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English Language Settings at Private Islamic Schools in Malaysia: How Interactive are The Language Classroom?

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Abstract

The development of Islamic schools in Malaysia has undergone a long historical strand. The traditional Islamic education in Malaysia began with the formation of community-based religious schools named '*pondo*k' which eventually were upgraded to modern integrated Islamic schools funded by both the government or the non-governmental organizations. However, these schools are not without problems. Several studies have been conducted and almost all studies share the same findings; these schools face several problems among all, financial constraints, lack of trained teachers and the schools lack infrastructure for learning facilities which eventually caused a decline in English language achievement in the country's national exams. The mentioned constraints, if left attended, would eventually reduce the chances of students to get a place in the university enrollment and continue career as professionals. Language teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make modifications to their educational choices on a regular basis. Classroom interaction, on the other hand, is one of the most significant tools to increase teacher-student engagement, improving understanding, and ensuring the success of language teaching and learning. This term paper suggests there is a necessity to conduct more research on the teacher-students-students classroom interaction patterns in the schools' language settings that will lead to new discoveries that will aid teachers in improving the quality of their instruction as well as students in improving their language proficiency.

The History of the World Islamic Education

The establishment of Islamic schools in Malaysia is, to some extent, is due to the issue which has caused a heated discussion among the Muslim scholars in the 1990s; i.e. the dualism in the education system in the Muslim world. Dualism education is defined as the presence of two systems of education; the national, modern secular system and the traditional, Islamic religious system (Rahimah, 2019). It was reported that both systems have failed to produce the expected successful Islamic personalities with those graduated from the secular education described as professionals lacking in religious values. On the other hand, those with traditional religious education background are said as possessing the ability to become religious specialists, however, are unable to participate actively in the society, and were not critically and creatively responsive to deal with current issues. In response to the issue, some Islamic scholars have proposed for a combination of both the traditional and modern Westernized educational system (Baba et.al., 2018). Rahimah (2019) claims that this newly proposed idea then became the starting point to the emergence of the contemporary modern Islamic schools. This new type of Islamic educational system attempts to integrate harmoniously both Islamic and secular education.

The Emergence of Integrated Islamic Schools

The emergence of this contemporary integrated Islamic school movement was spearheaded by Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib Al Attas and the late Professor Syed Ali Ashraf. The idea was also presented in the First World Conference on Muslim Education (Nurulhayati and Ton, 2016).

This event marked the emergence of many Integrated Islamic Schools established in the Muslim world, funded by the government or the non-governmental organizations and community based; as they cater for the needs of the community they serve. Each country uses different names in introducing these schools, such as Madrasahs, Islamic Integrated School, Pesantren, National Religious Schools, Community Religious Schools etc. However, in order to be permitted to operate, they have to comply with certain rules set by the Ministry of Education in their respective countries, among all, they are required to register with the countries' MOE and each school must integrate the national academic curriculum which is provided by the National Education System to enable their students to sit for the countries' national standardized examinations (Nurulhayati and Ton, 2016).

The Historical Background of The Integrated Islamic Schools in Malaysia

In the context of Malaysia, the existence of various types of religious schools has long history. The formal schooling in Southeast Asia started with the traditional Islamic education. Children as young as 5–6 years were sent to religious teachers' homes to learn on how to worship God, studying the Holy- Quran and reciting daily prayers (Nurulhayati and Ton, 2016; Din and Solomon, 1988). When these homes became very crowded, small huts were built for the teaching and learning to take place and this led to the establishment of '*Pondok*' (literally means '*hut*') religious institutions in Peninsular Malaysia. The subjects offered were solely on religious studies with no academic subjects taught at all to learners (Nurulhayati, 2016). A few decades later the '*Pondok*' school system was upgraded by extending the curriculum and integrating some subjects. The schools' infrastructures were also improved and as a result, a more formal institution employing a more formal system was formed called the '*Madrasah*' school.

During British colonization, the British education system was introduced and it underwent rapid development with the establishment of many British schools by Christian missionaries. Not only that, the British took over some of the traditional Islamic schools by giving full assistance with one condition: the Islamic school must agree to integrate academic subjects into their educational system besides religious instructions. However, Islamic studies and Quranic reading were excluded from the official school schedule and were taught in the afternoon in the same building (Abdullah, 1982 in Khilani, 2003).

Right before independence, the National Education Act was launched. Upon request by the Malay community Islamic subjects were infused back into curriculum of government schools. Meanwhile, the private 'Pondok' and 'Madrasah' schools began to become less popular due to improper administration and infrastructure. It was also found that although the schools integrate both Islamic and academic subjects, they emphasized more on Islamic studies with less attention given to the non-religious academic components.

The Ministry of Education took further steps to revamp the private Islamic school system to ensure its academic curriculum aligned with the national education policy. This led to the acquisition of few traditional Islamic schools to become the National Islamic Secondary Schools (SMKA) by the MOE. This was followed by the establishment of the Government Assisted Islamic Schools (SABK) in 2006. The government also offered a range of assistance to SAR schools such as trained teachers, teaching facilities, textbooks, scholarships and infrastructure development but does not interfere with the school management (MOE, 2012). The remaining traditional Islamic schools which did not accept the offer made by the Ministry of Education remained as the private Islamic Schools until now. They are operated and managed by Islamic non-governmental Islamic organizations and individuals. However, these schools are to register under the respective State Islamic Religious Departments labelled as the Private Islamic Schools or Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR) for the purpose of channelling assistance. They are also required to adopt the academic curriculum provided by the National Education System to allow their students to sit for the national standardized examinations (Nurulhayati, 2016).

The above events in sequence led to the establishment of different types of religious schools in Malaysia. Based on a study made by the Advisory Board for the Coordination of Islamic Education or Lembaga Penyelaras dan Pendidikan Agama Islam (LEPAI) as cited in Tayeb (2018), in general there are three types of integrated Islamic Schools in Malaysia:

i.   The Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama (SMKA) (National Religious Secondary School) which are solely managed by the Ministry of Education.
ii. The Sekolah Agama Negeri (SAN) (State Religious Schools) managed by the State Department of Religious Affairs.
iii. The Private Agama Rakyat Schools (SAR) (Community Religious School) which are operated and managed by the non-governmental organizations which are responsible for the management, financial breakthrough, curriculum development and others.

This article will focus on the fourth item from the above list, the Private Agama Rakyat Schools (SAR)

Problems Faced by the Private Islamic Schools from Few Selected Muslim Countries
However, these schools are not without problems. Several studies have been conducted and almost all studies share the same findings; these schools face several problems among all, financial constraints, lack of trained teachers, schools lack infrastructure for learning facilities etc. (Nurulhayati and Ton, 2016). Adan (2016) conducted a study about the integrated Islamic schools in Uganda and the findings reveal that almost all schools shared the same problems; the schools feel overburdened in trying to manage two curricula with limited number of teachers and financial resources. The fees collected from the students who study in the schools particularly from the rural areas were insufficient to cover the school expenses. Most of the teachers were not certified in the areas they are teaching. Furthermore, they are rarely sent for further professional development courses. As a result, the teachers lack the expected teaching pedagogical skills. Hidayati (2017) in her study reveals that most of these integrated Islamic schools in Indonesia integrate English, as well as other secular sciences and technology subjects, as part of its curriculum. However, it has been reported that English language teaching in Indonesia is facing with a number of challenges, including concerns about its threats to the establishment of Bahasa Indonesia, the national language, as well as concerns that liberal western ideas integral in English may corrupt young people's morals and attitudes.

The private Islamic integrated schools in Thailand also encounter a range of problems. According to Tan (2015), the school leaders lack the adequate management skills and characteristics to become effective educational administrators. Teachers are insufficiently trained in pedagogical methods in both religious and academic areas. There is a large number of religious academics who lack in scientific knowledge. Meanwhile the academic who are well versed in scientific knowledge are not well versed in Islam. The conditions deteriorate when both religious studies and academic are taught together in the school hours increasing the teachers' teaching hours. In addition, many students in the private Islamic schools fail in the university entrance examinations.
Meanwhile, in Singapore, the promise of a balanced education strengthens the Muslims' beliefs that meaningful success is defined only if one strives for happiness in this world and the world hereafter. It is a pull factor that many parents find hard to resist, although they are aware that the funds and resources of the Islamic schools, or also called Madrasahs in Singapore are severely limited. Financial constraint leads to paying meager salary to the madrasah teachers. Facilities such as laboratories, libraries, computer facilities, and suitable premises are also inadequate (Mukhlis, 2018).

Challenges in Private Islamic Schools (SAR) in Malaysia
In context of Malaysia, Nurulhayati and Ton et.al (2016), studied the management of the private *SAR* schools in Perak and revealed a number of major problems, among those are the limited school financial resources which leads to the school development problem. Without the initiative of the school to obtain financial resources other than from the students' fees, the schools cannot provide better school infrastructure for the students. In fact, the classrooms and dormitories do not comply with the building construction specifications rules. The management also could not allocate enough money to meet the minimum wage requirement for the teachers. This has caused teachers to frequently change job and thus, affect the students' learning process. Besides that, almost all the teachers involved in the study were unproperly trained. A large number of them were merely SPM

leavers. The teachers were also rarely sent to professionalism courses. The schools also lacked in capital to send their teachers to attend training or organize the courses.

It was also found that majority of the students showed a moderate performance in English language subject at the national SPM examination. This is indeed alarming, given the fact that some of these students would be expected to continue their study at colleges or universities where English is the primary language of instruction. If they do not perform a commendable result in the subject at the national SPM level, worries about their suitability to pursue tertiary education may arise (Haimi, 2017).

Besides the aforementioned dilemmas, these schools have also caused some 'heated' discussions or controversial debates from the socio-cultural perspective. Among those is the issue of attitudinal resistance of some Muslims toward English, a language which is frequently considered as a main tool for the transmission of Western values (Omar, 1998; Kim, 2003; Ratnawati, 2005). A doctoral study by Asmaliza (2018) also investigates students' learning styles and motivation and finds that in learning English, the students employ the same technique they use in memorizing the Quran, which is rote learning. On the other hand, Airil Haimi in his 2017 study pertaining professional and identity changes within two Malay-Muslim English language teachers at private SAR schools finds out that the resistance of the small minority Islamist extremist teachers makes English teaching difficult. Not only that, some of the students in these schools have a relentless attitude to mastering English and things become worst when Arabic is emphasized more compared to English.

All of the above constraints, if left unchecked, could be among the main causes to the decline in English language achievement in *SAR* schools. An immediate action should be taken to address the problem and further helps to improve the English language performance in the schools.

Malaysian Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR Aligned Curriculum
As described above, *SAR* schools are required to register with the MOE and adopt the national education curriculum to allow the students to sit for the national standardized examinations. This also means that *SAR* schools are with no exception to comply with the current Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR Aligned curriculum specifically prepared for language education in schools all over the world.

The implementation of the CEFR-Aligned curriculum which was first introduced in Malaysia in 2013 and launched in 2017 is one of many serious efforts taken by MOE with an aim to improve our students' level of proficiency by providing the best language education from pre-school to tertiary level (Azman, 2016). CEFR can be described as an international framework designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for preparing language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, teaching and learning materials and foreign language assessments for all languages including English (National Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025, 2013).

CEFR Aligned curriculum does not replace our current country's KSSR and KSSM curriculum, instead, improvise it. KSSR/KSSM standards are internally set based on the needs of learning

a second language in Malaysia, and the success criteria is based on national goals, and expectations. CEFR Aligned curriculum standards are international based, developed following a 20-years of language-learning research carried out by the Council of Europe. These standards allow us to structure what we teach, assess and to benchmark the progress of our students internationally (Prof Ganakumaran in Star, 2018).

CEFR and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)
The paradigm shift in learning which took place in the 21st century advocates for the practice of more student-centered approach in language instruction. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which was proposed in the 1960s is an approach which prioritizes communicative competence as the goal of language teaching (Abraham and Margana, 2019). CLT places student-teacher interaction as the center of its teaching learning process. Student-teacher interaction plays a significant role in developing students' language ability (Moh. Abraham and Margana, 2019). CEFR promotes CLT (Cambridge University Press, 2013; in Ketsemabom and Kornwipa (2018), therefore teachers in a communicative based classroom are encouraged to engage their students with as many as possible interactive activities to facilitate the students' language development (Shim, 2015).

As schools registered with the MOE and adapts the national curriculum, SAR schools are with no exception to adhere with the language teaching and learning aspects embodied in the CEFR Aligned language curriculum and practicing the current CLT approach in its language instruction. Providing students with sufficient interactive activities can raise learners' motivation and gives them opportunity to expand their skills of the target language and thus develop their communicative competence (Vijayavarathan, 2017).

How Interactive are the Classes?
The problem is how interactive and communicative are the classes? To what extent does language class offer interaction opportunities to encourage students' language use? Regardless of which approach taken, communicative based language teaching suggests that among the responsibilities of language teachers is to act as facilitators, minimize the amount of Teacher Talk (TT) and provide as many as possible opportunities for Students Talk (ST) in the target language (Shim, 2015). This, has resulted in a large number of studies conducted to analyze the patterns of classroom interaction in many language settings to ensure that they comply with the characteristics of CLT and are truly beneficial in helping students to achieve language proficiency.

IRF Structure as Tool to Analyze Patterns of Classroom Interaction
Among the most well-known tool used to analyze patterns of classroom interaction is the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) Cycle as proposed by Sinclair and (Couldthard, 1975) in Ganagane, 2015). The authors define IRF as a cycle representing the typical minimum verbal exchanges which largely occurs in a language classroom. Initiation Move (I-Move) refers to the first part in a communication cycle which usually starts with the teacher asking a question to the student/students (Rasku-Puttonen et al., 2012). Response Move (R-Move) refers to the student/students responding to the teacher's initiation questions. The responses could be verbal or non-verbal. The Feedback Move (F-Move) marks the last part of the IRF cycle. At this stage, the teacher would provide feedback to the student/students' responses, ends the discussion before initiating another question. In a complete IRF cycle, student/students can

also ask questions at the I-Move, followed by the teachers and other students take turns to provide responses at the R-Move before teachers provides feedback.

A sample of a complete IRF cycle is as below:

Teacher:	*What is the capital of Ecuador?*	**I**
Student:	*Quito.*	**R**
Teacher:	*Well done!*	**F**

However, this short simplest structure of IRF cycle has been criticized as fail to initiate longer, prolong interactions which could promote communicative competence (Abd-Kadir & Hardman, 2007; in Ganagane, 2015). CLT promotes for continuous interaction with the teacher reducing his/her turn-takings allowing the students to interact more in the target language to build up their proficiency. Therefore, a teacher teaching in a speaking classroom is encouraged to initiate longer discussions by using referential questions instead of display questions at the R-Move stage.

Referential questions are high level questions which could generate critical and creative thinking within the students while display questions are low level questions in which the answers can be easily found from the teaching materials used. Not only that, the teacher should also encourage other students to respond as well at the R-Move before closing the conversation by giving appropriate feedback. This allows for more turn-takings in a more complex I-R-F cycle such as I-R-R-R-F which is believed can open more opportunities for the students to interact, verbalize their thoughts and improve their language competence (Munaspriyanto and Media Putri Yohana, 2017).

The Necessity of Examining the Classroom Interaction Patterns at Sar Language Settings
SAR schools are not without problems. The clash between Islam and English, the negative perception of Islamic extremists that link English language learning with the inculcation of negative western values and the lack of school administration in providing proper infrastructure and professional training for their English language teachers present great challenges to these teachers in their efforts to become successful in their field. Their pure intention to help put into realization the schools' aspiration to produce citizens who are not only spiritually strong but also those who possess high levels of intellectual ability to meet the challenges of global challenges would definitely face a lot of obstacles. Obstacles will negatively affect the quality of language teaching and learning.

Language teacher cognition proposes teachers as active, thinking decision-makers who continuously make changes to their instructional choices whenever necessary. On the other hand, classroom talk is an important medium to allow more language use and practice which could help students' language learning. Therefore, observing the classroom events in language classrooms at *SAR* schools from the lens of classroom talk is very important in an effort to improve the quality of teaching and learning of *SAR* in Perak and thus improve the students' performance in English. Such study is highly encouraged as it may reveal some issues pertaining teachers' existing knowledge about the relationship between classroom interaction and students' communicative competence. We may also obtain a clearer picture about the teacher-students-students' classroom interaction patterns and how it facilitates students' communicative competence. Not only that, we may even gain valuable knowledge

of how the atmosphere outside the classroom including the schools' administration shape the classroom interaction patterns which in turn impacts the English language performance of the school in whole. All these possible outcomes could provide guidance to L2 teaching in similar contexts as well as to the policymakers of education, curriculum creators, practitioners, and teacher educators involved.

Conclusion

The integrated Islamic school with its long history of establishment clearly shows that these schools are not without problems. Financial constraints affect the school administration and in turn negatively impact the school academic performance in the academic specifically in English language. Language teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make modifications to their educational choices on a regular basis. Classroom interaction, on the other hand, is one of the most significant tools to increase teacher-student engagement, improving understanding, and ensuring the success of language teaching and learning. It is believed that conducting more research on the teacher-students-students classroom interaction patterns will lead to new discoveries that will aid teachers in improving the quality of their instruction as well as students in improving their language proficiency.

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