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**‘STORYTELLING TO IMPROVE SPEAKING SKILLS AMONG
ESL STUDENTS: STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS’**

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**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF MASTER IN EDUCATION
(TESL)**

**LANGUAGE FACULTY
UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS
2009**



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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this dissertation is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

16. 10. 2009

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I am greatly indebted and thankful to The Almighty and Thavathiru Swami Govindan for their blessings and paving me the way for Higher Education and endeavour to complete the whole programme of Master Degree in TESL successfully.

Secondly, my heartfelt appreciation goes to Dr Norashima Isa, my supervisor for this project paper. I am deeply indebted to her for the assistance, guidance, advice and whose invaluable suggestions and encouragement helped me throughout the time I was researching and writing this project paper.

I would also wish to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to my parents, family members and friends whose prayers, love and best wishes were a source of inspiration, encouragement and motivation for me as I was successfully completing this study.

To my beloved husband, Mr. R. Karpanasamy, my loving children, K. Thaneswari and K. Thanapriyan, I owe a special word of thanks for their continuous love, patience, understanding, encouragements, sacrifices and unstinting support and faith in me throughout the trying periods of my life.

Finally, I am extremely thankful to all the participants who participated actively and contributed their part in this study.



ABSTRACT

English Language has become the global language of the world. It is the widely used medium for communication, political, economical and social purposes in most of the countries in the world. Therefore, it is not surprising that Malaysia is one of the countries, which is rapidly following the footsteps of other countries in pursuing this language.

However, there is a notable decline in the use of English as the language of communication especially among students in recent years. To improve the standard of English and to bring back its crowning glory, various strategies and techniques should be introduced in teaching this language.

Therefore, the study of this research attempts to find out the effectiveness of using storytelling to improve speaking skills among ESL students.



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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ESL : English as Second Language.

EFL : English as Foreign Language



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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.0 Introduction



The central focus of the Secondary School English Language Programme in KBSM is the development of the four language skills i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking. In fact, it is stipulated in the curriculum specifications that teaching is to emphasize both the oracy (listening and speaking) and the literacy (reading and writing) skills. The objectives of ESL teachings are to enable the learners to:

- listen to and understand spoken English in the school and in real life situations,
- speak effectively on a variety of topics,
- read and understand prose and poetry for information and enjoyment and
- write effectively for different purposes.

(Ministry of Education, 1989)





Based on the Malaysian Education syllabus, the four skills that have been emphasized are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Learners use these skills to interact with people, obtain information and present information, respond to literary texts, and express themselves creatively.

The researcher believes that speaking skills, being the most important of all the four skills plays a great role in shaping the students' development in the language learning process. Becoming verbally proficient and being able to lucidly express one's thoughts and feelings is important for a student's development in language learning. This is because; clear communication is the first step to being verbally competent and able to develop further in the use of English as the most important tool in the language learning process.

Unfortunately, according to Jassem, Zaidan Ali (1993), the use of English as a communication tool among students in ESL Malaysia classroom has deteriorated along the years after Malaysia gained its independence from Britain in 1957. The seriousness of the deterioration can be seen especially in the 70s and early 80s when the English medium schools were changed into Malay medium ones.



According to the National Education Policy (1957), English stands as 'the second most important language in Malaysia – second to Malay and should be taught in schools as a second language'. This resulted in Malaysians paying more attention to Bahasa Malaysia and somehow the English language is neglected. This scenario can be seen when students being not competent enough in English, find difficulties in securing well paying jobs that require them to communicate in English. Most of these English literate youths are having difficulties when communicating in English at work or in public (Lo, B. 2005).

In May 28, 2002, Razak Abu Bakar, a senior consultant at Alpha Platform public relations has declared that at least 2,000 entry-level executive jobs remain unfilled in the professional services sector because of a shortage of English speaking graduates. 'It therefore follows that with English, Malaysia will be more competitive, presumably in attracting investment and building a more efficient workforce'.
<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1-82669940.html>



However, today, there is more emphasis on improving the Malaysian's command of the English language and this matter is taken up seriously by the whole political and educational structure of the country. This is because, Malaysia, as a fast developing country has to strive for competence and excellence in every field globally to be on par with the fully developed countries. This is because in many locations around the world, learning English has the objective of learners' gaining access to technical, educational, or professional opportunities (Canagarajah, 2002, 2005).

Considering the serious need for this, the best way to forge communication and friendship with these developed countries is by being competent in English as it is described as the 'lingua franca of field of business, science, technology and research'. English language has to be learned so that adults can be prepared to keep up with the world as it changes (Merrifield, 2000). In 2003, Minister of Education, Musa Mohamad said, 'we cannot help but acknowledge the instrumental role of the English language. We want them [Malaysians] to build networks with people from other nations'.
<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1-82674101.html>

Realizing the seriousness of the matter, in 1991, our former prime minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad voiced his concern and urged Malaysians to improve their English language skills to realize and ensure the continued growth and advancement of the country. Now, the English language is slowly gaining back its status and due recognition in Malaysia. Various methods and measures were taken to ensure its successful comeback into the education system and one of them is in the Teaching of Mathematics and Science in English in government schools which was implemented in 2003.

Nevertheless, the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English has brought fresh problems for the education system in Malaysia. In July 9th, 2009, the Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister, Tan Sri Muhiyiddin Yassin announced that Mathematics and Science subjects will be taught in Bahasa Malaysia from 2012. The decision for the switch in medium of instruction was due to a growing gap in the performance of students in urban and rural schools.

However, the researcher feels that the switch to Bahasa Malaysia will not be very beneficial to the students. This is because; the students will still face a big problem when they extend their studies to higher institution where most of the medium of instruction



and references are in English. Therefore, it is better to expose them as much as possible to this language in the beginning itself.

Nevertheless, the aim of making Malaysians more proficient in English has not changed with the decision to revert the teaching of Mathematics and Science. In July 10th, 2009, The Prime Minister, Datuk Sri Najib Tun Razak has stressed that the English language will be given prominence by beefing up the teaching of the language. He said that that this will be done by increasing the time allocated to boost the proficiency in the language, introducing English literature and language laboratories, among others.

In regards to the state of the students who have studied Mathematics and Science in English all this while, Tan Sri Muhiyiddin Yassin announced in August 10th, 2009 that the cabinet has decided these students can continue to do so until the end of their secondary education.

In spite of all these turmoil, the researcher believes that the importance of English Language in the Malaysian Education System cannot be ignored. This is because English is the language of wider communication, and in order to tap into current knowledge, knowledge of English is necessary.

1.1 Background of the study

Speech is one of the ways human beings make connection with each other. Corubleet and Canter (2001), state that speaking is combining sounds in a recognized and systematic way, according to language-specific principles, to form meaningful utterances. Speaking is the skill by which learners are most frequently judged and through which they make and lose friends. It is the vehicle par excellence of social solidarity, social ranking, of professional advancement and of business. It is also the medium through which much language is learnt (Bygate, 2001).

Through speaking, students connect with others, learn concepts, develop vocabulary and able to comprehend the grammatical structures of English language (Florez, 1999). Students who have a strong oral language base have an academic



advantage. School achievement depends on students' ability to display knowledge in a clear and acceptable form in speaking as well as writing.

In researcher's view, English Language in the Malaysian education system is not only used as a communication tool but also in daily activities and job situations including local and international trade. Pertaining to the importance of English as a communication tool, speaking skills should be regarded as an integral part in the learning of languages and it is best developed through meaningful use in a trusting environment where students' cultural backgrounds and communication styles are taken into account.

Teachers, as the role models, should play an important part in ensuring that speaking skills occupy a central position in the classroom. This is because, if speaking skills is given the attention that it deserves, it can change the normal atmosphere of a classroom into an active and vibrant for language learners. Furthermore, it is the teachers' duty to ensure that their students have what they need to be a confident speaker.

Therefore, teachers as motivators should take the challenge in creating the type of environment that will promote effective communication among the students. For that reason, the educators need to utilize various strategies and methods in their teaching practice to accommodate the learners' needs and interest in the language learning process.

Hence, storytelling is one of the powerful methods that can be utilized by the teachers to captivate their students' attention towards language learning process and also to improve their speaking skills. Storytelling is an established part of the curriculum in both English-speaking countries and many others, and stories are seen as a first-rate resource in the teaching of the child's own language (Zaro & Salaberri, 2002).

This is because educators have long known that the arts of storytelling can contribute to student academic success and emotional well-being. Storytelling, considered an art form, can be mastered by most people (Morrow, 2001). It is a creative art form that has entertained and informed across centuries and cultures (Fisher, 1985), and its instructional potential continues to serve teachers. The ancient art of storytelling is especially well suited for students' exploration. As a folk art, storytelling is accessible to all ages and abilities.

As a learning tool, storytelling can encourage students to explore their unique expressiveness and can heighten a student's ability to communicate thoughts and feelings in an articulate, lucid manner. Storytelling can also be a nurturing way to remind children that their spoken words are powerful, that listening is important, and that clear communication between people is an art.

Therefore, the researcher strongly believes that storytelling can be an effective method to be used in the classroom to improve the students' speaking skills. This is because it provides students a new and interesting way of learning speaking from the usual dull and dreary method of teaching.

1.2 Rationale of the study

Speaking is an important component of the language teaching syllabus and it is also an important skill of communication. Therefore, it is important for the students to speak in the said language, especially in the classroom. Therefore, well prepared speaking exercises for second language learners are thus an integral aspect in the adoption of a new language.

The researcher believes that using storytelling as a method to improve speaking skills is important because it provides opportunity to examine the student's attitudes and responses to the speaking skills. The aim is to increase student's proficiency and fluency in English language through the utilization of puppets in a set of narrative texts. This will also indirectly functions in contributing to personal development, character building and broadening the student's imagination through speaking about other cultures and world views.

1.3 Statement of the Study.

We live in an educational world where orality is seen as a necessary, positive personal characteristic (Daly, 1991). Worldwide expansion of English Language has

increased this demand to acquire good communication skills in English. However, many researchers have pointed out that the skill producing most anxiety is speaking (MacIntyre and Gardner, 2001).

Reluctant to speak or keeping quiet in the classroom is a notable factor in the Malaysian ESL classroom today. Research shows that there is a steady decline in the use of English language to communicate in the classroom. Students in Malaysia feel more at ease in communicating in their mother tongue or in Bahasa Malaysia even in the English language classroom and stutter when asked to answer questions. Lim (2003) says that without the target language speaking competence and strong motivation, Asian students have a propensity to talk to each other in their native language and murmur when encountering questions.

The researcher believes that although there are plenty of English speaking activities conducted in the classroom, much of the "talking" is done by the teacher, rather than by the students. When called on, these students usually hesitate, give short answers, or do not answer at all. In most cases, these students shun eye contact as well, preferring to stare at the floor, ceiling or out of the window. For instance, when a teacher seeks interaction in a teacher-class dialogue, students do not respond to his or her questions and they do not participate in the discussion.

According to Arnold (2003), this anxiety comes in part from a lack of confidence in our general linguistic knowledge but if only this factor were involved, all skills would be affected equally. What distinguishes speaking is the public nature of the skill, the embarrassment suffered from exposing our language imperfections in front of others. The attitude of these students is a constant worry to the teachers who wish to create a healthy and friendly classroom atmosphere.

1.4 Purpose of the Study.

The purpose of the study is to find the effectiveness of using storytelling to improve students' speaking skills in Malaysian ESL classroom.



This research aims to gain hindsight at the possible reasons that contribute to students' reluctance in speaking in the English language classroom. The researcher also would like to find out the need to use storytelling to improve speaking skills among students in Malaysian ESL classroom. In this aspect, the researcher will discuss widely on the reasons of using storytelling to improve students' speaking skills.

The researcher would also like to explore on the different types of stories that are available in the teaching and learning process and the types that can be best exploited in improving speaking skills among the students. The researcher will also like to find out the effectiveness of using puppets in telling the stories to the students.

1.5 Research questions

This research will answer the following questions:

- 1.1. What are the causes of students' reluctance to speak in English language classroom?
- 1.2. Why do we need to use storytelling as a teaching tool?
- 1.3. What is the type of stories?
- 1.4. How can storytelling improve students' speaking skills?

1.6 Definition of terms.

The researcher would like to define certain words that serve as keywords in this study.

1.6.1 Storytelling

According to Wajnryb (2003), 'storytelling is both universal and timeless. There is no human collective that doesn't have its stories'. Storytelling is an act of sharing, of



are ten as important to the storyteller as to the listener. When people tell someone a good story, they release their real language power. ‘Storytelling can come from personal experience, from one's imagination, or from stories heard or read. It involves students by creating a link with peers, with the oral tradition, and with literature. It attunes students to their audience, to the power of language, and to narrative structure’ (Tanner & Green,1998).

1.6.2 Improve.

According to Minnaar (2007), the word ‘improve ‘ can be defined as to improve on a previous performance.

1.6.3 Speaking.

Speaking is “an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information” (Florez, 1999, p. 1). It is “often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving” (p. 1), but it is not completely unpredictable. “Speaking is a skill which deserves attention every bit as much as literary skills, in both first and second languages. Our learners often need to be able to speak with confidence in order to carry out many of their transactions. It is the skill by which they are most frequently judged, and through which they may make or lose friends” (Bygate, 2001).

1.6.4 Skills.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2000), skills refer to the ability to do something well, a particular ability or expertise in something. Swanson and Holton (2001) define skill or expertise as a “displayed behavior within a specialized

domain and or related domain in the form of consistently demonstrated actions of an individual that are both optimally efficient in their execution and effective in their results” (p. 241).

1.7 Significance of the study.

Reluctance to communicate in the ESL classroom and the factors that are related to them are major aspects that contribute to students’ passiveness in the English language learning process. These factors cannot be treated lightly as they can further lead to the ‘contamination’ of language learning process.

By conducting this research, the researcher hopes to find out the common problems that students face in their communication process. By finding out the reasons and the solutions to overcome these problems, the researcher hopes that this will further contribute to the students’ improvement in speaking skills in the future.

Besides that, the researcher also hopes to find out the need to use storytelling as a teaching tool, the types of stories that can be used and also to prove the effectiveness of a chosen storytelling strategy that will help to improve the students’ speaking skills.

This research might also be helpful to other language teachers who are looking for new ways to vary their teaching strategies. These teachers can fully utilize the method of storytelling to teach speaking skills to their students in future. This will give them a clue on how to be creative in their teaching and also help to make the classroom atmosphere a livelier one.

1.8 Limitation of the Study

There are several limitations that can be explored based on this research entitled ‘Storytelling to improve speaking skills of ESL students’ of Form One students in the school where the study was carried out.



This study is limited to a particular group consisting twenty Form One students from a selected school in Perak. Therefore, it could not represent the whole population. The results of this study will only apply to students who are directly involved in the investigation. Exploration to other students should be ventured upon only if the population is similar to those who participated in this study.

The samples taken for this research involved 20 students. The researcher feels that if the teacher conducts a similar activity in the normal classroom of 40 students, it will pose a big quandary for them. They might not be able to handle the circumstances where the noise will be deafening when the activities were carried out. This will not only pose a threat for them but for the other teachers who will be teaching in adjoining classrooms.

The teachers will also face obscurity in employing the various strategies in storytelling sessions. For example, if the teachers were to create puppets as suggested in this research, they will certainly need a lot of time, effort and creativity to create them and teaching students to utilize the puppets will be another uphill task for them. Thinking about the problems ahead will certainly discourage these teachers to exploit the various techniques available.

1.9 Summary.

Speaking is a very crucial skill in the language learning process. Striving to become as effective a communicator as possible should be everyone's goal in life. According to Lyle (1998),

'Speaking is a very important link in the process of students' learning and thinking development. Speaking provides a foundation for the development of other language skills. As students talk about themselves and their experiences, they are learning to organize their thinking and to focus their ideas'.





It is important to provide opportunities for oral language to continue to grow in the classroom from those foundations. Before students achieve proficiency in reading and writing, speaking is one of the important means of learning and of acquiring knowledge. In fact throughout life, speaking skills remain essential for communication of ideas and intelligent conversation.

