

ICLALIS 2013

Examining the role of the English literature component in the Malaysian English curriculum

Paramjit Kaur^a, Nooraida Mahmor^{b*}

^{a,b}Universiti Utara Malaysia, School of Education and Modern Languages, Sintok 06010, Malaysia

Abstract

This paper examines the role and the position of the English Literature component in the current Malaysian English curriculum. A brief historical overview of the role and the position of English literature in the Malaysian curriculum will be provided. English literature has been through volatile changes throughout the years and is often seen to play a secondary role to help increase English proficiency of students. In the preliminary National Education Blueprint (2013 – 2025), once again English literature is juxtaposed as a tool to help increase English proficiency. Given the many revamps the curriculum in Malaysia has undergone, this paper argues that there is a general state of ambivalence towards the role and position of English Literature in the curriculum. This paper proposes that English Literature as a subject should be reconceptualised given its potential to help educate and prepare young Malaysians for the impact of globalization and the vibrant changes and challenges in the Malaysian political and social context. Literature should no longer be considered merely as a tool to increase English proficiency; it should serve as a bridge to educate young Malaysians about their rich literary traditions, heritage and culture.

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Selection and peer-review under the responsibility of the Organizing Committee of ICLALIS 2013.

Keywords: English Literature; curriculum; role of literature education; Malaysian National Education Blueprint; Malaysia

1. Introduction

The preliminary National Education Blueprint (2013 – 2025) was introduced by the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak on the 11th of September 2012. One of the main objectives of the Blueprint is to rejuvenate and reform the education system in order to help Malaysia achieve the status of a developed nation by 2020. The

* Corresponding author: Paramjit Kaur. Tel.: +6-019-417-0666; fax: +6-04-928-5382.
E-mail address: paramjit@uum.edu.my

Blueprint charts the education policies in Malaysia for the next 17 years and focuses on 11 shifts to transform the education system. The Blueprint is meant to ensure Malaysia's ability to compete globally with other developed nations. It is an amalgamation of the government's concerns and a response to the weaknesses of the current education system. The 11 shifts represent a move away from current practices and address every stakeholder and the main concerns of the public. Among these shifts, Shift 2 is concerned with ensuring that every child is proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and the English language (National Education Blueprint, 2012, E-10). Among the strategies outlined in Shift 2 include the 'upskilling' of English language teachers and expanding the opportunities for more exposure to English via a compulsory English Literature component at the secondary school level.

The English Literature component is foregrounded in the Blueprint and is given the role of promoting English proficiency. Generally, in the Malaysian primary and secondary school curriculum, English literature is seen to play two roles; i.e. literature as a study (referred to as the big "L") and literature as a resource (referred to as the small "l") (see Carter & Long, 1991, Carter & Walker, 1989; Subramaniam, 2003). The Blueprint highlights literature as a resource paradigm where literature is seen as a tool and resource to promote English language learning. This role of literature as an avenue to improve English proficiency has often been highlighted. For example, the Prime Minister particularly emphasized this role of English Literature in one of his speeches in reference to the Blueprint:

"English (language) is a reality; (it is) not a zero sum game but an asset if we can speak well in English," he said. He added that English Literature can help improve proficiency in the language and suggested that students could start with abridged version of Shakespeare. "If this is too hard, you can even start with Enid Blyton," he said during his speech before launching the preliminary report on the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 here on Tuesday.

(Chapman, 2012).

The teaching and learning of literature in English has been through many phases in the Malaysian context, from being the foci, to a point of near extinction only to be foregrounded once again. Today, once again the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 marks the projection of literature in English to a more prominent and clearer role. Literature in the Malaysian classroom has been used to enhance and upgrade the proficiency level of English and also to contribute to students' "...personal development and character building and widen their outlook of the world through reading about other cultures and world views" (Ganakumaran, 2003, p. 39). This paper will examine the role and position of literature in English in the primary and secondary curriculum. The paper will also propose a reconceptualization of the literature component to make it more effective.

2. Role and position of literature in the Malaysian primary curriculum

The general aim of the 2011 Primary English curriculum as outlined in the 2011 Primary English Language Curriculum is to equip pupils with basic language skills to enable them to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts that are appropriate to the pupils' level of development (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010). In the KSSR curriculum, literature in English is given a prominent role via the Language Arts strand. One of the objectives under the Language Arts strand for Year 1 is:

4.2 Pupils will be able to demonstrate understanding of and express personal response to literary texts.

4.2.1 Able to listen to and talk about stories with guidance:

- (a) book covers
- (b) pictures in books

(Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010)

In the new primary curriculum, the Language Arts strand includes the use of readers in Level 1 which includes Big Book, the Lady Bird series as well as music, poetry and drama. For Level 2, the Language Arts strand combines both readers and English at Play (literature) component (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010). Pupils also need to produce simple creative works as well as take part in creative works such as nursery rhymes, action songs, jazz chants and stories. Thus the focus is both on productive and receptive skills via literary texts and works.

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