

**“The End Justifies the Means”**

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## **'THE END JUSTIFIES THE MEANS'**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper seeks to demonstrate how the format of the current UPSR (Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah) examination influences the style of teaching of English in Primary Schools from Year 1 to 6. "Teachers teach for the test" is a common expression used to justify approaches to language teaching, and as the 'test' has only reading and writing components, oral and listening skills are given scant recognition for any contribution in preparing for the 'test'. It is not the place of this paper to suggest wholesale changes to the UPSR examination, but that the preparation for this final test can be made more efficient by developing the students' skills of listening and speaking as a foundation and efficient springboard to prepare them for the reading and writing elements of the test. This paper details changes in the assessment system for primary level one only, as the final three years of the child's teaching can be dedicated to the intense preparation for success in the examination. This preparation will be much easier and more efficient because the children will be able to build on a foundation of communicative skills, prior to embarking on the more academic skills needed for the examination. This will serve the pupils in two ways, by allowing them to be more communicative with their language skills and give them a good foundation for the grammar, reading and written exercises which are the sole features of the UPSR examination.

I will also give practical examples of level 1 Primary Schools examinations which can be more communicative and still be faithful to long term UPSR preparation. Versions of this scheme are already being carried out in Kelantan and a report on this will also be presented.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Much criticism is waged against the Malaysian Education system of teaching English which seems to churn out individuals who can pass examinations but are unable to communicate. The first national level assessment of a child's ability is the UPSR examination which is taken in Year 6 of all Primary Schools throughout the country.

The UPSR examination is a pivotal point in a child's education as success in the test can determine whether they go to a special school for 'bright' children or to just an ordinary secondary school with all the rest. And success here is not defined as simply passing the examination but is seen in terms of obtaining A grades in all subjects taken.

Obtaining all 'A' grades at UPSR is perceived as being the ultimate goal by students, teachers, schools and society at large and schools are judged and merited on the number of pupils they can produce with the magic 5 or 7 'A' grades. To this end, practically the whole of the entire six years prior to the examination are one long preparation for this test with regular tests and teaching practice directed at practicing and preparing students for it.

Despite all this preparation a good number of students fail at this first hurdle, and this is especially true of the English paper.

This paper therefore seeks to suggest that the current approach to preparing children for the English UPSR examination is founded on a wrong premise that over emphasizes the early introduction to teaching reading writing and grammar as virtually the only means of preparing pupils for the examination. It proposes that the current approach to language teaching seems to ignore the foundational skills of successful language learning and acquisition; that is the basic skills of elementary communication which involves first developing listening and speaking skills.

It must be emphasized that this paper is not concerned with a criticism of the current UPSR examination system, specifically the English Paper; nor is it necessarily relevant to the other subjects taken at UPSR – these can go through their own revisions. This paper is concerned with current teaching practice which seems to be dictated by the format of the examination which is only reading and writing

Teachers teach for the examination is a truism that can be used to advantage rather than being a detrimental idea. This can be done by changing the nature of the exam, especially during the first three years of a child's education. If the form of the examinations are made more communicative rather than text based, then teachers will be forced to teach these basic communication skills.

## **BACKGROUND**

The form of the UPSR examination concentrates solely on the skills of reading and writing, with the majority of the questions being 'objective' multiple choice and some are guided writing which lends itself to a teaching method of memorizing formulas and set phrases in order to complete the task. The UPSR examination, in its current form has absolutely no requirement for the taker to either hear or say one word in English during the examination.

It is simple to see why the examination does not test the more 'subjective' skills of listening and speaking as these are difficult to teach and when all the children in Malaysia take the same examination on the same day it would be an administrative nightmare to conduct such an examination and the marking of the papers would potentially be challenged by accusations of 'unfair' and 'bias' of the assessors.

So, because UPSR does not have any listening or speaking elements then these skills are perceived as being irrelevant to achieving success in the examination, and whilst all teachers would agree they are indeed important, their main emphasis will be on preparing the only perceived skills necessary for passing the examination – reading and writing.

And this preparation starts virtually on day 1 year 1 where the prime emphasis on teaching English is to start the children on reading and only a little later on writing. This is reinforced with lots of grammar practice and UPSR type question practice – all this to the neglect of developing listening and speaking skills. It is deemed necessary that children should get as much practice as possible for the examination and so regular progress tests are conducted. These can be as frequent as once a month, but are usually once every two months. The format of these tests are invariably similar to the final UPSR test – once again, no listening or speaking elements in the assessments.

Teachers teach for the examination as their competency of their ability to teach is judged by the results of these examinations and so one cannot entirely blame the teachers using this

examination preparation technique approach, but even despite this lengthy specific exam oriented preparation, many pupils still fail to reach even a passing grade and countless more fail to obtain the all too important Grade A.

## **POINTS TO CONSIDER**

The learning of language is a totally different process from that of learning every other subject. It has been known for over 100 years that language is a totally separate part of the brain which is not directly connected to normal cognitive functions, in other words the processing of language is different from the processing of science, maths or any other subject matter and whilst language is the medium used to express these ideas, the processing parts of the brain are different.

Language learning being distinct has features which must influence the way that it is taught, learned or acquired, such as:

- a. Language is instinctive. The majority of times, in social interaction, we do not think about what we are going to say before we say it. As we interact we speak immediately and the processing of the grammar and choice of words are subconscious and natural, though for some technical or obscure words there may be some processing which is covered up by pauses, hesitations or fillers. But in the majority of interaction language flows naturally, uninterrupted. This is not to say that grammatical errors and wrong choice of lexis do not occur, but these errors, in most parts, do not interfere with the fluency and understanding of the interlocutors.

Yet in teaching many teachers insist that children give accurate answers that they have possibly memorized or have to formulate in their mind from a pattern they have just studied. They insist that pupils think about their responses and consider accuracy to be far more important than fluency

- b. Language is functional. When people speak they usually do so for a reason such as persuading, giving information, apologizing etc. Strangers rarely (if ever) come up to you in the middle of the street and say, "My sister had a baby last week." If they did you would consider them most strange and wonder, why did they say that?

Yet many utterances and sentences in workbooks are made without context or reason other than possibly demonstrating a particular grammatical or lexical point.

- c. Language is situational. We change our way of speaking depending upon the situation we find ourselves in. For instance if we were teaching a class and the Prime Minister were to walk in the room you would be unlikely to say "What do you want? Sit down and keep quiet!" Whereas if an errant pupil were to enter the class your response would hardly be, "Oh good morning sir, we are honoured to have you here with us." (Unless sarcasm was the aim of the comment).

All too often pupils find that their teachers speak to them in their first language and when they do speak English this is often translated into their first language so as to 'help' them with their understanding. Pupils therefore do not receive a consistent model where the language is used for real communication and become reliant upon the teacher translating for them, so that in the end they do not need to listen to what the teacher is saying in

English as they know it will be said in the first language anyway. Both teachers and pupils become accustomed to this situation and both rely on translation as the main means of achieving effective communication.

Testing of pupils for years 1 to 3 is determined at State Education Level or by PPD's MGB's etc. The frequency for every organizing body may be different ranging from monthly to just twice a year. The format of these tests are usually mini versions at various levels of the UPSR examination and concentrate solely on the skills of reading and writing.

An attempt to introduce oral testing was introduced in 2003 has now largely fallen into disuse as the test, for most schools, was impractical and the results were not reported as part of the normal test marks, therefore little or no attention was paid to this test.

### **CHANGES YEAR 1 TO 3**

As stated earlier, this paper is not a direct criticism of the current format of the UPSR examination, but there are changes that can be made to the preparation that pupils undergo to prepare for the examination and these are detailed as follows. It should be noted that these changes are proposed only for pupils in Years 1 to 3 and need not necessarily apply to years 4 to 6 where the teachers have a responsibility to prepare their pupils for the examination:

- a. Testing of pupils should not solely be mini-UPSR style questions, but be oriented to testing the pupils listening and speaking skills so as to encourage the building up of a good foundation in the basic communication skills before moving on to the more cognitive challenging aspects of English which are required for UPSR. Teachers will find that if children have this good foundation, their work in years 4 to 6 will be much easier.
- b. Teachers should adopt a much more communicative methodology in the classroom allowing the pupils to acquire the language rather than simply be taught by rote learning. Skills such as story telling, singing of songs, playing language games and altogether making language learning more enjoyable should be encouraged. The greatest gift a language teacher can give to their pupils is not their knowledge of English, but their imagination and creativity to make something that is difficult – easy and something that is boring – interesting.

### **NEW LISTENING TEST YEARS 1 TO 3 IN KELANTAN**

With the cooperation and support of MGB Kelantan, in March 2005 listening questions were introduced into the regular 2 month assessments carried out in Kota Bharu district for all English tests for years 1 and 2. After initial assessment this was expanded throughout the State for years 1 to 3 and is now a regular part of the bi-monthly assessment.

Instructions given to teachers on the conduct of the examination are as follows:

- a. At any time during the test the teacher stops the examination and informs the class that they are going to take the listening test which are questions X to Y on their paper. (All instructions can be given in Bahasa Malayu if the teacher feels this is necessary.)
- b. The instructions will then continue by directing all the pupils to the listening questions and telling them that they will hear each question said twice and they are to mark on their

paper the correct answer as soon as they know the answer and not wait until the end of the test before putting down the answer.

- c. As soon as the teacher is satisfied that pupils have reasonably understood the instructions then he/she can proceed with the test.
- d. The teacher should read the question number first and then the question on their sheet. The questions should be read at a reasonable communicative speed – not too slow and not too fast. Give the pupils a few seconds to make their answer and then repeat the question again to allow those pupils who did not catch the question the first time a second opportunity.
- e. The question must not be repeated a third time. If the pupils do not know the answer or understand the question they should not be given any further opportunities to hear the question.
- f. Continue asking the questions until they are all completed and then instruct pupils to continue the test where they left off prior to the listening test until the designated time for the end of the examination.
- g. The listening test can be carried out by any person supervising the examination, but if that person is not confident in using English it is suggested that a teacher of English should be appointed to go around each class taking the examination and administer the test. It should be noted that the test can be taken at any time during the allotted time for the examination, though it is suggested that it should not be done at the very beginning or the end of the examination time.

A sample of the listening part of the question paper is as follows:

## **LISTENING TEST – YEAR ONE**

Put a tick  in the box with the correct answer:

41.) a.  blue      b.  black      c.  green      d.  yellow

42.)

a.  b.  c.  d.

43. 41 14 40 4

46.



cat



goat



lion



giraffe

47.



eye



nose



mouth



ear

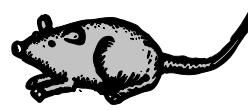
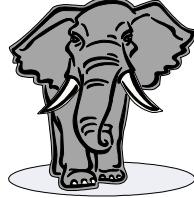
lox	box	pox
a. <input type="checkbox"/>	b. <input type="checkbox"/>	c. <input type="checkbox"/>

48.

pin	pan	pen
a. <input type="checkbox"/>	b. <input type="checkbox"/>	c. <input type="checkbox"/>

desk	disk	dusk
a. <input type="checkbox"/>	b. <input type="checkbox"/>	c. <input type="checkbox"/>

49.



50.

cat  
a.

dog  
b.

hen  
c.

horse  
d.

(For ease of format the font has been reduced on this paper, but the actual test papers use much larger font with each question being distinctly separate)

#### YEAR ONE – LISTENING QUESTIONS – TEACHER’S COPY

##### Instructions:

Tell the class to complete whatever question they are answering and pay attention to questions 41 to 50 on the question paper. (This instruction can be given in L1 if you think it is necessary). Give the children time to complete the question they are doing and to find the listening part of the paper. The teacher can say:

“Complete the question you are doing and turn to page X of your question paper and look at questions 41 to 50. We will now do these questions.”

The teacher should say the number of the question and say out loud the question on this sheet. This can be done twice, but should not be done for a third time. The teacher can say:

“Question 41. What colour is the sun? Is the answer a, b, c or d?””

The question must be spoken clearly and sufficiently loud that all the children can hear it. Do not speak too slow or too fast, but clear, natural English.

Questions:

41. What colour is the sun? Is the answer a, b, c or d?
42. Look at the pictures. Choose the correct one. The square is in the triangle.
43. Put a circle around Number fourteen
44. Spell the word 'blackboard'.
45. Look at the example, the word 'cat' begins with the letter 'c'. So when I say 'cat' the first letter is 'c'. Listen to three more words and write the letter that you hear which is the first letter of the word: a. ball, b. pit, c. good.
46. Put a circle round the animal which has a long neck.
47. Choose the correct answer. We smell with our nose.
48. Choose the word that you hear. a. box, b. pen. c. desk.
49. Choose the animal which is smaller.
50. Choose the animal that has only two legs.

In January 2007 a survey form was sent to all participating schools in the State (450) of which 200 replied. The basic survey form asked the following questions:

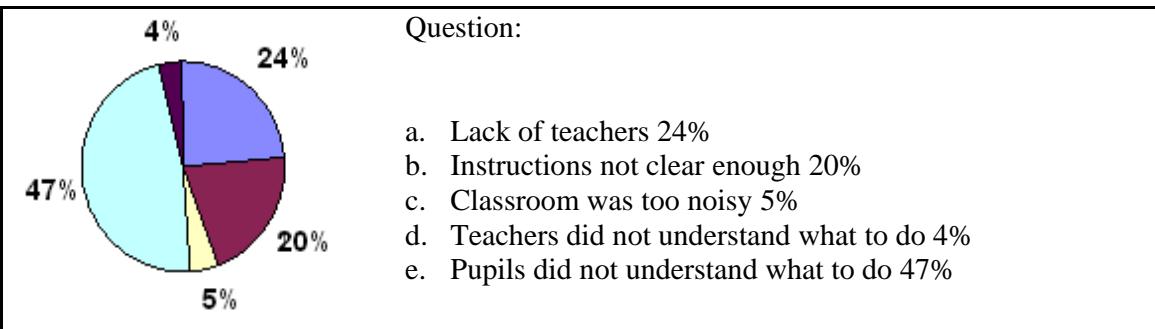
What problems did you face in conducting the listening part of the test?	lack of teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>
	instructions not clear enough	<input type="checkbox"/>
	classrooms too noisy	<input type="checkbox"/>
	children did not understand what to do	<input type="checkbox"/>
	teachers did not understand what to do	<input type="checkbox"/>

How would you rate this listening test?	too easy	easy	just right	challenging	very difficult
	<input type="checkbox"/>				

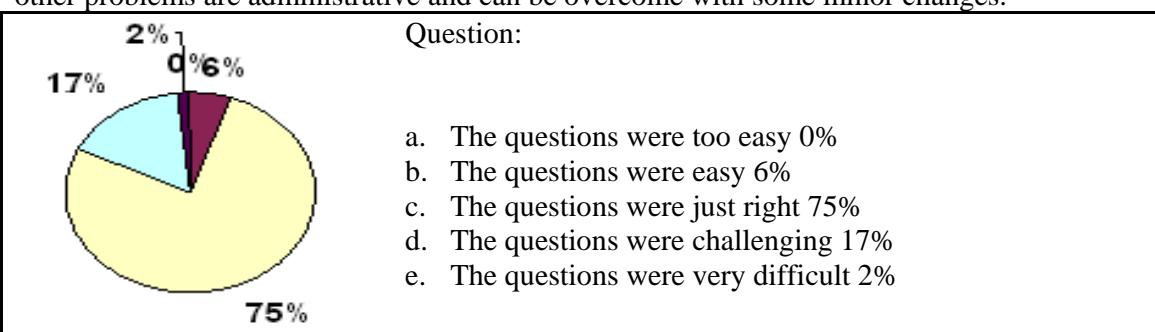
Do you think the listening test was 'fair'; in other words should the pupils have been reasonably expected to know the answers?	very fair	fair	unfair	Extremely unfair
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

How frequently do you consider that testing of pupil's English should be carried out	once a year	twice a year	four times a year	every 2 months	every 2 months
	<input type="checkbox"/>				

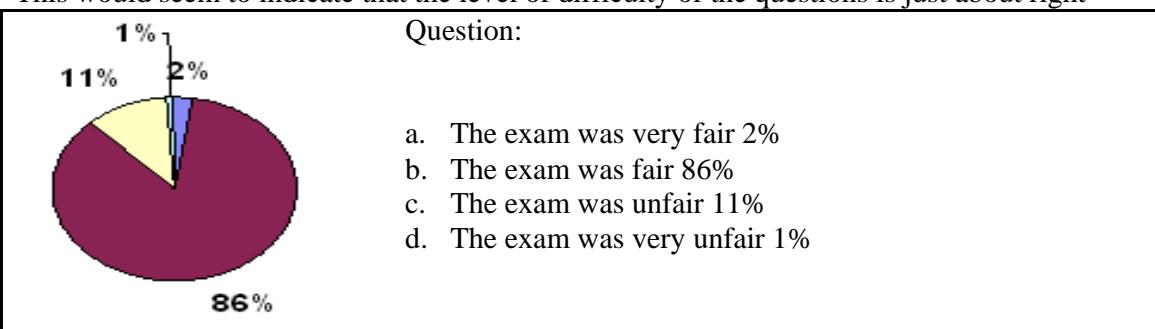
Details of the responses are recorded here with my own comments about each of the statistics.



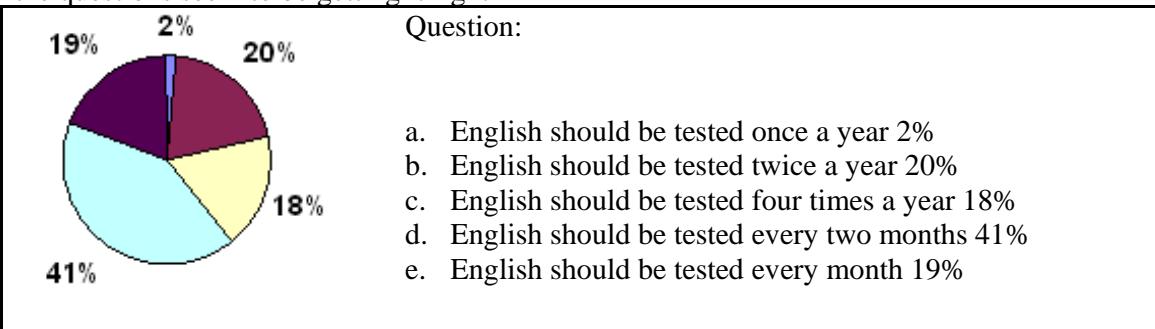
One of the main aims of introducing this style of questioning is to encourage teachers to practice its format in the classroom prior to the test. As teachers increase the use of English in the classroom and practice the questions outside of the test, then pupils should become more familiar with the format of the test and this percentage of 47% should reduce. The other problems are administrative and can be overcome with some minor changes.



This would seem to indicate that the level of difficulty of the questions is just about right

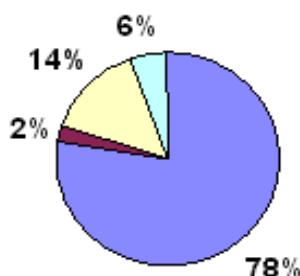


This question is different from the level of difficulty and reflects once again that those setting the questions seem to be getting it right



This response shows quite a variety of opinions. The current practice is to have examinations every two months and so probably the majority of teachers responded with what they are familiar with. The number of teachers wanting the test twice or four times a year and those wanting a test every month are virtually the same. It is difficult to draw a consistent conclusion from this result.

conclusion from this result.



Question:

- a. The number of questions should be kept as is 78%
- b. The listening questions should be stopped 2%
- c. More listening questions should be included 14%
- d. Fewer questions should be included 6%

The majority of respondents feel that this aspect of the examination should be retained in the form it is at present, though those wanting more questions are double those wanting fewer.

The survey form also invited teachers to make their own personal comments regarding the inclusion of the listening test and whilst over 95% of the respondents did not make any comment, the few that did comment stated that they thought that the listening test should be conducted separately from the main examination and the marks recorded separately.

When the idea of this test was being formulated, this was indeed proposed by some of the teachers, but has been strongly resisted as teachers are very much influenced by examination results, and if the marks go down, they will receive criticism from parents or possibly the Head Teacher and so it is in the teachers best interest to prepare the children appropriately for this part of the test which would include much more listening practice in the classroom.

## CONCLUSION

The process of teaching and learning English in Malaysia can not rely on any quick fix, instant answers solution. The current approach to prepare pupils for UPSR is clearly biased towards the 'brighter' children who can cope with the copious amounts of grammar and practice papers, to the detriment of those less capable who not only cannot score highly on the examination, but also fail to acquire the important skills of basic oral communication which should be fundamental to anyone learning a foreign language.

One conclusion that can definitely be drawn is that this listening test has been accepted by teachers in Kelantan as an integral part of the regular assessments;

As to whether the listening tests have increased the amount of communicative interaction in the classroom as yet has not been fully assessed. The survey question about the problems facing the administration of the test had 47% of the respondents saying that the pupils did not understand what to do, could possibly indicate that this aspect of the examination is not really being practiced in the classroom, yet the large majority of respondents who feel that the test should be retained and is a fair assessment would suggest that pupils were able to cope with this new element

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Whilst the majority of respondents prefer to keep the test as it currently stands, it is felt that this is just a beginning and will only have dramatic effect on language teaching when the amount and type of questions in the regular assessments test the pupil's foundational skills of listening and speaking. Currently the marks for this listening test account for 20% of the total, but I feel that this amount should actually be increased to be nearer 50 or 60% for year 1 and gradually decreasing to the 20% level for year 3. As stated earlier, the whole emphasis of these measures is to increase the children's exposure to real communicative English have been aimed at years 1 to 3 and teachers can then prepare their pupils for the UPSR test in years 4 to 6.

Ultimately, the ideal would be to include a listening test in the actual UPSR examination, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Teachers should be made more aware of the methodologies which promote these foundational skills, such as story telling, singing songs, using flash cards, playing games etc and to see them not as time wasting or irrelevant to the ultimate aim of achieving A grade at UPSR but as a positive dynamic assistance, particularly to those pupils who may not be so academically inclined.