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

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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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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

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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.

3. Role and position of literature in the Malaysian secondary curriculum

The general aim of the English language curriculum for secondary schools is to enable pupils to be able to communicate effectively, read and respond to texts independently, produce well-structured written texts, enjoy and respond to literary works and make confident presentations (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010). At the secondary level English language curriculum there is a direct reference to literature and enhancing pupils' English proficiency via the literature component. In the secondary school English curriculum, literature plays 2 distinct and different roles, i.e. the English literature component is integrated in the English classroom as well as Literature in English. Both these roles will be explained further below.

The first role is where the English literature component is integrated in the English classroom. Literature is part of the formal national level examinations at the PMR and SPM level (20% of the assessment). Here the aim of the literature component is to enhance and enrich our students' English proficiency and, through the learning of literature, their wisdom and grace (Ministry of Education, 2011). Students are generally given exposure to the literature component once a week from Forms 1 to 5. Different texts are used in the various forms. These texts are a mix of local as well non-local literary texts. The texts used are shown in Table 1. The assessment for the English literature component includes multiple choice questions and a short essay for the PMR exam; and structured questions as well as an essay for the SPM exam.

Table 1. Texts used in English literature (Forms 1 to 5)

Form	Poems	Short Stories	Plays	Novels
1	The River by Valerie Bloom Mr. Nobody by author unknown	Flipping Fantastic by Jane Langford		
2	I wonder by Jeannie Kirby Heir Conditioning by M. Shanmughalingam	One is One and All Alone by Nicholas Fisk	Rumpelstiltskin by Angela Lanyon	
3	A Fighter's Line by Marzuki Ali Leisure by William Henry Davies			
4	In the Midst of Hardship by Latiff Mohidin He Had Such Quiet Eyes by Bibsy Soenharjo	QWERTYUIOP by Vivian Alcock	Gulp and Gasp by John Townsend	
	Nature by H.D. Carberry Are you Still Playing Your Flute by Zurinah Hassan	The Fruitcake Special by Frank Brennan		(Pahang, Terengganu, Johor, Sabah, Sarawak, Labuan) The Curse by Lee Su Ann (Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Negeri Sembilan, Malacca) Step by Wicked Step by Anne Fine (Perlis, Kedah, Penang, Perak) 1. Catch Us If You Can by Catherine MacPhail
5				

Ministry of Education (2011)

The second role of literature in the secondary curriculum is where the Literature in English course is offered as a subject on its own; students have an option of taking it as an elective subject at SPM level (start learning it at Form Four), as well as STPM. The Form 4 Literature in English syllabus (2006, p.5) outlines its objectives are to encourage and develop students' ability to:

- enjoy reading literary works;
- explore the contribution of literature to human concerns, and human relationships;
- appreciate values which would enhance an understanding of themselves and their relationships with others;
- understand and respond to literary texts in different forms and from different periods and cultures and;
- experience literature's contribution to aesthetic, imaginative and intellectual growth; and
- awareness of how language is used for different purposes.

The texts used are more extensive and of higher level than the English literature component and also include local as well as non-local literary texts. Students opting for this elective will have the same number of periods as other subjects. Texts used in the elective English Literature subject are shown in Table 2. The assessment for the Literature in English covers all four components of poems, short stories, drama and novel. Students will need to answer one question in each component. For instance, for the play component, there will be 3 plays to be studied and all 3 plays will be selected for testing each year. Each play will be tested individually. Students are required to answer one out of the three questions.

Table 2. Texts Used in the Elective English Literature Subject for Forms 4 and 5

POEMS	SHORT STORIES	DRAMA	NOVELS
<i>Theme: Relationships</i>	Naukar (Anya Sitaram)	Julius Caesar (William Shakespeare)	Fahrenheit 451 (Ray Bradbury)
Tonight I Can Write (Pablo Neruda)	Cinderella Girl (Vivien Alcoc)	The Lion and the Jewel (Wole Soyinka)	Fasting, Feasting (Anita Desai)
Ways of Love (Chung Yee Chong)	The Landlady (Roald Dahl)	An Inspector Calls (J.B. Priestly)	Holes (Louis Sachar)
A Prayer for My Daughter (Yeats)	A Common Story (Kassim Ahmad)		
The Way Things Are (Roger McGough)	Neighbours (Robert Raymer)		
For My Old Amah (Wong Phui Nam)	Harrison Bergeren (Kurt Vonnegut Jr.)		
How Do I Love Thee? (Elizabeth Barret Browning)			
<i>Theme: Perceptions of Self</i>			
Birches (Robert Frost)			
I Am (John Clare)			
This Is A Photograph of Me (Margaret Atwood)			
Waiting to Go On (Hugo Williams)			
Daring Tears (Craig Romkema)			
The Traveller (Muhammad Hj Salleh)			
<i>Theme: Conflicts</i>			
Dulce et Decorum Est (Wilfred Owe)			
The Man He Killed (Thomas Hardy)			
Death of A Rainforest (Cecil Rajendra)			
The War Against Trees (Stanley Kunitz)			
A Quarrel Between Day and Night (Omar Mohd Noor)			
"Crabbed age and youth cannot live together" (Shakespeare)			

4. Implementation of the English literature policy

Although the objectives of both the English literature components are valid and aim to strengthen and enhance the proficiency levels of English, there are various fundamental issues that arise from the implementation of this policy. As stated by Ganakumaran (2003), one challenge is the selection of appropriate texts in the literature component. The texts chosen need to be manageable in terms of the language used as well the cultural aspects of the texts and also be of interest to the students. Striking a balance between these criteria will ensure a successful literature curriculum. Efforts have been made to address readability and manageability in terms of culture by incorporating local and foreign texts, for instance, the use of poems by a local (Are You Still Playing Your Flute by Zurinah Hassan) and a foreign writer (Nature by H.D. Carberry) in the Form 5 syllabus. However, in terms of balance between foreign and local texts, foreign texts seem to be more in number. Foreign texts may be 'foreign' to Malaysian students in terms of historical and cultural relevance. In fact, Ganakumaran, Shahizah and Koo (2003) observe that the cultural information in some of these foreign literary texts is obsolete even in the countries of origin. The foreign texts used in the Malaysian classrooms seem to be based on British and American literary traditions (Venthamani, 2004). Although, it cannot be denied the importance of literature from these two traditions, there is a need to acknowledge and promote our own local Malaysian literature as well literature from neighboring countries and Asian countries. These local and Asian literary texts will offer students a more progressive and pragmatic view of the world as well as being more culturally relevant to them. We need to strike a balance between introducing students to local literary traditions and canonical literary traditions. Malaysia has a rich literary tradition that is more relevant culturally and historically to the youth of today. Thus introducing local literary texts may be more effective in the long run as students will be more engaged in texts that are culturally known to them. However, introducing foreign literature is also good as it will expose students to different world-views and will enhance students' knowledge of different cultures and traditions.

Literary texts offer a wide range of uses, other than being a vehicle of enhancing proficiency of English. For instance, in Singapore the study of literature is to "promote culture and arts, and a sense of national identity... As Singapore progresses and develops as a nation, the importance of literature as a unifying agent becomes more evident" amongst its people (Dass, Chapman & O'Neill, 2012, p.2). Therefore in Malaysia, we need to shift our focus from conceptualizing literature as being merely a pedagogical tool. Literature can also play a more encompassing role to promote nation-building and as a unifying agent. Properly chosen literary works by Malaysian authors that reflect our multicultural identity can promote and enhance nation-building. Literature can also be used to help educate and prepare young Malaysians for the impact of globalization and the vibrant changes and challenges in the Malaysian political and social contexts.

Literature should no longer be considered as a tool merely to increase English proficiency; it should serve as a bridge to educate young Malaysians of their rich literary traditions, heritage and culture. The functional aspects of literature in the classroom to enhance English proficiency are undeniable. Literature offers a fun and relevant way of learning and enhancing English proficiency. In the Malaysian context, this aspect can be seen in the integrated literature component in the English syllabus in the secondary English curriculum. In the KSSR curriculum, the Language Arts strand promotes this paradigm of literature as skill enhancing. However, literature can also be tapped to promote the Malaysian cultural heritage and national identity. Careful selection of apt local literary texts can be used to promote and educate Malaysians of our values and identities as a multicultural nation. Literature should be part and parcel of the society and not seen as foreign or merely for the select few who are proficient in English. Malaysia also needs to move away from post-colonial attachment and standards. We need to develop our own "multi-racial literary culture" that resonates with our youth and values and norms. Policy makers need to shift from having a myopic view of the functionality of literature as merely a tool to enhance proficiency, to recognizing the potential literature can play as a nation building and unifying agent. English Literature should play a more prominent role in the curriculum and it should be planned properly and pragmatically keeping in mind its various other roles and uses. Concerted efforts by relevant authorities should be made to plan and execute the teaching of English literature to maximize its potential in helping prepare young Malaysians for the advent of globalization and the various challenges that abound in today's borderless world.

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