

## “A Glimpse on the Re-Introduction of English Literature in Malaysian Secondary Schools”

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### Abstract

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English Literature in Malaysian Secondary Schools context has evolved from being a core part of the English Language curriculum to a point of near-extinction only to re-emerge in the twenty-first century in a stronger form. English Literature is aimed at developing language proficiency and nurturing the love for reading in Malaysian education system. In August 2012, the Minister of Education has announced the re-introduction of English Literature subject in secondary schools, aiming at improving the education system. This has invited streams of mixed responses from various parties. Therefore, this study functions as the platform to provide an insight on the level of readiness among the English teachers, in terms of their pedagogical skills, proposed activities and attitudes towards Literature. With that, 320 English teachers in Sarawak, Malaysia were given questionnaires and 32 of them were interviewed to validate the findings. SPSS Version 21 was utilised to generate the findings. The results indicated their high level of readiness in teaching Literature as a subject though almost half of the respondents were not aware and ready of the proclamation. Hence, it shows that teachers are aspired to act as the catalysts in working towards the improvement of Malaysia English Education.

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**Keywords:** Literature, ESL, Malaysian Education System, Readiness, Attitude, Teachers

### 1. Introduction

In Malaysia, the teaching and learning of English Literature encompasses both the primary and secondary schools education.

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Several English Literature programmes have been introduced in the Malaysian primary schools such as The New Zealand Readers Programme, The World Bank Reading Project, The NILAM Programme and Children's Contemporary Literature Programme for English Language in Primary Schools. On the other hand, English Literature is also part of the secondary schools curriculum. Subramaniam (2003) denoted that glancing back at the history; literary materials were used for two different purposes during the early periods of Independence. Literary materials were used as support or resource supplies for the teaching of English. Then, it was also offered as an elective subject in the Senior Cambridge Certificate or the Malaysian Certificate of Education and Higher Schools Certificate Examinations level. With the change of instructional medium in the education system which was finally completed in 1976, English Literature was only used during the English language reading programmes (Subramaniam, 2003). This is the continuous effort by the Government in order to develop learners' exposure to the English language, both inside the language classroom and outside the classroom.

English Literature in Malaysian Secondary Schools context has evolved from being a core part of the English Language curriculum to a point of near-extinction only to re-emerge in the twenty-first century in a stronger form (Subramaniam, 2007). This is where the Ministry of Education Malaysia announced a major change that would take place in the English Language Teaching (ELT). English Literature component would be introduced in the secondary schools and a single period will be allocated for this component. The Literature component is classified under 'language for aesthetic use' learning outcome in the English language curriculum specifications. The component was first introduced in the year 2000 and it involved the teaching of four genres like poem, short story, drama and novel. In fact, students are tested on the component in the national examinations, Lower Secondary Assessment (PMR) and Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM). The component is aimed at highlighting the intentions to enrich the students' proficiency level in English language via the study of prescribed texts, as well as to contribute to the personal development and character building of the students (Subramaniam, 2003). Concurrent to this, students' perceptions of other world views and cultures can be broadened and widened. Works by local as well as the foreign writers are taught in the component and the students are learning the second set of the prescribed texts.

The issue started when Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who is the Minister of Education Malaysia announced the re-introduction of English Literature subject in secondary schools in August 2012.

This is proposed as part of the review of the national education system. In addition, this may work as a medium to raise the standard of English in Malaysia as it is seen to be deteriorating as compared to years ago. However, this proclamation invites streams of mixed responses and concerns from various parties. Among those include The Parents Action Group for Education Malaysia (PAGE) who wants the Government to ensure the availability of trained teachers who could teach the subject before English Literature is re-introduced in the education system (News Strait Times, 24 August 2012). Its president, Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim stated that the teachers' ability to handle the subject is important so that a situation does not arise where it is beyond the capability of students to handle English Literature which was not a 'light' subject.

In addition to this, the president of National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP), Hashim Adnan held the opinion that a more in-depth study was needed before the plan was to be implemented (Borneo Post, 24 August 2012). He further claimed that it must be borne in mind that it is rather difficult to get students interested in Malay Literature, what more English Literature. Therefore, it is important to look deeper into the matter as the education system would not in favour to experience the effect of *Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains & Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris (PPSMI)* or *English for Teaching Mathematics and Science (ETEMS)* for the second time. Opposing to the plan, the Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz Ungku Abdul Hamid in a newspaper interview 3 days after the announcement of the re-introduction plan, commented that the study of literature in the national education system should not only focus on English Literature as the education system should instead promote the study of literature in all of the world's languages (The Malaysian Insider, 24 August 2012). He even added by saying that English culture portrayed in their literature was not like that in the past and it was possible their language and culture would lose importance in the world in future.

This plan has been documented in Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025, whereby English Literature module will be a compulsory subject in secondary schools as a means to expose the students to English language. This will be done by the increase of 15% to 20% of the exposure to the language.

It is proposed that the plan is to be executed in the second wave of Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 (2013).

Hence, this article is meant to provide an insight on the level of readiness among the English teachers, in terms of their pedagogical skills, proposed activities and attitudes on the Literature lesson towards the re-introduction Literature subject in secondary schools.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Importance of Literature**

Literature serves as an avenue to inculcate the reading habits among the students. To begin, as Ibsen cited in Sidhu (2003) puts it, most of us often read Literature to enjoy a good story. Then as we read on, we get excited in knowing what happens. Despite the linguistic difficulties, this motivates us to read on. Students need to read the literary texts to be able to get to the gist of the texts in studying Literature. The texts would encourage students to read thus promote language acquisition and expand students' language awareness (Nair et al., 2012). In fact, Ganakumaran (2003) revealed that the Literature was used in school through English Language Reading Programmes since 1976. Thus, Literature may assist in promoting the reading habit among the students.

Literature is the means helping to raise the language proficiency. It encourages the awareness among learners on how the language works (Muthusamy, Marimuthu, Michael, Ghazali & Veeravagu, 2010). Literature aids in developing learners' knowledge of syntax, morphology, semantics and even phonetics whenever learners are taught effectively. This allows students to indirectly learn the grammatical aspect while trying to enjoy and appreciate the literary texts. This is in par with Sidhu, Chan and Kaur (2010) who believed that a literature-enriched curriculum not only helps learners improve their reading and writing skills but more importantly helps them internalize grammar and vocabulary. In addition, Isa and Mahmud (2012) stated that in Malaysia, literature is taught to enhance the students' grasp of the English language and to be enjoyed. Hence, Literature can serve to nurture literacy and proficiency in the language where at the same time, it is meant to be enjoyed.

### **2.2 The Study of Literature in Malaysia**

Several studies have been conducted in regards to the teaching and learning of Literature component in Malaysia education system.

When the component first introduced in the system, Subramaniam, Hamdan and Koo(2003) conducted the study on the incorporation of it in Malaysian ESL Syllabus, involving 500 ESL teachers. It was found out that only 42% of the respondents perceived that they possess adequate knowledge of the methodology of teaching Literature to appropriately teach the Literature component. In addition, Ghazali, Setia, Muthusamy and Jusoff (2009) conducted a study on the attitudes towards learning Literature and methods employed in teaching the component. The study revealed that teachers spent a lot of time discussing plot, characters, theme, setting and moral values of the texts in class and the students responded that the teaching strategies used were boring.

Another similar findings was found from the study conducted by Aziz and Nasharudin (2010). It was revealed that teachers do not know the best approach to teach Literature in order for students to gain both language and appreciation of the Literature itself. Adding to that, Yunus, Salehi and John (2013) proposed that the use of visual aids enable the teachers to engage their students closely with the literary texts despite of being able to facilitate students of different English proficiency level in reading the texts with interest. Yunus and Suliman (2014) conducted a study regarding Literature teaching involving a sample from the East Malaysia denoted that 94% of the respondents employed more answering comprehension questions technique in class.

### **2.3 Role of Teachers**

Teachers are at the heart of the educational process (Idris, Loh, Nor, Razak&Saad, 2007). The role of quality, qualified and effective teacher is invaluable that one may fail to come up with proper expression to express the magnitude of their significance in its exactness (Kavenuke, 2013). All of these demonstrate how crucial a teacher is. In fact, the quality of teachers is the most significant school-based determinant of student outcomes (Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025, 2013).The teachers' roles have evolved and undergone a lot of changes, which are applicable to language teachers too.

The language teachers have to constantly update their knowledge, look for new methodology, and learn to use technology for pedagogical purpose (Gore & Begum, 2012).

Teachers need to be rejuvenated with new ideas and challenges to promote renewed enthusiasm in their profession (Idris et al., 2007). With the plan of re-introducing literature as a subject in the Malaysian education system, teachers need to be prepared and challenge themselves to accept the changes.

Teachers are dominant in the process of teaching (Huijie, 2012). Teachers plan the course, choose and prepare the lesson to be taught, systemize the teaching process and also evaluate the students. In a language class, the teacher tries to promote the students' efficacy, skills in using the language to the maximum by urging students to join him in the learning process (Huijie, 2012). The same goes to the Literature lesson class. Teachers will be in position of engaging students to be part of the lesson so that they will see Literature as something exciting and fun to learn regardless that learning Literature in English is not easy (Chacko, 2007). Despite its difficulties, it is the teachers who offer help to the students so they could enrich their learning and indirectly motivate the students in their learning.

In a nutshell, there are many roles that teachers of 21<sup>st</sup> century have to bear. They are the educator, motivator as well as facilitator. In fact, teachers' role has also been highlighted in Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 (2013) where no education system can succeed without the dedication and commitment of its teachers.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This study employs a mix-method approach in which the researcher simultaneously collected both quantitative and qualitative data using questionnaire and interview. The items in the questionnaire are adopted and adapted from Hwang and Embi (2007) and Abdullah, Zakaria, Ismail, Mansor and Aziz (2007). The questionnaire is based on the four-point Likert scales, which are strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree. The pilot test was conducted involving 30 English teachers. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was calculated to test the reliability of the instrument and the value obtained was 0.963, indicating that the questionnaire was reliable. As for the validity of the instrument, the questionnaire was examined by an expertise in TESL field.

For the purpose of the study, cluster sampling was employed and 320 English teachers teaching in the state of Sarawak were involved as the respondents. The sample size is obtained via Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents and after a week, the questionnaires were collected to be analysed. To validate the data gathered from the questionnaire, a structured interview session was conducted with thirty English teachers, two weeks after the questionnaires had been collected. The questions posed in the interview reflect the items available in the construct of the questionnaire. The questionnaires were analysed based on the descriptive analysis using the mean, frequency count technique and percentages. Demographic variables of the respondents collected will also support data to understand the overall analysis. The data analysis utilised was the Statistical Package Social Science (SPSS) version 21.

#### **4. Findings and Discussions**

There were 74% female teachers and 26% male English teachers were involved in this study. 91% of the respondents were majoring in English. In terms of qualification, majority of the respondents were bachelor degree graduates (n=259), followed by diploma level (n=41), and the least is master's degree (n=20). 57% respondents claimed they received training in teaching Literature while 43% teachers did not receive the training.

As this proclamation is current, 52% respondents denoted that they knew about the plan while the remaining 48% respondents claimed they did not know about it. The later item required them to not if they agree or not regarding the plan. 72% teachers demonstrated their agreement on this matter as compared to 28% teachers. To support this, some of the interview excerpts include "It allows students to develop an appreciation of literary works and improve their language proficiency" and "I think it is a wise move as it allows students to read extensively and promote critical thinking skills".

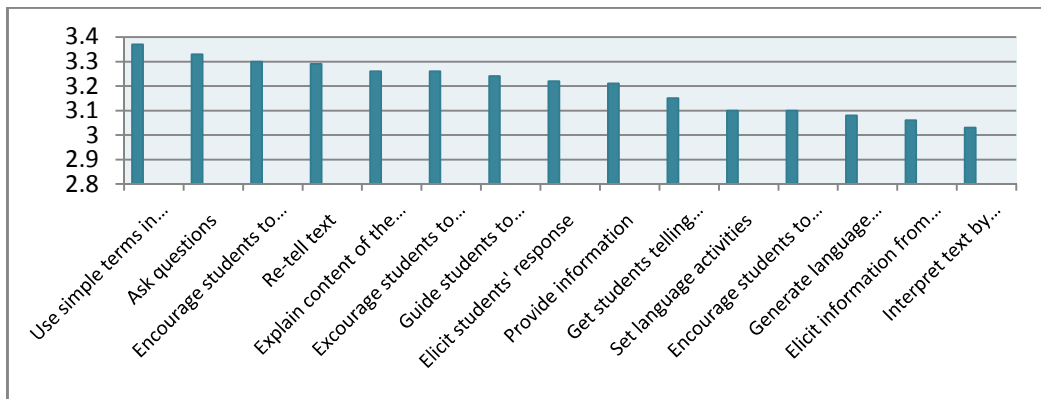
The finale item in this section generally inquired the respondents whether they are ready in teaching the subject or not. Less than 2/3 of the respondents (59%) claimed that they are ready with the plan while the other 41% claimed they were not ready to teach the subject. The interview session revealed "Yes. Literature is an interesting way to teach the language", and "Yes.

As an English educator, I believe that having Literature as a subject can ensure that students can improve their English because understanding Literature means to really have great English proficiency".

On the other hand, those who oppose the idea claimed “No. We are not trained specifically. Students who are confident to take up this subject are likely to be high achievers”, and “No, I am not ready. I received limited exposure to Literature teachings and lack of skills in conducting Literature activities”. Hence, we can see here that despite 72% of the respondents denoted their agreement towards this proposal, only less than 2/3 of them are ready in to teach the subject. This somehow shows that the teachers are not fully prepared in embracing the reformation in the education system.

#### 4.2.1 Teachers’ Readiness in terms of Pedagogical Skills in Literature Lesson

This section presents the pedagogical skills employed in teaching Literature lesson. The graph below displays the mean score for each item, from the highest to the lowest. The mean score ranges from 3.03 to 3.37, indicating that the pedagogical skills listed are prevalent in the Literature lesson and commonly employed by the teachers in the lesson.



**Figure 1: Mean Score for Teachers’ Readiness in terms of Pedagogical Skills**

The highest scoring item is ‘Use simple terms to explain what the story is about to students’, with mean score of 3.37. On the other hand, the lowest scoring item is ‘Interpret a text by looking at the language used by author’, with 3.03 mean score. In regards to the use of simple terms to explain the story, the respondents revealed that

*“Using simpler terms as more often than not, students could not comprehend any literary text on their own” and “I see that this approach is a better way of teaching knowledge about Literature. It is more suitable for our students”.*

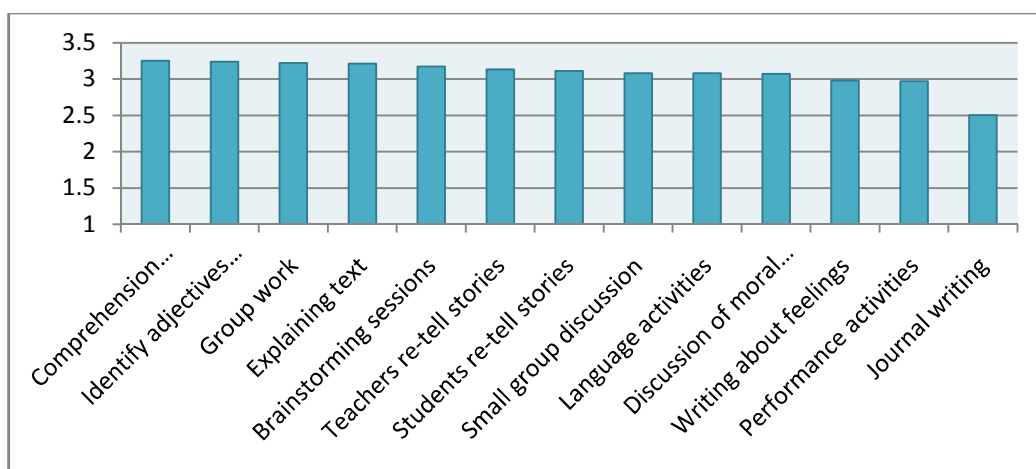


This supports Carter and Long (1991) that Literature is a source of facts and it is teacher centred where the teacher passes knowledge and information to the students.

In responding to the lowest scoring item, the respondents revealed that *“Literature enhances out students’ English proficiency, wisdom and grace in realising the objectives of the government’s policy, to strengthen the English language”* and *“Sometimes it makes them to be more confused”*. To further emphasize, Literature is essentially a study of language and both are inseparable as they create ‘a sharp awareness of the communicate resources of the language being learnt’ (Widdowson, 1975)cited in Muthusamy et al. (2010). Hence, we can see the pattern of the respondents in this study who are still favouring in getting the students to understand the message in the literary texts rather than focusing the students in developing their language repertoire.

#### 4.2.2 Teachers’ Readiness in terms of Proposed Activities in Literature Lesson

This section enlightens the activities that can be executed in the Literature lesson. Findings revealed that out of thirteen activities, only one activity seemed to be less favoured by the teachers. The graph below shows the mean scores of the items, ranging from 2.50 to 3.25.



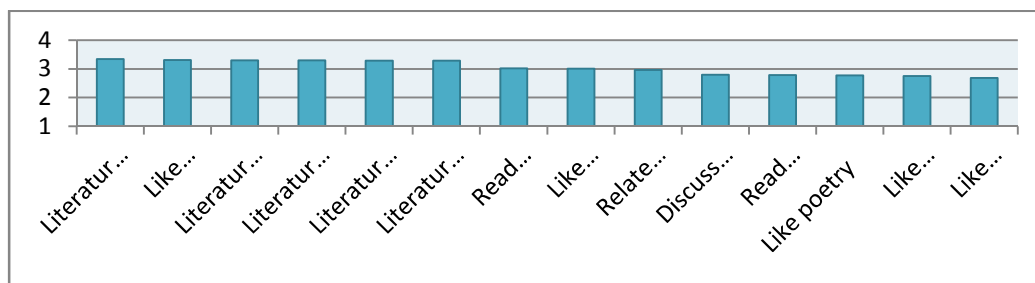
**Figure 2: Mean Score for Teachers’ Readiness in terms of Proposed Activities**

The highest scoring item is ‘Comprehension question exercises’, with the mean score of 3.25 while ‘Journal writing’ scored the lowest mean score for this construct, with 2.50. Most of the respondents agreed that comprehension questions exercises help students in the Literature lesson. They elicited responses such as “*They help students to comprehend/understand the text, thus enabling them to tackle questions from different views*” and “*Comprehension questions could help to check students’ understanding of what being learnt*”. This seems prevalent to what Sidhu et al. (2010) denoted in her study in which teachers spent more on individual comprehension work, little emphasis to comprehension instruction and higher order thinking skills.

In greater explanation to journal writing as the least proposed activity in Literature lesson, many respondents denoted reasons such as “*Those less proficient students can hardly express their responses in writing and that makes journal writing not interesting at all*” and “*Journal writing is regarded to be personal and should be encouraged for individual keep sake*”. This explains to what Talif (1995) put forward as students respond to a text to motivate and encourage them to read by making a connection between the themes of a text and his or her personal life and experiences. From this comparison, we can see that teachers are still very much conducting activities which are more of the lower level in Bloom’s Taxonomy such as the knowledge and understanding level. Supposedly, focus is given to higher thinking skills activities such as in the form of analysis, synthesis and evaluation level.

#### 4.2.3 Teachers’ Readiness in terms of Attitudes towards Literature

This section provides an insight on teachers’ attitudes towards Literature.. It is assumed that the respondents possess intermediate attitude towards Literature as the mean score ranges from 2.68 to 3.34, as shown in the graph below.



**Figure 3: Mean Score for Teachers' Readiness in terms of Attitudes towards Literature**

The highest scoring item is 'Literature enhances language proficiency', with the mean score of 3.34. while the lowest scoring item is 'Like classics', with the mean score of 2.68. In regards to Literature enhances language proficiency, this is supported via the interview where the respondents claimed "*Students will be exposed to all forms of the language and can learn how to play and be flexible with it*" and "*Literature brings back the beauty of English language as well as the uniqueness of the culture of the Literature materials. Sometimes, it's from the Literature that we explore the culture of certain civilisation*". This is in concurrent to Nair et al. (2012) where Literature learning has assisted them to improve their grasp of the target language and the students perceived literature as important and integral in the holistic development of language of the students.

On top of that, the lowest scoring item 'Like classics' obtained responses like "*The language used in the texts can be very confusing at times. So I prefer to read current works*" and "*Literature is a more authentic contact with the real, practical use of language in context*". This proves what Pandian (2000) claimed that only 20% of Malaysians read regularly while the rest of the population are called 'reluctant reader' and students read to pass exams. Thus, although Literature serves two functions in Malaysian Education System, respondents are more inclined towards the first objective which is to develop the language proficiency rather than the later one, which is to nurture the reading habit among Malaysians.

From the findings gathered earlier, 48% of the respondents are not aware on the proposal to re-introduce Literature as a subject in secondary schools. This is surprising to be noted as denoted by Gore and Begum (2012), the language teachers have to constantly update their knowledge, look for new methodology, and learn to use technology for pedagogical purpose. Thus, they ought to keep themselves updated with current issues in the education system. In addition, Ministry of Education needs to undertake more efforts in order to inform the teachers and the public regarding this matter though it has been documented in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025.

However, when asked their general perception on the issue, 72% of the respondents indicated their agreement. They believed that this is a wise step taken by the Government to enhance the students' language proficiency. Concurrent to this, it was also denoted that some respondents agreed that Literature helps in developing reading habits among the students.

To note, Subramaniam (2003) revealed that the Literature was used in school through English Language Reading Programmes since 1976. Therefore, the association between Literature and reading is inevitable. In fact, the texts would encourage students to read thus promote language acquisition and expand students' language awareness (Nair et al., 2012).

When asked if they are generally ready to teach the subject, the finding opposes the earlier item. Only 59% of them (188 respondents) denoted their readiness in teaching the subject. Teachers are at the heart of the educational process (Idris et al., 2007). If the teachers are not ready towards the changes, what is then expected from the students? Malaysian education system has undergone lots of changes in order to improve the quality it offers. The changes can take place well if all parties work hands in hands. Here, teachers need to be rejuvenated with new ideas and challenges to promote renewed enthusiasm in their profession (Idris et al., 2007). This shows how essential the teachers are in this issue. It should be noted that learning Literature in English is not easy (Chacko, 2007).

## **5. Implications and Conclusions**

As the implication, the Ministry of Education has only about a year in order to prepare and get the teachers ready in executing the proposal. This preparation involves the designing of the syllabus and curriculum, what are the prescribed texts to be taught, courses for the teachers as well as the forms of assessment and evaluation involved. Teachers should also get themselves ready in order to carry out this plan. With another one and half a year before this proposal commences, they should be able to prepare themselves to embrace this reformation. Hence, teachers should be aspired to act as the catalysts in working towards the improvement of Malaysia English Education. As highlighted in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 (2013), no education system can succeed without the dedication and commitment of its teachers.

In greater emphasis, this study indicates that the proclamation may succeed only if it is well-designed and English teachers are fully-prepared to cater to the needs of Malaysian education system. In fact, collaboration and cooperation from various parties, especially the teachers, is needed to ensure the success of this proposal.

To sum up, no true reform can occur without taking the needs of teachers into serious consideration and looking for ways to nurture and sustain excellence (Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025, 2013).

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