal government. The schools also could not provide additional welfare to the teachers such as medical allowances, insurance, year-end bonus and pension allowances. The effect of the low allowance has caused teachers to often change job in a short period of time. This is because the teachers would be actively looking for other jobs which can secure better future, financially. The frequency of teacher exchange could affect the students' learning process.

It was also found that almost all SAR secondary school teachers are not properly trained. A large number of them are merely SPM leavers. There are only a small number of teachers who are diploma/degree holders from other discipline than education. The teachers are also rarely sent to professionalism courses. The school itself does not have enough funds to send their teachers to attend training or organize the courses.

In one of his survey on a group of 97 teachers teaching in few SAR secondary schools in Selangor, Ahmad Zabidi (2005) revealed that most of the teachers, especially those teaching academic, do not have the basic teaching training and could not get access to teaching courses that could elevate their professionalism. The teachers also differ in terms of the services. Most of the schools do not offer promotion and permanent service scheme, or opportunity to undergo training and pursue higher education. Besides lack in qualified teachers the schools are plagued by managerial problems such as insufficient funds and inadequate facilities. The Ministry of Education (MOE, 2012), on the other hand, relates the poor academic performance of the students in the SAR schools to the lack of quality teachers, slow progress in the infrastructural development and the ineffective management of the organization.

RESULTS

This article presents some qualitative findings extracted from a larger scale research which employs both quantitative and qualitative methods on how English is taught at few SAR schools in Perak. Four English language teachers; Teacher A, B, C and D, teaching from four different schools were interviewed. With the aim of answering two research questions; i) what are the challenges faced by the SAR English Language teachers and ii) What are their future hopes and aspirations, an in-depth, semi-structured interview questions were developed as a mean to gather data. The questions includes a grand tour questions about the teachers such as their length of time served as teachers, their language proficiency level, their academic background, their hours of teaching per week and whether they could manage their workloads. It was hoped that the casual conversations could lead to more serious issues unveiling their feelings, experiences and aspirations teaching the language with the aim to get some insights on how English language is taught at those schools.

After drawing on 'thick' data from the interviews this research paper deals with the teachers' experiences of becoming English language teachers at four SAR schools in Perak. It is impossible to narrate each and every issue discussed, but somehow, the researcher has summarized the discussions into three very salient and pertinent issues highlighted by the teachers which are (i) the students' moderate English language proficiency (ii) the lack of variety of language teaching methods and (iii) the lack of information and communication technology (ICT) to assist teaching.

The Students' Moderate English Language Proficiency

It was found that all 4 teachers agree that most of the SAR school students possess between low to moderate level of English proficiency. In addition, the students' religious background also leads them demonstrating higher level of interest in Arabic language rather than to English. This factor forces two of the four teachers; Teacher A and B to agree with the necessity of regularly and rigorously using Malay translation in their teaching. They explained that their use of the Malay language in their language instructions can be classified into three purposes; to assist learners'

understanding, to teach grammar and to communicate individually with the students. In one instance, Teacher A mentioned:

Teacher A:
"Because the students will not understand. Their mind set is religion. That's why I said, they are all very weak in English. If I use English too teach, they will not understand….".

The same reason was also used by Teacher B as she stated:

Teacher B:
"Because the students will not understand…If I use English, definitely they will not understand, especially when I teach grammar items…".

On the other hand both Teacher C and D disagreed with the notion. Compared to Teacher A and B, Teacher C and D said they would try their best to maximally use the target language in delivering their instructions. They were also asked during the interview and had different opinion regarding this matter. Both Teacher C and D stated that they would timely ask and check the students' understanding and always encourage them to use dictionary in class. Sometimes, they would ask the advance students to help the weaker ones in looking for meaning of difficult words. Their opinion regarding this matter can be seen clearly in the excerpts:

Teacher C*:*
'I always believe they know and understand. And if they don't, I always encourage them to raise their hands and ask. I even allow them to use Kamus Dewan Bahasa to look for meaning. Some of the students use Thesaurus, which I think works better…'.

Teacher D
'Hmmm…sometimes teachers tend to think that all the students will not understand if we use English. Wouldn't they understand…at all? I think teachers should check first whether or not the students understand. I always ask them to bring dictionary to class. Sometimes I ask them to ask their friends…'.

The Inadequate Knowledge on Teacher Teaching Knowledge
It was also found that besides not possessing any qualified teacher training certificate, the teachers' long absence from attending courses specifically on teaching English language has resulted in their poor readiness to teach. Neither of them had been sent to teaching professionalism courses within the last two years. All four teachers admitted that they lack in knowledge on how to conduct more interesting, meaningful and communicative activities which could enhance students' language skills. They also expressed how they often feel confused on how to stimulate students' interest mainly to learn grammar. Teacher B had admitted that she had never been to any courses which specifies on how to teach the four language skills; listening, reading, writing and teaching. As she said:

Teacher B:
'I can't remember the last time I was sent for English language teaching course. It was a long time ago…I have never been exposed to the latest and effective techniques on language teaching…especially on teaching writing or grammar…'.

However every teacher expressed their eagerness to be sent to teaching professional courses specifically on equipping them with pedagogical content knowledge. This, according to them, could help them in acquiring relevant teacher teaching knowledge which will help them to make appropriate decisions whenever embraced by students' language learning problems. Not only that they had expressed their passion and devotion in teaching the language, they also firmly believe, that having chances to attend such courses would also elevate their teaching performance and help improve their students' language competence. As stated by Teacher C:

Teacher C:
'Yes of course. I really hope for two things; first, that we will have the opportunity to go to courses on teaching and learning of English…I plan to further my studies and if could possible I want to register for TESL course. I really love teaching English language…'.

The Lack of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to Assist Teaching

During the interviews, all teachers showed their awareness about the importance of using ICT to assist teaching but unfortunately, they complained that the schools lack the facilities. Almost all LCD in the classrooms were not in good condition and they have limited numbers of computers in the lab to fit in with the number of students. School financial barriers were mentioned most frequently in the interview sessions. The cost of hardware, software, maintenance (particular of the most advanced equipment), makes it impossible for the teachers to employ computer assisted language teaching. The teachers also expressed their hope for the schools to take some take drastic and urgent measures to solve the problem and thus, helping them improving the quality of their teaching. In an instance Teacher A said:

Teacher A:
"IT is it? Like the computer lab? We don't have it here. In fact, most of the classes are not provided with LCD. There few classes with LCDs but almost all are not working. LCDs are very expensive you see, and the school is incapable of buying them. We have a lot of financial constraints here…I do hope that the school would do something to overcome the problem, seriously and quickly…We badly need computers and LCD…you know, it can help us to attract students' attention. Or else, we could not employ other more interactive language teaching techniques besides using conventional paper, pens, books and whiteboard to assist our teaching. As such, the teaching sessions would be less lively, dreary and less controlled because the students will get easily bored. There are few LCDs here but not functioning… '.

Teacher C had in fact, said:

Teacher C:
'Yes of course. I really hope for two things; first, that we will have the opportunity to go to courses on teaching and learning of English… I plan to further my studies and if could possible I want to register for TESL course. I really love teaching English language… Second, I hope the management could provide each teacher a laptop to assist teaching. Then the LCDs need to be repaired. These two things are extremely important to help us improving our teaching performance…'.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

All four SAR language teachers involved in the interviews do not possess basic qualification on language teaching (TESL, TEFL, TESOL) endorsed by either the Ministry of Higher Learning or other Teacher Education Institutes. Nearly all of them also had not gone to professionalism courses specifically on English language within the last 2 years. As a result of all the teachers admitted that they are not well equipped with the basic teacher teaching knowledge to teach the language. This leads them lack the ability to diversify their teaching techniques other than using the conventional methods for paper, books, whiteboard and pen. In fact, two of them show their favour in reverting to the mother tongue to ease their language instructions. A big question arises here; why did the teachers vary with the ratio of the target language use, although all of them were having students with a similar level of proficiency? Why didn't Teacher A and B, check to find out who among their students were really in dire need of help with understanding the meaning of the texts before simply reverting to the students' mother tongue without hesitation? This is really in contrast with what Polio and Duff (1994) who have argued, that the more students are exposed to the target language, the more their minds will negotiate meaning and the more they will learn.

Besides that the school financial constraints also leads to lack of ICT facilities in the classrooms. Despite all the teachers show their deep interest and passion to teach English language, the

constraints and challenges faced by them have somehow deter them from demonstrating their best teaching competence.

It is hoped the respective schools' administrative could raise their awareness about the necessity of giving the responsibility to teach English language to qualified language teachers who are certified with English Language Teaching credentials (TESL, TEFL, TESOL) either from the Ministry of Higher Learning or any English Teaching Programs at any teaching institutes. This is to ensure that all their language teachers possess at least the basic knowledge of teaching English language to qualify them to teach.

Schools' administrative also should be aware about the necessity for their education workforce to engage in continuous professional courses. This should then, be proceeded by providing accessibility for the teachers to professionalism courses which will strengthen their language teaching knowledge. Not only that, the administrative should also provide sufficient technological tools to assist teaching. This could help the language teachers to use high technological eye-catching and interesting listening tools to assist students' understanding. The combination of the above factors would definitely help in improving students' language competency and thus improve the performance of English language subject in the national standardized examinations.

REFERENCES

Ahmad Kilani Mohamed. (2003). *Pengurusan pendidikan di sekolah: Huraian menurut perspektif Islam.* Skudai: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

Ahmad Zabidi. (2005*).* Ciri-ciri sekolah berkesan: Implikasinya terhadap sekolah agama. In *Pentadbiran dalam pembangunan pendidikan* (pp. 75-92). Bentong: PTS Professional Publishing Sdn. Bhd.

BPI KPM. (1989). *Mengkaji beberapa Sekolah Menengah yang berkesan dan tidak berkesan di Semenanjung Malaysia.* Putrajaya: Ministry of Education Malaysia Ministry of Education

Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia. (2012). SABK & SMKA. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.my/my/sabk-smka

Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia. (2014). SABK & SMKA. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.my/v/sabk-smka

Nor Raudah, *et al.* (2013) *Pengurusan Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR) di Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Dakwah dan Pembangunan Insan, Akademi Pengajian islam, Universiti Malaya.

Mohd. Roslan, & Wan Tarmizi. (2011). Sejarah dan perkembangan Islam di Malaysia. *Jurnal At Ta'dib*, *6*(1), 59-78.
Retrieved from https://umexpert.um.edu.my/file/publication/00009616_75776.pdf