Overcoming Impediments to Learning the Four Language Skills Using Note Books

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Abstract

The level of awareness of the importance of mastering ESL among the local community is poor, particularly in rural areas. A study was conducted to gather information from English as a Second Language (ESL) learners pertaining to the impediments of English Language learning (ELL) by specifically focusing on the four language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. The study involved 30 Intermediate Year 5 pupils from a rural primary school. The method involved the use of note books as the medium for the learners to channel various problems which they feel hinder the effectiveness of their ESL learning in the four language skills. The pupils were also asked to suggest ways they think these problems can be solved by themselves, their ESL teachers and their fellow ESL peers. The analysis revealed varying viewpoints on the contributing factors that trigger various problems in learning the four skills as well as measures for mutual language improvement among them. It is hoped that ESL educators, particularly in rural areas will place importance on the various impediments which their ESL learners face and strive to make their learners' ELL more effective and meaningful.

Keywords: ESL, ELL, note books, impediments, language skills

1. Introduction

In this second decade of the 21st century, ESL learners in some parts of Malaysia, be it at primary or secondary level are still being taught using exam-oriented methods whereby the teacher focuses his or her lesson by giving great emphasis on getting the students to pass their exams with flying colours. The situation is even worse especially for those who are studying in rural areas where the level of awareness on the importance of mastering ESL among the local community is extremely poor. Usually, at the primary level, English is treated as merely a subject to be passed in the exam, thus, lessons would be conducted by focusing on reading and writing skills since only those two skills are being tested in the exams. Speaking and listening are usually treated as side skills with the general assumption that the students would acquire these skills along the way, therefore, not much attention is paid to them.

2. Overview of KSSR English Language Syllabus for Primary Schools

English is taught as a second language in all Malaysian primary and secondary schools in the country. The terminal goal of the English Language curriculum for schools is to help learners acquire the language so that they can use it in their everyday life, to further their studies, and for work purposes.

The standardised English Language Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR), was introduced in 2011 to replace the KBSR syllabus as an effort to restructure and improve the current curriculum to ensure that students have the relevant knowledge, skills and values to face the challenges of the 21st century. KSSR emphasises on holistic development of the students which encompasses new elements such as grooming of creativity and innovation, entrepreneurship, and integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The Focus is on the 4M: Reading, Writing, Counting and Reasoning as compared to the 3M: Reading, Writing and Counting for the KBSR syllabus.

However, interviews with five primary school English Language teachers in rural schools have revealed that English Language lessons are still being taught based on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. As the English proficiency of the pupils is lacking, teachers are not able to successfully incorporate the elements required for holistic development as outlined in the KSSR syllabus such as Reasoning.

3. Purpose of Study

The main purpose of the study is to gather information from English as a Second Language (ESL) learners pertaining to the impediments of their English Language learning (ELL) by specifically focusing on the four language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. The study also aims to give these ESL learners the opportunity to express their opinions and voice out their frustrations in the course of their ELL experience in class through the use of the note book.

4. Review of Related Literature

Feedback, whether positive or negative, is said to generally have a strong impact on learning. However, the effects vary depending on what type of feedback and how it is given. Hattie & Timperley's (2007) article gave a conceptual analysis of feedback and examined its impact on learning and achievement, suggesting ways that feedback can be used effectively in the classroom. Several studies have also been done on the effects of feedback on English Language learners, particularly on peer feedback.

Mendonca & Johnson (1994) conducted a study on how negotiations take place during ESL students' peer reviews and how these negotiations influence students' revision activities. Twelve advanced level ESL learners who undertook a writing course participated in peer reviews where students asked questions, gave explanations and suggestions, restated what was written or said by their peers, and corrected grammatical errors. Students used the comments given by their peers to revise their essays but chose to be selective in what to include in their own texts. Postinterviews which were conducted revealed that, in general, students found peer reviews useful. The study found that including peer reviews in ESL writing instruction is important and valuable, specifically in providing feedback on students' essays.

Hartshorn, Evans, Merrill, Sudweeks, Strong-Krause & Anderson (2010) developed an instructional strategy for improving students' writing accuracy. A total of 47 advanced-low to advanced-mid ESL students studying at Brigham Young University in the US were the participants of the study. This instructional strategy or "written corrective feedback (WCF)" (Hartshorn et. al. 2010) was aimed at enhancing the accuracy of students' writing. The performance of two groups of students was compared where for one group the conventional process approach was used and the other had the dynamic WCF approach administered in the writing class. The findings revealed a significant improvement in the writing accuracy of students who went through the WCF approach.

More recently, Adams, Nuevo & Egi (2011) examined how learners provide each other with two types of feedback: recasts or implicit feedback, and explicit corrections i.e. explicit feedback. They focused on discovering how different types of feedback and learners' responses to feedback promote the learning of the past tense and locatives in the English Language. The findings suggest "a limited evidence for a relationship between implicit feedback, modified output, and L2 learning, and evidence for a negative effect of explicit corrections from peers" (p. 42). The findings also reveal that feedback and modified output in learning play a different role in learner-learner interactions from that of native speaker-learner interactions.

The studies reviewed bring to mind the role of Cooperative Learning (CL) where relatively small groups work together to strive to achieve common learning goals through cooperation (Dornyei, 1997). It has been found to be an effective approach in second language learning. The studies reviewed, however, focused more on writing and did not address the other skills such as listening, speaking and reading. In addition, there is a lack of similar studies done in rural schools which this study focuses on. The feedback gained from this study is also useful to the teachers in helping them select the right strategies for their ELL classroom.

5. Sample of Study

This is a qualitative study hence a large sample is not needed to interpret the results (Creswell, 2008). The sample of this study was a class of Year 5 students from a rural school. There are 3 classes namely Bistari (Advanced), Gagah (Intermediate) and Tabah (Beginners) in Year 5 and students are grouped based on their overall academic attainment through a series of exams and tests for all five subjects that are Bahasa Malaysia (Comprehension & Writing), English, Science, Mathematics and Kajian Tempatan (Local Studies). The 5 Bistari class was chosen with a general assumption that the pupils comprised of those with mixed-abilities, that is, neither too advanced nor too slow. There were 30 pupils in the class with two different ethnic groups; Malay (25 pupils) and Siamese (5 pupils). Since the school is located in a remote area, the level of awareness about the importance of learning English among the community is still very poor. Most of the pupils learn English only for the sake of passing the exam. According to their English teacher, most of the pupils performed well on paper, but when it came to applying what they had learnt spontaneously, usually through speaking, the results were extremely frustrating. Thus, the biggest challenge that every English teacher has to shoulder is to draw the students' interest to learn English in various ways.

6. The Note Book as the Instrument

Each of the students was supplied with a note book and they were reminded to regard the note book as their personal diary to write about their feelings on various impediments which they encountered in learning English. The note book was divided into four sections namely reading, writing, speaking and listening where the students had to fill-up the sections accordingly (Refer to Appendix A). In the briefing session, the pupils were briefed on the purpose of this study as well as what they had to do with the note book.

6.1 Using the Note Book in the English Class

All the 30 students were provided with a note book. The function of the note book is similar to a diary where they can write almost anything about how they feel regarding any impediments which hinder them from acquiring all the four English skills namely reading, writing, speaking and listening. Each section comprised of a table with three columns where they could fill in the problems, reasons that contributed to the problems and the ways that they think would be helpful to tackle the problems. The respondents were given the options to write in either English or Bahasa Malaysia to make sure that the intended meaning of each of their opinions could be delivered clearly since the focus here was to gather the information rather than evaluating their language performances. They were given a week to complete the

note book either in school or at home. Prior to the distribution of the note book, a meeting was arranged with the English teacher assigned to teach English in the respondents' class. The teacher agreed to conduct the English lesson of the target week by emphasizing on all the four skills. By the end of the lesson, the students were given 5 minutes to note down whatever they felt regarding the lesson.

6.2 Analysing the Note Book Contents

The note book contents were analysed and categorised according to the learner's impediments in learning the four language skills namely reading, writing, speaking & listening by concentrating on the problems, reasons as well as the ways to overcome the highlighted problems. Frequency count was used to calculate the responses.

7. Results and Discussion

The results of this study reveal the findings of i) the respondents' views pertaining to the problem they experienced in learning the four language skills; ii) the respondents' general views on the probable reasons that contributed to the mentioned problem; and iii) the respondents' suggestions to enhance their learning effectiveness based on the respondents' personal approaches or views. The actual names of the respondents have been kept confidential.

7.1 Learner's Language Learning Impediments, Reasons & Ways to Overcome in ESL

7.1.1 Speaking

Table 1. Speaking Problems, Reasons and Ways to Overcome among Year 5 Pupils in ESL Learning

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	PROBLEMS	REASONS	WAYS TO OVERCOME
17 Respondents	Unable to speak fluently	• Inadequate/ Limited range of vocabulary • More time is required to think of suitable words/ phrases • Feel like friends are yelling at them	• Express on the need to further expand their vocabularies • Penalty on those who portray negative responses
22 Respondents	Grammar as stumbling block	• Confusion on the correct form to be used in various contexts. • Hesitate to speak due to worries of making grammatical mistakes.	• Teacher should explain on related grammatical items that suit the task best. • More exercises to brush up their grammar.
15 Respondents	Unable to overcome anxiety & stage fright	• All eyes are focused on learner during speaking activity which leads to stage fright • Learner inhibitions • Mindset of being criticised due to poor performance • Domination by more advanced learners.	• Give the learners opportunity to perform & work in groups • Clearly set the rules and goals that tailor to individual needs to hit the target.
12 Respondents	Confusion on pronunciation	• Imperfectly learned pronunciation	• More exposure to those items.
13 Respondents	Mother tongue interference	• Focus on delivering information correctly • No restriction from teachers • Fearful of criticism	• Not stated • Continuous monitoring from teachers • Not stated

In Table 1, a total of 17 respondents expressed their inability to speak fluently due to inadequate vocabulary which further resulted in them having to spend more time thinking of suitable words/phrases before saying them out. Nagy (1988) stated that the lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge is obvious and poses a barrier for many students. Besides, the number of these students can be expected to increase as more and more of them fall into the educationally critical category. The respondents also revealed that they could not take it easy when their friends yelled at them when they tried to converse in English due to the local community mindset that only the elite group in the big city speak in English and since they are just 'kampung' or village people, the Bahasa Malaysia with the pure Kelantanese dialect should be maintained. Thus, most of them suggested the need to further expand their vocabulary as well as urged their fellow friends to be more open-minded in accepting English as the language that everybody needed to acquire regardless of their family or residential background as some ways to overcome the problem. Several pupils also voiced

the need for their teacher to penalise those who showed a negative attitude towards pupils who were working hard to brush up their spoken English regardless of their proficiency level since all of them possessed the right to speak freely without being judgemental. Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis (1985) suggests that language learners might be distracted by emotion-related factors in the course of language learning. As such, learners may not be able to absorb the lesson because of their teachers being unapproachable or their classmates' disruptive and competing attitudes.

''I'm so sick and tired to hear Halim, Fauzi and Amran laughed and yelled at me whenever teacher asked me to voice out opinion during our speaking session. They called me **'Si gagap koya mat saleh** *(the speaking retarded person who always dream to speak like the Englishman) since I paused a lot to think of suitable words.* **English diorang pun teruk jugak** *(their English is not good as well)..they always failed in their English test and refused to say even a word when teacher asked them to. I'm pretty sure that the world would be happier if teacher could just chase them away from her English classes. They're like parasites that always kill our joy!'' (Salleh)*

At the same time, anxiety and stage fright are also stated as one of the problems related to the speaking impediment. In fact, in any speaking task, all eyes would be focused on the speaker which led to the mentioned problems, and again, their psychological state would be challenged with the anxiety of being criticised should their performance be poor. This kind of problem was experienced by 15 respondents in this study. Thus, they believed that they should be given the chance to communicate in a smaller group to avoid such problems. Language teachers should generate a pleasant, lower affective filter and an inspiring study environment leading to higher morale and a greater sense of confidence and achievement among the learners (Krashen, 1982). Meanwhile, 22 respondents claimed grammar as the stumbling block in their speaking practice especially when it came to deciding on the correct form to be applied in various contexts. Several pupils also stated that they felt hesitant to speak due to the fear of making grammatical mistakes. As a result, they preferred to keep their conversation as short and simple as possible so that they would not be underestimated by others, especially the proficient speakers. Most of them expressed their hope that the teacher would explain to them the correct grammatical items to be used prior to the task and also admitted to the need for more exercises to strengthen their proficiency in grammar. Since 95% of the respondents were pure Kelantanese, including the five Siamese, their pronunciation of certain words was also influenced by the local dialect which they have been using in their everyday life. One of the most noticeable sounds that most of them tend to mistakenly produce is the pronunciation from /a/ to /æ/ due to the strong influence of their Kelantanese dialect. This has led to confusion on the pronunciation of certain words due to the imperfectly acquired pronunciation. They concluded that more exposure was needed to tackle this problem. Last but not least, 13 respondents claimed that the interference of their mother tongue did affect their speaking skills in ELL. They revealed that they could not prevent this in certain circumstances especially when it came to delivering information clearly to avoid misunderstanding. In addition, the fact that there was no restriction from the teachers to converse in the target language was also a reason related to such a problem since the respondents need not work hard as they could just respond in Bahasa Malaysia. Therefore, in order to overcome this problem, they suggested that their teacher be stricter in allocating the percentage of using both the English Language and Bahasa Malaysia in class.

7.1.2 Listening

Table 2. Listening Problems, Reasons and Ways to Overcome among Year 5 Pupils in ESL Learning

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	PROBLEMS	REASONS	WAYS TO OVERCOME
12 Respondents	Unable to catch the speaking	• Teacher/ spoken materials spoke too fast	• Teacher: slow down their speaking pace. • Spoken materials: select ones where the pace is suitable to the pupils' level. • Repeat the recording several times • Role play the dialogue
7 Respondents	Unable to decode certain pronunciation	• Poor grasp on standard pronunciation of unfamiliar words.	• To have more exercise and exposure in those areas.
24 Respondents	Unfamiliar with meaning of certain words	• Inadequate vocabulary	• Explain the situation prior to the listening process. • To be provided with sets of vocabularies related to the text.
9 Respondents	Unable to relate the information to their life context	• Unfamiliarity with the context	• Early exposure to the context prior to listening.
5 Respondents	Unable to focus on 2 things at the same time	• Focus more on understanding the text word by word but end up with nothing at the end.	• Let them read the questions before the recording is played • Explanation on what ought to be done before and after listening to the spoken text.

In Table 2, a total of 12 respondents revealed that they were unable to catch what the teacher was saying when their teacher or the recorded voice spoke too fast. Thus, they really hoped that their teacher would consider their dilemma when speaking to them as well as become more meticulous in materials selection so they could cope with the lesson as desired. Some also suggested the use of role-play to reveal the non-verbal clues for better understanding instead of just saying it out in monotone. Meanwhile, 7 respondents highlighted the inability to decode certain pronunciation due to poor grasp on the standard pronunciation of words or phrases using the reduced or "weak form" which they believed could be resolved through exercises and continuous exposure to the language.

''I find it so difficult to differentiate the pronunciation of certain words such as 'can' and 'can't' because both sound so similar and often lead to confusion. We really need to observe her mouth to see how the words are pronounced. Teacher should use more verbal clues for better understanding I supposed'' (Nurdiana).

24 respondents mentioned their unfamiliarity with the meanings of certain words due to inadequate vocabulary as the contributing factor to their listening problem. They believed that the problem could be slightly improved if their teacher could provide them with a set of vocabulary related to the spoken text as well as explaining the situation prior to the listening process.

''I guess it would be a great idea if teacher could **terangkan secara ringkas** (brief us with some details) regarding the situation before she plays the spoken text. At least we could get ourselves ready..like today, even the advertisement that teacher plays was short but **saya rasa agak kecewa** (I felt quite disappointed) because there were quite number of words which I couldn't understand. If only teacher could let us know earlier that she was going to play the recording on 'Back to School Advertisement' maybe I could do some readings on the topic for preparations''. (Salmiah)

In the meantime, 9 respondents expressed their dilemma regarding the inability to relate what they heard to their own lifestyle due to limited exposure to the situation. Thus, they stated that the teacher should at least provide them with some basic necessary details regarding the context prior to the listening process. This would reduce the probability of inaccurate interpretation and enhance the pupils' involvement in the listening activity (LaScotte, 2015).

''I don't think it is a good idea for teacher to speak about summer camp if we ourselves have zero idea on how the summer season looks like'' (Noraini)

''Learning English is so frustrated when the meaning of certain words which sound so familiar turned to something else which is absolutely impossible to be figured out! **Pelik macam mana mat saleh ni boleh gabungkan** (I wonder how the Englishmen combine) the words 'threw' and 'up' which I mistakenly thought that it refers to the past tense of throwing something upwards! But then OMG (Oh my God!), teacher said it is an example of Prepositional phrase which carries totally different meaning...it refers to 'vomitting' in fact!'' (Haslinda)

Lastly, 5 respondents highlighted their inability to focus on the meaning and message at the same time during the listening task. This is because they tended to concentrate on the meaning of each word which indirectly inhibited their understanding of the message that either the teacher or the spoken text was conveying. As a result, they ended up with nothing. Thus, they expressed their wish to be given the opportunity to read the questions or be briefed on what ought to be done after the listening process as a guideline on what they had to gather from the activity.

7.1.3 Reading

Table 3. Reading Problems, Reasons and Ways to Overcome among Year 5 Pupils in ESL Learning

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	PROBLEMS	REASONS	WAYS TO OVERCOME
6 Respondents	Unable to concentrate on the reading process	• Errors in topic selection. • Timing error • Noise level	• Teacher should be more creative in selecting the reading materials • Properly plan the schedule. • Teacher should be able to control the noise level.
14 Respondents	Unable to fully comprehend the passage	• Frequent encounter with unfamiliar words.	• Brainstorming on related topic prior to the reading process • Use dictionary
9 Respondents	Unable to complete the reading on time	• Lengthy passage • Not interested in completing the reading	• The number of words should suit the students' levels. • Choose interesting materials
11 Respondents	Unable to connect ideas in the passage	• Unfamiliarity with the context of the passage	• Proper material selection.
7 Respondents	Unable to retain the information for long	• Retention difficulty: focus more on understanding the word one by one and end up with nothing in the end.	• Give them opportunity to read the questions prior to reading. • Teacher briefly explain the purpose of the reading.

In Table 3, a total of 6 respondents mentioned that they were facing difficulties in concentrating on the reading because of factors like timing and material selection errors. They agreed that the teacher played a vital role in proper planning and management for two reasons:

''Reading requires our mind to be fresh and ready. I would say that having reading activities in the last period before recess is totally **tak guna** *(useless) since our mind and soul is already in the canteen'' (Hafiz)*

''I feel bored when the reading material is boring'' (Suardi)

14 respondents complained about the difficulty in fully comprehending the reading passage due to frequent encounters with unfamiliar words. A reader's knowledge of vocabulary shows how well that reader can understand a text (Freebody & Anderson, 1981). The respondents suggested that this problem could be reduced if they were allowed to refer to the meaning either in the dictionary or through some hints given by the teachers on the unfamiliar words prior to the reading. Meanwhile, 11 respondents stated that they were unable to connect ideas in the passage due to unfamiliarity with the context. Thus, they urged their teacher to be more meticulous in choosing the passage so that the reading activity would be beneficial to them. Finally, 7 respondents revealed their inability to retain the information for long due to retention difficulties. They described this as the action whereby they focused more on understanding the passage by interpreting word by word which in the end, when they were asked to explain what they understood about the passage they would simply shake their heads in despair. Thus, they added that the teacher should clearly outline the purpose of the reading activity so that the respondents know what they ought to do with the reading passage.

7.1.4 Writing

Table 4. Writing Problems, Reasons and Ways to Overcome among Year 5 Pupils in ESL Learning

TOTAL RESPONDENTS	PROBLEMS	REASONS	WAYS TO OVERCOME
15 Respondents	Unable to write the intended meaning	• Poor vocabulary	• Teacher should provide set of vocabularies related to the topic and use it during the brainstorming process.
13 Respondents	Unable to differentiate between the sound and spelling for certain words	• Poor vocabulary	• Not stated
14 Respondents	Unable to expand the points given	• Poor writing skills • Lack of reading & limited access to informative resources.	• More writing exercise • More reading should be done.

In Table 4, a total of 15 respondents revealed that they were unable to write the intended meaning due to lack of vocabulary. Thus, they really hoped their teacher would provide them with a set of vocabulary related to the topic prior to the writing process such as during the brainstorming stage. Meanwhile, 13 respondents expressed their inability to differentiate between the sound and spelling of certain words which was also due to inadequate vocabulary. However, none of them suggested ways to overcome this problem in the column provided. Last but not least, 14 respondents expressed their difficulty in expanding the points given by the teacher due to poor writing skills as well as lack of reading and limited access to informative resources. Thus, they urged the need for more writing exercises as well as more reading effort on their own part.

''Writing becomes so difficult **sebab** *(because) I don't know* **macam mana nak** *(how to)* **use perkataan-perkataan yang diberi** *(the words given). Even we're allowed to refer to dictionary, still I don't know* **macam mana nak guna perkataan tu untuk buat ayat sendiri** *(how to use the words to build my own sentences)'' (Nik Azman)*

8. Implications of the Study

All in all, the pupils tended to welcome the more open-minded and creative ELL methods by taking their opinions into consideration. The respondents of this study exposed the varying impediments that hampered their ELL for all the language skills i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening together with the contributing factors which triggered the problems. The findings showed that English teachers at the primary level should provide some space for their pupils to voice out the various challenges which could impede their ELL as well as lending an open ear to listen to the ways that they wish their English teacher would adopt to stir their interest in striving to improve their ELL in those four skills**.** Once these impediments and challenges have been addressed, the teachers in these rural schools can then progress to incorporate the reasoning element as outlined in the KSSR syllabus for primary schools.

9. Conclusion

In English language learning, the right of each learner is undeniable. Thus, the learner's perceptions pertaining to ELL should be seriously taken so that the ESL teachers can plan their teaching strategies in accordance with what the learners hope for because teaching and learning is a two-way process which requires both parties to work hand-in-hand for the betterment of everyone. In fact, reading, writing, speaking and listening are four different language skills to be studied using different methods and approaches. However, all of them are closely related in such a way that the lack of mastery in any of them would directly affect the others as well. By understanding the impediments faced by every learner in every skill, the teacher would get a clearer overview to assist them in planning and implementing the best strategies so that the needs and requirements of every ESL learner can be fulfilled satisfactorily.

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Appendix A

IMPEDIMENTS TO LEARNING THE FOUR LANGUAGE SKILLS

Date/Time *(Tarikh/Masa)* : _____

Subject *(Matapelajaran)* : _____

Topic *(Tajuk)* : _____

Language Skill(s) *(Kemahiran Bahasa)* : Reading *(Membaca)*/ Writing *(Menulis)*/ Speaking *(Bercakap)* / Listening *(Mendengar*)

What problems do you face in learning each of the skills mentioned above? Complete the table with your problems, reasons that contribute to the problems and suggestions to overcome the problem.

Nyatakan masalah-masalah yang anda hadapi berkaitan kemahiran-kemahiran yang dinyatakan di atas. Lengkapkan jadual yang diberi dengan mencatatkan permasalahan, faktor-faktor yang menyumbang kepada permasalahan yang dinyatakan dan sebarang cadangan untuk mengatasinya.

SKILL(s) (Kemahiran)**:**
_____

Problems (Permasalahan)	**Reasons** (Faktor-Faktor)	**Ways to Overcome** (Cara Mengatasi)	

Comments (Komen):

List down/ describe the qualities of an effective English Language teacher that you admire the most?
(Senaraikan/ terangkan kualiti-kualiti seorang guru Bahasa Inggeris yang anda impikan)