

## Exploring English Language Learning And Teaching In Malaysia

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### Abstract

This paper presents a review of recent research that investigates the problem and the practice of English language teaching and learning in Malaysia. The aim of the paper is to identify the factors that contribute to low or limited English literacy achievement among Malaysian learners. A review of these studies indicates a general pattern of dissatisfaction among students, educators, policy makers and the public regarding the teaching and learning of the language (Razianna Abdul Rahman, 2005; Rosemala Ismail, 2008). In addition, studies focusing on English language proficiency among Malaysian university graduates also seem to resonate a feeling of uneasiness with the graduates' level of English proficiency (Isarji Sarudin et al., 2008). This paper therefore discusses some of the key issues and competing discourses confronting English language learning in this country. It reflects on how the teaching of English is variously conceptualized in our classrooms, raising important questions about the positions of English literacy to Malaysian learners and the society in general.

**Keywords:** English language teaching, low proficiency, school practices, literacy, second language learners.

### Introduction

The concern over low literacy attainment in English language among Malaysian learners has been investigated quite extensively. The main focus of these studies is to examine why Malaysian students do not seem to be able to attain reasonable English literacy even after going through 11 years of learning English in school (Naginder, 2006; Nor Hashimah Jalaludin, Norsimah Mat Awal & Kesumawati Abu Bakar, 2008). The commitment to address this problem is given utmost importance by the government. As

announced in the 2011 Budget, the government is bringing in 375 native-speaking teachers to teach English in schools. Though a number of groups have voiced their doubt of such a measure (MELTA, 2010), this action demonstrates the crucial need to improve the standard of English literacy among Malaysian learners. In order to understand the issues surrounding English literacy learning in Malaysia, this paper presents a synthesis of recent studies conducted in the area.

In this paper, English language learning and English literacy learning are used interchangeably. The word *literacy* has become more prominent in current scholarship discussing language learning. Whilst previously the focus of language learning was on the teaching of reading and writing skills, literacy in a language is increasingly conceptualized as a social practice (Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009). Drawing largely on Bakhtin and Vygostky, literacy researchers have widely argued that language learning cannot and do not take place primarily in the brains of isolated individual learners but are instead inextricably bound up with social factors as learners interact in human activities (Leki, 2007). Literacy learning evokes an expanded view of language learning that encompasses learning not only as a unitary concept of learning specific skills but embraces a continuum of abilities and competencies ranging from simple decoding of the printed words to critical literacy (Purcell-Gates, 2007). This perspective on literacy forms the backdrop of this paper.

### **Research Aim and Methodology**

This paper is based on a larger study that reviews and synthesizes research studies which investigate the problems and the practice of teaching and learning English in Malaysia. The general aim of the study is to identify and establish the key issues and common discourses with regards to the teaching of English in Malaysian classrooms. In doing so, the study also seeks to identify the factors that contribute to low English language proficiency among Malaysian learners. Framed within the qualitative research paradigm, the study uses document analysis (Bowen, 2009) as its research methodology. It combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis procedures to systematically review and synthesize research papers that examine English language learning in Malaysia from year 2000 to 2011. The process requires a careful, focused reading and re-reading of the data. Emerging themes are identified and later developed into categories for coding and category construction (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Research studies selected for this review are peer-reviewed papers.

### **Concepts of literacy and language learning**

Central to the discussion of the review here is two contrasting perspectives of literacy and language learning as suggested by proponents of literacy studies, among others, Baynham and Prinsloo (2009), Street (1984), and Purcell-Gates (2007). Situated within the paradigm of social theories of language and literacy, Street (1984) proposes a distinction between *literacy as autonomous skills* and *literacy as a social practice*. *Literacy as autonomous skills* posits language learning as the mastering of specific language skills such as grammar, sentence construction and writing skills. These skills, once learned, are

treated as context-free and are transferable to any situation. Alternatively, *literacy as a social practice* views language learning as ideological and that learning a language is best handled by participating in meaningful interactions. More importantly, ‘the ways in which teachers and students interact are already a social practice that affects the nature of literacy learned...’ (Street, 2009, p. 24).

Consequently, the discussion of the review here is presented in two parts. Part 1 discusses research studies that examine language learning as autonomous skills. Part 2 illustrates research studies that suggest language learning as *ways of being* and *ways of doing*.

## **Part 1: Language learning as autonomous skills**

### **Research on English language learning in Malaysian schools**

A review of research studies conducted to examine English language learning in Malaysian schools reveals that there is a strong influence of the national language or Bahasa Malaysia over the learning of English. Some of these studies are discussed here.

Marlyna Maros, Tan Kim Hua, and Khazriyati (2007) explore interference effect of Bahasa Malaysia as an important inhibiting factor in the acquisition of English literacy among Form One students. Using error analyses and contrastive analysis, the study examines errors made by 120 students from 6 rural schools in Pahang, Selangor and Melaka. Based on the errors in the students’ essays, the study concludes that the learners have difficulties in using correct English grammar in their writings. Three most frequent errors are wrong use of articles, subject-verb agreement, and copula ‘be’. The study claims that although not all errors are due to mother tongue interference, a large number of errors identified suggest interference of the Malay grammar.

In a related work, Nor Hashimah Jalaludin et al. (2008) examine the morphological and syntactical differences between the Malay language and English, and concludes that the linguistics differences are shown to be one of the major factors influencing students’ inability to successfully acquire English literacy. A study conducted on 315 Form Two students shows that the most obvious weaknesses of the students’ language ability lay in the area of grammar, particularly in the aspects of morphology and syntax. The study shows that students have problems with affixes and plural inflections as these linguistics variables do not exist in Malay language. The study also confirms that the differences in the syntactical structures between the Malay and English language contribute to the wrong use of copula ‘be’, subject-verb-agreement and relative pronouns. Further, the study maintains that, apart from the linguistics obstacles, the social surroundings such as unenthusiastic attitude, lack of interest towards learning the language and the environment that do not encourage learners to use the language have worsened the effort of acquiring the language.

Saadiah Darus and Kaladevi (2009) analyze 72 written essays by Form Four students in one semi-urban secondary school. The finding of the study indicates that students

generally have problems in applying correct grammatical rules in their writings. This study is in agreement with two previous studies that identify common grammatical errors made by the students are Subject-Verb agreement and wrong use of singular and plural forms. In addition, wrong application of verb tense, inappropriate word choice and prepositions are common among the participants. Findings of this study imply that students have not yet mastered basic grammatical structures even though they have gone through 10 years of learning English.

Siti Hamin Stapa and Abdul Hameed Abdul Majid (2006), on the other hand, document that the use of Bahasa Malaysia in teaching writing promote better writing literacy among limited proficiency English learners. Using experimental study, their research corroborates that the use of Bahasa Malaysia to generate ideas among limited proficiency English learners help the students to produce better quality essays in terms of overall score, content, language and organization. Razianna Abdul Rahman (2005) also confirms that using Bahasa Malaysia in an English class has helped her respondents to learn English. She reports that her students resort to explain an incomprehensible or difficult English passage using Bahasa Malaysia and the translation facilitates their comprehension of the English text. Mohd Sofi Ali (2008) however reports that teachers in his case study primarily use Bahasa Malaysia to teach English because of the pressure to get good grades in examinations.

Correspondingly, Nambiar, Noraini Ibrahim and Pramela (2008) examine the use of language learning strategies among Form Two students in the state of Johor. The results of the study show that language learning strategies are still underutilized and underdeveloped among the participants and this poor use of learning strategies could account for the students' weaknesses in reading English text. This study also reports that learners tend to use strategies that do not require them to be analytical and critical. In fact, 68.2 % of her participants reported that they rarely or never use contextual or the background knowledge to 'guess the contents in a reading passage' and that they are highly dependent on Bahasa Malaysia to help them comprehend an English text.

A further look into some of these studies also discloses a prevailing strand in Malaysian school. The discourse of 'privileging examination' (Koo, 2008, p.56) is dominant across the education site. Because of the high importance placed on national examination, it is reported that teachers tend to concentrate on the teaching of grammar and neglect the communicative aspects of language learning in their teaching. In an analysis of the KBSM syllabus, for example, Ambigapathy (2002) reports that students are required to learn too many grammatical skills, which are then tested via examinations. The focus on mastering and rote learning of skills and applying them in examinations eventually eroded communicative competence - hence emerged a new class of students who could pass examinations and continue to the tertiary level without actually being able to use the English language productively in a communicative event (ibid). Furthermore, classroom teaching is highly characterized by teacher-centred approaches and chalk-and-talk drill method (Ministry of Education, 2003). The most popular teaching method, sadly, is drilling using past-year examination questions, work sheets and exercise books (Ambigapathy, 2002).

Studies conducted at school level are important as English literacy in Malaysia is generally acquired through schooled English (Hazita Azman, 2009). Most of the school children, in particular, those who reside in the rural areas experience contacts with English language only during their English classes. Furthermore, students go through a formal, structured process of learning English throughout their eleven years of schooling and therefore it is reasonable to deduce that English literacy among Malaysian learners are highly conceptualized through school experience. School experience in learning English, as shown by studies discussed earlier, indicate a strong sense of looking at English language learning as mastering of specific language skills such as writing, reading and grammar.

In summary, the studies highlighted here suggest two important issues regarding English language learning in Malaysia. First, Bahasa Malaysia has a strong influence over the learning of English. Interference of mother tongue language system in some ways contributes to wrong use of English grammatical rules, morphology and syntax. Learners tend to refer to their first language system when writing in English, use direct translation and depend on dictionary meanings to comprehend English text (Ambigapathy, 2002; Nambiar 2007).

Second, a strong emphasis is given on the teaching of reading and writing skills and the mastering of grammatical rules. These items are then tested in the school examinations as well as in the national examinations (Razianna Abdul Rahman, 2005). The teaching and learning of English therefore is seen as learning a subject, focusing on the mechanics of the language without making connections to how it is used in real communicative events. Though some of the grammatical rules are presented in a dialogue form, these dialogues are mainly used to practise the language functions taught in the lesson. These common classroom practices suggest that the teaching of English literacy neglects the sociocultural elements of language learning. English language learning is presented as learning a set of language mechanics with 'fixed' ways of using the language; isolated from its communicative use. It is presented as a neutral set of language systems; to be learned and mastered for specific classroom situations. Framed in this paradigm, arguably, learning English literacy will continually and persistently be regarded as an alien language to the learners' communicative discourse.

### **Research on English language learning in higher education**

Research studies involving higher education learners are relatively small. Undergraduate students are found not to have note-taking skills and this creates a problem to them when listening to lectures or discussions (Rosniah Mustaffa, 2006). In addition, it has been observed that when Malaysian students make the transition from secondary schools to university, they are expected to have both academic literacy and critical literacy abilities to meet the academic demands at the university. Several studies however have shown that students face difficulties to shift from school learning culture to the university culture (ibid) for a number of reasons. Learners are found to have limited critical ability to appropriately respond to an academic text (Ahmad Mazli Muhammad, 2007) and lack the conventions of academic writing needed to write well in an academic discipline

(Krishnakumari, Paul-Evanson, & Selvanayagam, 2010) . Studies also indicate that the students are not prepared for the reading demands imposed on them at university (Nambiar, 2007).

Additionally, learners at tertiary education are found to have limited vocabulary knowledge and weak at understanding long sentences or sentences with difficult words (Ahmad Mazli Muhammad, 2007; Nambiar, 2007; Zaira Abu Hasan, 2008). As vocabulary play an important role in academic reading comprehension, the insufficient vocabulary knowledge inevitably affects the learners' performance in the content subject areas (Rosemala Ismail, 2008).

In a study that examines the reading skills of tertiary students, Noorizah Mohd. Noor (2006) discovers that proficient and non-proficient readers use different reading strategies in reading an academic text. Limited proficiency readers tend to use surface approach to reading; such as displaying a limited ability to use textual schema, having a limited ability to link between paragraphs, unsure of reading strategies used as well as having anxiety of text. This behaviour impedes the students' understanding of the text and hampers in-depth comprehension. The more proficient readers however use deep reading approach that advances intrinsic motivation and this helps the readers to maintain their interest and have positive attitudes towards reading. These proficient readers use more metacognitive strategies and are able to identify the link between the paragraphs to help them comprehend a text. Correspondingly, Zaira Abu Hasan (2008) documents that the less proficient readers struggle to locate information from a reading text and do not engage critically or constructively to comprehend their reading.

Mohamed Ismail Ahamad Shah and Normala Othman (2006) conduct a study on information and interaction patterns between teachers and students in a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) classroom in one public university. Looking at teacher questions, the researchers discover that teachers in these CLT classes use more comprehension check questions as opposed to clarification questions. Comprehension check questions do not encourage two-way interaction or exchange of meaning as they focus on comprehension of specific content. In this way, learners are given less opportunity to produce 'modified output', a crucial element in language learning.

In a related study that looks at language anxiety among English language learners in higher education, the majority of the learners interviewed report that they are very nervous when speaking in English and that they face great difficulty to express themselves in English (Noor Hashimah Abdul Aziz, 2007). The respondents also state that the use of English is only limited or confined to certain situations such as when they have to present or produce written works in English, but at other times, they use Bahasa Malaysia. More importantly, a number of studies also reveal that language anxiety experienced by the learners originates from the learners themselves, school instructional practices and social and cultural influence putting them linguistically and psychologically isolated from English language use (Rosemala Ismail, 2008; Noor Hashimah Abdul Aziz, 2007).

Essentially, in discussing the problem faced by our learners in reading English text and learning English in general, a number of studies associate the causes of the problem to Malaysian education system. Because of its strong orientation towards national based assessment, our education system has generally produced students who are unable to operate autonomously (Koo, 2008) ‘whereby learners assume the part of empty vessels’ (Naginder, 2006), presuming that teachers will teach them all the lessons they need to know. This characteristic indeed discourages and inhibits independent language learning. The strong tendency to depend on teachers for their own learning is further worsened with the prevalent discourse of examination throughout their school experience (Ambigapathy, 2002). The high importance placed on scoring good grades in the examination further establishes the need to memorize and regurgitate even in the discourse of assessment in higher learning institutions (Lee King Siong, Hazita Azman & Koo Yew Lie, 2010; Koo, 2008).

To end, the review of literature discussed here illustrates the challenges and the complexities surrounding English literacy learning in the Malaysian education scenario. The review clearly reveals the need to reassess the approaches used to teach English literacy in this country. One common suggestion that emerges from these studies is to incorporate out-of classroom practices into the learning as well as to deliberate on social and cultural influence on English literacy learning (Naginder, 2006; Marlyna Maros et al., 2007; Nor Hashimah Jalaludin et al., 2008; Razianna Abdul Rahman, 2005). Correspondingly, Noorizah Mohd. Noor (2006) and Rosniah Mustaffa (2006) call for understanding students’ reading and learning styles in order to promote better learning among the students.

It is important to note that the studies highlighted in this section show that literacy learning in Malaysia is highly conceptualized as *autonomous*, as a universal set of discreet cognitive skills that are transferable to any context (Street, 2009). The assumption underpinning this ideology is that literacy learning is treated as ‘neutral’ or ‘technical’, as a set of skills that are learnable through practice and schooling. Koo (2008, p.57) however asserts that “literacy practices that emerge from within this context will continue to produce learners who look at knowledge as learning of a fixed body of information which can be regurgitated and applied without much comment and critique”.

### **Causes of limited English proficiency in Malaysia**

Several studies have attempted to identify the possible factors that result in low English literacy attainment among Malaysian learners. Table 1 presents a summary of the factors. Though these causes cannot be generalized to all learners, it does represent a majority of the learners. The overall picture is discouraging and is indicative of the need to change the ways in which English language literacy is taught to Malaysian learners. In learning a second language or a foreign language, research has established that it is utmost important that learners receive maximum support in terms of supportive and conducive learning environment as well as adequate, meaningful language experience. As shown in Table 1, these elements are currently lacking in our education system.

Table 1: Causes of limited English proficiency among Malaysian learners

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English is viewed as a difficult subject to learn.  
Learners depend on the English teachers as authorities.  
English is used only to answer teacher's questions and spoken during English class.  
Learners tend to depend heavily on translation and dictionary use to find meanings.  
There is a lack of support to use English in the home environment and the community.  
Learners are found to have limited vocabulary as English reading materials are not always available.  
Learners display unwillingness and lack of motivation to learn English as they do not see the immediate need to use the language.  
Learners have inadequate or insufficient exposure to the language as there is a limited opportunity to use English outside the classrooms.  
English is not perceived as an important medium for communication as they use Bahasa Malaysia both for academic and personal interactions.  
Learners express unwillingness and high anxiety to use English to communicate despite acknowledging that English is important for their future.  
There is a mismatched between policy and practice in the Malaysian ELT curriculum; the policy as envisaged in the school curriculum cannot be fully implemented in schools because of the over-riding concern for examination.

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Source: Ambigapathy (2002; 2006); Fauziah Hassan & Nita Fauzee Selamat (2002), Mohd Sofi Ali (2008), Naginder (2006), Noor Hashimah Abdul Aziz (2007), Razianna Abdul Rahman (2005), Rosemala Ismail (2008), Zaira Abu Hasan (2008).

## **Part 2: Language learning as *ways of doing* and *ways of being***

The analysis of recent studies on English language literacy in Malaysia indicates a strong predisposition towards looking at literacy as autonomous skills. As mentioned earlier, classroom practices are mainly characterized by answering reading comprehension questions and essay writings with limited listening and speaking exercises. In this regard, literacy is learnt as a set of skills and not as a social practice connected to various domains and communities of practices in the real world (Ambigapathy, 2006). A more current view on literacy however reflects a recent shift in thinking and examining English literacy in Malaysia. In line with a body of scholarship that advances literacy as social practice, several studies suggests that understanding and examining English literacy from



social practice approach might offer possible pathways to promote English learning in Malaysia.

Lee Su Kim (2003) investigates the impact of the English language on the construction of the sociocultural identities of a selected group of ESL learners in Malaysia. The findings reveal that in a multicultural, post-colonial society like Malaysia, identity issues are complex and multi-layered. Identity shifts take place frequently in strategic and non-strategic ways, and identity constructions of the participants are heavily dependent on the localized contexts. The participants possess a range of diverse identities depending on the contexts and the reference groups they are interacting with, and have to subtly manage the complexities of their multiple identities in order to fit in or belong to a group. The findings revealed that within certain contexts, it is *the non-use* rather than *the use* of the English language that enhances conformity and acceptance. She also notes that using the English language within certain contexts where there is resentment towards the English language may bring about hostility, marginalization and even alienation. Lee (2003, p. 9) further suggests that:

understanding learners' struggles in learning the English language involves not just his/her difficulties in the classroom but also an awareness of how sociocultural meanings are linked in complicated ways to sociocultural identities. Teachers and practitioners should be aware that the classroom is not a neat, self-contained mini-society isolated from the outside world but an integral part of the larger society where the reproduction of many forms of domination and resistance based on gender, ethnicity, class, race, religion and language is a daily event.

Lee's study reveals that learning and using English has some impacts on the learners' identity. It is important therefore for teachers and curriculum designers to understand how English language plays a part in the learners' repertoire and their identities.

Hazita Azman (1999) complements this work by examining socially embedded literacy events in rural areas. This study diverges from previous studies in Malaysia which relate literacy issue to deficiencies in the non-school environment and lesser cognitive abilities. Looking at literacy practices in two local communities, the key finding in her study shows that the differences between communities, ethnic groups and socioeconomic status has less influencing effect on a rural child's literacy development. Hazita's analysis of the socially embedded literacy events in the rural communities makes clear the prevalent control school practices have over home practices, eschewing other literacies practiced outside the school environment.

Hazita Azman's (1999) study has two significant implications on literacy learning in Malaysia. First, the study demonstrates the paradox between perceptions of literacy and actual practices. The *Kualakeroh* and *Hulubukit* communities equate literacy with school literacy and this has led to a marginalization of non-school literacy practices both in the schools and homes. Parents encourage their children to study instead of reading comics and school regards other literacy practices at home are not valuable because they are

unrelated to school practices. Such beliefs are injurious to the development of literacy as researches elsewhere have documented literacy as being multiple and socially sanctioned. Second, the study also argues that assessing the literacy skills of the rural students against urban or environmentally 'advantaged' students is a basic mistake as it only encourages the rural students to feel discouraged.

Koo (2008) uses the concept of Pluriliteracies to propose the use of inclusive pedagogy in language learning. She argues that language is important for knowledge acquisition and meaning making. Pluriliteracies pedagogy advocates innovative curriculum and education policy which address the vital questions of the empowerment of marginalized learners, re-distribution and sharing of power and representation in ELT context. Imperative in this proposition is learners as active participants in their own learning where they construct meanings and knowledge based on their ethnocultural resources that reside from their primary life-worlds and are represented in their mother-tongue or first language. The pluriliteracy perspectives encourage learners to engage, design and position the vernacular and the folk ways of thinking as resources for the construction of 'dominant' knowledge as required in the global market-place. Koo calls for an inclusive pedagogy that necessitates learners to engage in critical voice in which learners and teachers become co-producers and co-authors in the teaching and learning process.

### **Challenges in teaching English in Malaysia**

The challenge facing the teaching of English literacy in Malaysia lies in making our classroom relevant to the current literacy needs. Literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century necessitates an inclusive pedagogy that looks at learners as co-authors and co-producers in knowledge acquisition (Koo, 2008). Learning is seen as participating and taking part in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), making literacy learning as meaningful and emergent. Implicit in the concepts of literacy as meaningful and emergent is that literacy is about new learning, about promoting new knowledge and offering opportunities of continuity and discontinuity. As learners participate in a meaningful learning, they acquire new literacy.

Current formulations of academic literacies in our educational environment that reflect a heavy emphasis on the commodity value of literacy is disadvantageous to our learners (Naginder, 2006). Students are evaluated based on their performance and ability to obtain good grades in the examination or display good writing skills. The practice of evaluating students based on their skills and competencies silences learners' voices, making them feel alienated and separated from meaningful language use.

In the same vein, Koo (2008, p. 31) cautions that "as long as literacy continues to be viewed in terms of narrow utilitarian, decontextualized skills-based discourses..., Malaysian learners will find themselves seriously disadvantaged" in today's global space. She further affirms that "a serious discontinuity exists between literacy practices in schools and universities and the expectations, norms values of the new workspaces in present 21<sup>st</sup> century". The new literacies for 21<sup>st</sup> century command for the capacity to negotiate diversity, produce new ideas and think out of the box. The new language

classroom should encompass learning environments which encourage critical thinking, foster innovative culture, and acknowledge diversity in global spaces. Baker (2009, p. 78) describes literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as follows:

literacy is variously said to cultivate values, norms of behaviour and codes of conduct, to create benign citizens, develop powers of thinking and reasoning, enculturate, emancipate and empower, provide enjoyment and emotional development, develop critical awareness, foster religious devotion, community development and not the least to be central to academic success across the curriculum.

Based on the reviews presented earlier in this paper, it remains unclear how, and how well schools are preparing our students to live and participate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century 'literate ways' of behaving and doing things. When young people around the globe are already connecting and enthusiastically using English in an ICT-saturated world, how are the language teachers preparing our young learners to meet the needs of the present and future worlds? Also remains unclear is the nature of the practices that the learners currently engaged in with regards to learning English both in-school and out-of-school contexts. Some research have suggested that lack of connectivity between home, school and local communities may have significant implications for student learning.

### **Gaps in the literature and suggestions for further research**

Studies conducted to look for ways to improve English language learning in Malaysia have largely focused on the teaching and learning of English in the language classrooms. It is important now to look beyond the language classrooms in order to understand the position of English literacy to the learners. More studies are needed to examine learners' ways of using different linguistics repertoire when they are outside of the classrooms. Studies are also needed to find ways to situate English language among the available linguistics codes our learners have.

Most of the studies reviewed in this paper are situated within the structure of autonomous model (Street, 1984). Within this perspective, learning is viewed as concrete, cognitive skills that are transferable to any context. The review here however points towards the need to look at language learning as joining or 'membership into a discourse community'.

The studies also mainly use questionnaire or survey methods to examine the problem in hand and the methods used underplay the intricacy and the psychological nature of English language learning in Malaysia. The use of quantitative methods such as survey questions could limit the critical areas that can be examined by qualitative case study researches. This paper therefore suggests that in order to look at English literacy learning as inclusive and relevant to the present needs, more studies that employ qualitative research design are needed to provide empirical evidence of localized, contextualized use of the language.

This paper argues that literacy learning in Malaysia should be positioned within the theory of literacy as social practice. Viewing literacy in this perspective, language is seen as a tool for navigating the social world, constructing meaning, displaying identities and accomplishing social goals. The focus of teaching and learning is on processes and practices as they are situated in meaningful activity, not on cognitive capacities that are required for those practices.

To situate English literacy learning in a non-native context such as Malaysia, it is necessary to have an ethnographic understanding of how English language is viewed by the local communities (Hazita Azman, 2009). Teachers and curriculum developers need to investigate the extent to which English is positioned in the learners' repertoire (ibid) so that they can design a literacy curriculum that will better suit the learners' needs. By connecting and situating English literacy learning in the learners' social lives, learning English to our learners would no longer be perceived as irrelevant and devoid of context. As suggested by Razianna Abdul Rahman (2005, p. 22), 'unless teachers understand the social and cultural nature of learning, it is not possible for teachers to provide the kind of English learning experiences that can help learners to develop their overall language proficiency'.

Following the preceding discussion, this paper proposes changes in the theorizing of English literacy learning in Malaysian classrooms. As illustrated in Figure 1, *literacy as a social practice* should be the overarching paradigm that includes in it the practice of *literacy as autonomous skills*. Together they would pedagogically position the *learning of reading and writing skills* as embedded into the *learning as participating in meaningful interactions*. This way, with literacy viewed in a social practice paradigm, language learning should incorporate elements of 'doing, experiencing, becoming and belonging to communities of practice' as suggested by Wenger (1998).

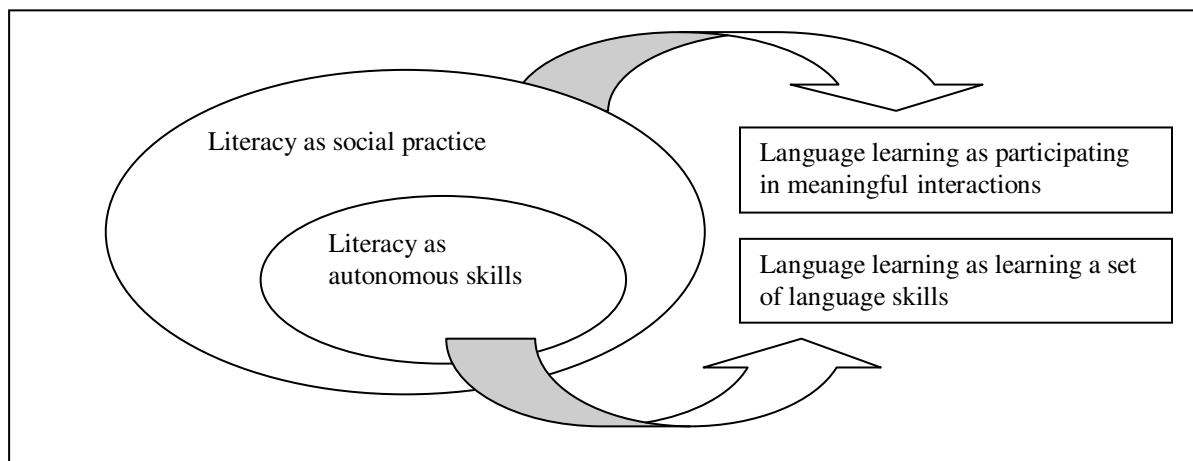


Figure 1: Proposed framework for English language curriculum

## Conclusion

This paper highlights a number of points that put forward important pedagogical implications in the teaching of English in Malaysia.

1. There is a strong influence of the national language or Bahasa Malaysia over the learning of English among Malaysian learners.
2. The teaching of English in our classrooms that emphasizes rote-learning and the mastery of specific language skills that are then tested via examinations should be revised.
3. A language curriculum that advances on inclusive, learning-by-doing experiences would encourage a more meaningful learning. An improved English language curriculum that operates on reflective learning pedagogy would encourage learners to become independent and critical language learners, in line with the current trends in language learning.
4. Future research needs to continue to investigate the pedagogical practices of teaching English in this country and at the same time, to evaluate and check the development of teachers' knowledge in the domain as they are significant agents that translate policy into action.

Literacy and language learning remain central to education domain. Language is used as a medium for learning and to communicate knowledge. Realizing this, it is highly important for language educators and policy makers to carefully examine how language learning is theorized in our educational context and make necessary changes in order to advocate better English language learning among our learners. The need is immediate.

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