

THE MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL EFL SPEAKING CURRICULUM: A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION ALIGNMENT ANALYSIS

Hazleena Baharun^{1*}, Harison Mohd Sidek², Noor Saazai Mat Saad³, Mohd Muzhafar Mohd Idrus⁴, Haliza Harun⁵, Ramiaida Darmi⁶, Norhana Abdullah⁷ and Zarina Ashikin Zakaria⁸

¹Dr., Islamic Science University of Malaysia, MALAYSIA, hazleena@usim.edu.my

² Assoc. Prof. Dr., Islamic Science University of Malaysia, MALAYSIA, harison@usim.edu.my

³ Dr., Islamic Science University of Malaysia, MALAYSIA, noorsaazai@usim.edu.my

⁴Dr., Islamic Science University of Malaysia, MALAYSIA, muzhafaridrus@usim.edu.my

⁵Dr., Islamic Science University of Malaysia, MALAYSIA, haliza@usim.edu.my

⁶Dr., Islamic Science University of Malaysia, MALAYSIA, ramiaida@usim.edu.my

⁷Ms., Islamic Science University of Malaysia, MALAYSIA, hana66@usim.edu.my

⁸Ms., Islamic Science University of Malaysia, MALAYSIA, zarina@usim.edu.my

*Corresponding author

Abstract

Goal-achieving curricular are often coherent at their fundamental level. In order for a curriculum to achieve its goals, it is imperative that the curriculum is coherent at all levels. What is presented in a curriculum must align with its theoretical underpinning. The present Malaysian English language curriculum is developed and designed based on the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Thus, the purpose of the current study was to examine if the theoretical grounding of the Malaysian form five English language curriculum, in particular the speaking curriculum, is in alignment with its communicative label. In line with its label, the speaking curriculum embedded in the Malaysian form five English language curriculum should be developed and designed based on the CLT. It should reflect the CLT approach. The data for this study were collected from the Form Five English Language Curriculum Specifications document and the Form Five English Language textbook. In analyzing the alignment of the Malaysian form five English language speaking curriculum with the communicative approach, the data were categorized under major second language acquisition (SLA) theories and second language (L2) speaking theories. The findings show that the socio-cognitive and socio-cultural theories are highly reflected in the Malaysian form five English Language speaking curriculum, the two theories which are closely related to the communicative approach. This shows that the Malaysian form five English language speaking curriculum is primarily in alignment with its communicative label. The findings are discussed in relation to their implications on English as a foreign language (EFL) speaking instruction.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, L2 speaking theories, English language speaking curriculum

1 INTRODUCTION

Every curriculum is based on a particular theoretical orientation about language teaching and language learning (Basturkmen, 1999; Richards & Rogers, 2001; Sidek; 2010). In order for an educational curriculum to be effective and to achieve its goals, it has to be coherent at all levels including at its theoretical level. A coherent curriculum should be reflective of the intended approach. Many studies on curriculum found that an incoherent curriculum often defeats the curriculum goals. Such a consequence may be due to the misalignment between the classroom implementation, textbook development and the intended approach of the curriculum (e.g. A. Rahman, N. H., 2014).

Since secondary schools are the feeders of higher education institutions, the curriculum at the school level should be developed carefully in order to ensure that the curriculum meet its objective to produce competent students that are fully functional at the university level not only in academic areas, but also in the English language. One of the areas in the English language that is of significance is the speaking skill. Students' inability in the English language speaking skill may have adverse effect on their academic performance (Sabri, U. & Qin, T. Y., 2014). The difficulty in communicating in English among university students is a critical issue within the Malaysian context (Sabri, U. & Qin, T. Y., 2014). Such difficulty has impacted university students in meeting the English language proficiency requirement for university enrollment and graduation. For example, the speaking component in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is one of the major components of the test. Students' poor performance in the speaking assessment may affect their overall MUET grade, which results in them failing to meet even the minimum requirement to pass the test. As a result, many students are not eligible to graduate until they manage to achieve the minimum passing level for MUET. At local universities such as USIM, UiTM and IIUM many students are not able to meet the required English language proficiency on MUET, which test also includes the assessment of the English language speaking skill. This is an economic liability, not only at the individual level, but also at the national level.

The root of these issues can be traced back to the secondary school level, at which the Malaysian students are trained with the English language proficiency, which includes English language speaking. English language speaking skill deficit, particularly among students at the university level is a phenomenon that can be investigated by examining the English language speaking curriculum embedded in the Malaysian Secondary School English Language Curriculum. Therefore, a study on The English language speaking curriculum is imperative to ensure that the curriculum is coherent in order to alleviate the English language speaking deficit to a level that it is no longer significant. Within the context of the current study, the preliminary investigation of the curriculum's coherence was conducted at the Approach or theoretical level in terms of its alignment with its current label.

2 THE MALAYSIAN FORM FIVE SECONDARY SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

The present Malaysian Form Five Secondary School English language curriculum revised in 2003 adopted the general proficiency approach. It is based on learning outcomes geared towards equipping students to communicate effectively, function appropriately in everyday life, and access information as well as able to understand and respond to literary works. English grammar, phonology, vocabulary, ICT skills, thinking skills as well as values and citizenship education were also included in the curriculum. In other words, English language is taught to learners in order to enable them to "use the language to further their studies and for work purposes" (Form Five English Language Curriculum Specifications, Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 1).

Based on the curriculum document, the four language skills i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing are integrated into the areas of language use. In other words, when learners use the language, they talk and listen to each other. In addition, they also write to each other letters and messages. Five broad areas are introduced and they are people, environment, social issues, health, and science and technology. These five areas are translated into topics using tasks and activities in order to enable learners to read, write and talk about them. Thus, it could be concluded that the Malaysian Form Five Secondary School English language curriculum was developed based on the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the form of Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching.

The objectives of the Form Five English language curriculum include the ability to talk about experiences and exchange ideas with friends and relatives, ask questions and respond to questions with relevant answers, make plans and arrangements with friends to do something or go somewhere, obtain information from

various sources and present these ideas to friends orally and in writing, read widely and enjoy poems and short stories, and show an awareness and appreciation of moral values and love towards the nation. The curriculum however, does not have an exclusive speaking curriculum and objectives. Nonetheless, based on the general objectives outlined in the curriculum document, it is observed that the speaking objectives are integrated and included in the general objectives.

3 THE COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT) APPROACH

What is communicative language teaching (CLT)? According to Brandl (2007), “communicative language teaching (CLT) is generally regarded as an approach to language teaching (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 5)”. It does not adhere to any particular theory or method. Even though CLT does not adhere to one particular theory or method, it is based on the theory that the main function of language use is communication as the primary goal of CLT is for learners to develop communicative competence (Hymes 1972).

3.1 Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theories

The Vygotskian’s Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT) stresses on the role of social interaction in language acquisition. It claims that interaction is an opportunity to learn. According to the SCT, human cognitive development is a socially situated activity mediated by language (Vygotsky, 1978). This means that knowledge is socially constructed by interaction and is then internalized. It is also through interaction that learners regulate or restructure their knowledge. Within the socio-cultural approach to L2, knowledge is constructed through social interaction between individuals and is then internalised (Vygotsky, 1978). This is because interaction allows mediation process to take place. Ashman and Gillies (2003) define mediation as the “need for someone other than the learner to translate knowledge about the society and culture so that it can be internalised” (p.199). The underlying assumption is that knowledge is created through interaction and not simply transferred. In other words, during social interaction, as learners negotiate, they have the opportunity to develop not only their language skills but also their cognitive and problem solving abilities (Swain & Lapkin, 2002). Thus, in this case, CLT could be viewed as “in line with socio-cultural theory (SCT), which views language as a tool in a socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978) and as a central tool for the development of thought processes or the crucial means of mediation for one’s cognition” (Sidek, 2012, p. 110).

Another SLA theory that is closely related to CLT is the socio-cognitive theory. Based on the socio-cognitive theory, interaction promotes language learning. One is through the context of social interaction and the other is through interaction with the environment. Thus, “an individual’s environment and changes in that environment affect the individual’s thought processes which in turns influences the development of his or her language acquisition” (Matsuoka & Evans, 2004 cited in Sidek, 2010, p. 24). The SCT and the socio-cognitive theory overlaps in the way they view language i.e., as cognitive and social in nature. Unlike the SCT, the socio-cognitive theory “does not promote communicative competence as central to language activities” (Sidek, 2010, p. 24). Nonetheless, due to its emphasis on interaction, the CLT is very much in line with the socio-cognitive theory views on SLA.

3.2 Second language (L2) speaking theories

The Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1995, 2005) claims that the act of producing language (speaking or writing) constitutes part of the process of second language learning. During interaction, learners receive feedback on the form and meaning of their messages, whether or not they are understood by others. If their messages could not be comprehended by others, they need to do something. This leads them to modify their speech in order to enhance the comprehensibility of their message. In this case, in order to make themselves understood better by others, the learners are pushed in their production. At the same time, they also push other speakers to do the same (i.e., modify their speech) so that comprehensibility is achieved. In sum, the whole idea of interaction, negotiation and output is very much emphasized.

The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) suggests a number of ways in which interaction can contribute to language acquisition. In general terms, it proposes that the more opportunities learners have to negotiate, both meaning and content, the more likely they would acquire the language. In other words, negotiation for meaning is an activity that occurs as a result of interaction “in which learners seek clarification, confirmation, and repetition of L2 utterances they do not understand” (Pica, 1994, p. 56). When learners fail to understand input or when they display a lack of control over a form, whether grammatical or lexical, they negotiate. What they do is that they ask questions, seek clarification and request for explanation; these moves inform other speakers that their utterance is somehow difficult to understand. The other speakers would make

modifications so that input is comprehended or understood by the learners. Thus, specifically IH suggests “1) that when interactional modifications lead to comprehensible input via decomposition and segmenting of input, acquisition is facilitated; 2) that when learners receive feedback, acquisition is facilitated, and 3) that when learners are pushed to reformulate their own utterances, acquisition is promoted” (Ellis, 2003, p. 80). This is because, as argued by Swain (1995), “learners need to be pushed to make use of their resources; they need to have their linguistic abilities stretched to their fullest; they need to reflect on their output and consider ways of modifying it to enhance comprehensibility, appropriateness, and accuracy” (p. 160). When learners are pushed in their production, they cannot avoid paying attention to language forms as they would do in comprehension. Learners would process language both semantically and syntactically. It is when learners are pushed to produce language that is accurate and precise that second language acquisition is promoted.

Within the realm of CLT approach to speaking, learners often play the role as a negotiator. They interact and negotiate meaning in small groups or as a whole class in order to complete tasks assigned to them. In this case, though not specifically labelled as L2 speaking theories, both IH and OH are very much in line with the CLT approach. Both IH and OH emphasize the importance of interaction, negotiation and output in order to promote speaking in SLA. Thus, speaking activities based on IH and OH may include activities among others that require learners to discuss in small groups, express opinions and contribute ideas on issues.

4 THE STUDY

In the Malaysian context, students at Malaysian schools receive 11 years of English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction. Nonetheless, it is a phenomenon that the Malaysian students are still not competent in the EFL including EFL speaking. Many studies have been conducted within the Malaysian setting in order to investigate different issues related to EFL speaking. They include among others research on language anxiety among English language learners and their speaking performance (Abdul Aziz, N. H., 2007; Chan, S.H., Abdullah, A.N. & Yusuf, N., 2012), using tasks to foster learners’ speaking abilities (Mohammadipour & S. MD. Rashid, 2015), using films to teach speaking in the EFL classrooms (Shing, S. R. & Yin, L. K., 2014) and turn-taking strategies among learners in class discussion (Rahmat, N. H., Rahman, S. A. B. S. A. & Yunos, D. R. M., 2015). The abovementioned studies primarily focused on learners and their speaking performance. Not many have been done at the root of it which is the curriculum itself.

It has been found that despite its importance being the foundation of the EFL instruction, studies on EFL speaking curriculum at the secondary school level are scarce/or if had been conducted, they are currently not available in the mainstream publications. Currently, studies on the Malaysian EFL curriculum had only been conducted on EFL secondary school reading curriculum (e.g. Sidek, H. M., 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014; Sidek, H. M. & Abdullah, H., 2013; Sidek, H. M., Abdullah, H. & Rahim, H.A., 2013). Hence, this study was a pioneering study of its nature as to the best of the researchers’ knowledge; such study has never been conducted in Malaysia. The aim was to investigate and examine the Malaysian EFL secondary school speaking curriculum and its communicative label. It further aimed to make suitable recommendation to the relevant authorities on how to refine the Malaysian EFL speaking secondary school curriculum at the level of Approach in order to enhance the effectiveness of the EFL speaking program.

5 METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research approach

The method of analyzing the Malaysian EFL secondary speaking curriculum in this study is substantially influenced by the language teaching model of Richards and Rodgers (2001), a revision of Edward Anthony’s (1963) model. This model presents a conceptual framework for language instruction proposing that at the fundamental level, language instruction can be analyzed in terms of *Approach* (foundational theory), *Design* (e.g., selected language skills, learning tasks, learner roles), and *Procedure* (e.g., classroom techniques, classroom observation, teacher interviews). However, as this study examined the curriculum coherence in terms of the alignment of theories and the overarching approaches to second language (L2) speaking instruction that are reflected in the Malaysian EFL secondary speaking curriculum and instruction, only the Approach component in Richards and Rodgers’ (2001) language instruction conceptual frameworks was applicable to the study, although with modifications.

5.2 Research questions

The present Malaysian English language curriculum is developed and designed based on the CLT. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to examine if the theoretical groundings of the Malaysian form five English

language curriculum, in particular the speaking curriculum, is in alignment with its communicative label. The study sought to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the SLA theories reflected in the form five English language speaking curriculum?

RQ2: What are the L2 speaking theories reflected in the form five English language speaking curriculum?

5.3 Data collection

To address the research questions posed in this current study, we used document analysis as the research instrument to generate data. The sources of data were in the form of speaking-related statements extracted from two written documents. The documents were the:

- i) Form Five English Language Curriculum Specifications (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2003) – this document is used by teachers of English language as their teaching guidelines.
- ii) Form Five English Language Textbook – this book is used by both English language teachers and form five students in the classroom during English language lessons.

5.4 Data analysis

Richards and Rodgers' (2001) model at the Approach level provides a tool for analyzing the Malaysian secondary EFL speaking instructional approach in terms of its grounded foundational theories of SLA and theories of L2 speaking. Hence, for the present study, only the 'Approach' aspect was relevant as the aim was to determine whether the theoretical groundings of the Malaysian form five English language curriculum, in particular the speaking curriculum, is in alignment with its communicative label. To answer the research questions, the current study extracted speaking-related statements from the Form Five English Language Curriculum Specifications (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2003) and the Form Five English Language Textbook. The data from the two sources were analyzed using straightforward percentages and compared in order to determine the alignments. The analysis for each research question is explained individually.

RQ1: What are the SLA theories reflected in the form five English language speaking curriculum?

Based on the reviews of SLA theories, the speaking-related statements in the curriculum specifications and in the textbook were inferred as one of the three prominent SLA theories: structuralism, socio-cognitive theory and socio-cultural. The structuralism theory was inferred in statements such as saying words after the teacher and taking turns to say sentences with the correct intonation, word stress and sentence rhythm. The socio-cognitive theory was inferred in statements such as presenting speeches. The socio-cultural theory of SLA was inferred in statements such as interviewing people to get more information, engaging in small group discussions and responding to questions and comments.

RQ2: What are the L2 speaking theories reflected in the form five English language speaking curriculum?

Based on the reviews of L2 speaking theories, the speaking-related statements in the curriculum specifications and in the textbook were inferred as one of the three prominent L2 theories: behaviourist, cognitive and communicative-based interactive theory. The behaviourist theory was inferred in statements such as pronouncing the words correctly, reading the dialogue and practising the following ways of expressing opinions. The cognitive theory was inferred in statements such as giving speeches and reporting findings. The communicative-based interactive theory was inferred in statements such as discussing and exchanging ideas, expressing opinions and asking questions either in pairs or small groups.

6 FINDINGS

6.1 SLA theories reflected in the form five English language speaking curriculum

This section presents the findings for the first research question: *What are the SLA theories reflected in the form five English language speaking curriculum?*

In terms of the SLA theories reflected in the form five English language speaking curriculum in both the Form Five English Language Curriculum Specifications as well as in the Form Five English Language Textbook that were examined, findings revealed that the SCT was prominent. This could be observed in the speaking related statements identified in both documents. A total of 94.7% of the speaking-related statements identified in the curriculum specifications exhibited the SCT approach. The speaking-related statements identified in the English language textbook also exhibited similar findings. A total of 68.8% of the speaking-related statements identified in the textbook reflect the SCT approach that underpins CLT in which the

curriculum was developed. While a majority of the speaking-related statements in both documents (94.7% and 68.8%) reflected the SCT approach to SLA, a total of 3.5% of the speaking-related statements from the curriculum specifications and 15.2% of the speaking-related statements identified in the English language textbook reflects the socio-cognitive theory approach. Further, even though the form five Malaysian English language curriculum was developed based on CLT with SCT as its underpinning theory, it is found that there is a trace of structuralism as well in the speaking-related statements both in the curriculum specifications (1.8%) as well as in the English language textbook (16%). These are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Analysis of SLA theories in the English language speaking curriculum

Documents/SLA Theories	Socio-Cultural Theory (%)	Socio-Cognitive Theory (%)	Structuralism (%)
Form Five English Language Curriculum Specifications	94.7	3.5	1.8
Form Five English Language Textbook	68.8	15.2	16

6.2 L2 speaking theories reflected in the form five English language speaking curriculum

This section presents the findings for the second research question: *What are the L2 speaking theories reflected in the form five English language speaking curriculum?*

The IH and OH are the most prominent L2 speaking theory reflected in both documents - the form five English speaking curriculum specifications document (94.7%) and the textbook (68.8%). Both hypotheses are in line with the SCT which underpins the CLT approach to the curriculum. They place great emphasis on interaction, negotiation and output in speaking. These could be observed in the speaking tasks for instance, which require learners to take part in conversations and discussion, and exchange ideas, information and opinions on topics of interest.

The Whole Language instructional approach, a corresponding teaching approach for the cognitive theory, was developed based on the theory of language as communication or social activity. Even though the approach is dominant in the realm of L2 reading, as a teaching approach, speaking is also included. However, it is mainly as a non-communicative teaching approach for speaking. It primarily involved individual speaking tasks such as presenting speeches without any direct interaction with others in the context. This is reflected in both documents examined – the form five English speaking curriculum specifications document (3.5%) and the textbook (15.2%).

Despite the emphasis on communicative abilities, the curriculum specification and textbook used still place emphasis on accurate production of the target language form, albeit not the primary focus. The L2 speaking theory reflected in the speaking curriculum is related to the behaviourist theory. This could be observed in some of the speaking-related statements identified in the documents. The statements both in the curriculum specifications (1.8%) and in the textbook (16%) placed emphasis on accurate repetition of dialogues, oral drills and pattern practice. These are common oral activities that are in line with the behaviourist learning theory as it is believed that “in order to acquire a language one needs to acquire the forms of the language, which are best taught using reinforcement or repetitive practices” (Sidek, 2010, p. 29). Findings are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Analysis of L2 speaking theories in the English language speaking curriculum

Documents/L2 Speaking Theories	Interactive Theories (IH & OH) (%)	Cognitive Theory (Whole-Language Approach) (%)	Behaviourist (Audio Lingual Method) (%)
Form Five English Language Curriculum Specifications	94.7	3.5	1.8
Form Five English Language Textbook	68.8	15.2	16

7 DISCUSSION

Even though from the total percentage of the SLA and L2 speaking theories calculated from each document did not show a total of 100% in terms of its alignment with its communicative label, it can still be considered communicative in nature as each document recorded more than 50%. In sum, the overall findings suggest that the SLA theories and L2 speaking theories identified in the Malaysian secondary English language curriculum reflect the SCT in which the CLT approach to language learning and teaching it underpins. The two main documents examined (the Form Five English Language Curriculum Specifications and the Form Five English Language Textbook) show that the theoretical grounding of the Malaysian form five English language curriculum, in particular the speaking curriculum, is in alignment with its communicative label.

In line with its communicative label, the speaking curriculum embedded in the Malaysian form five English language curriculum was developed and designed based on the CLT and reflects the CLT approach. This could be observed in the speaking-related statements as well as the speaking tasks identified in the curriculum specifications and the textbook used by the learners in the form of Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching. Hence, it can assumed or expected that learners who have gone through five years of secondary schooling should possess an acceptable communicative ability in order to “meet their future needs for English in everyday life, for knowledge acquisition, and for future workplace needs” (Form Five English Language Curriculum Specifications, Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 1).

However, as mentioned earlier in the introduction of this paper, learners still have problems in the realm of speaking as exhibited in results of national examinations such as MUET. This could affect their academic performance at tertiary level, a situation, which makes secondary school English language preparation more crucial among secondary school students. Many university courses especially at private universities require classroom presentations in English as part of their course requirements. In addition, many students who obtain scholarship to continue their tertiary studies in foreign countries, which English is the first language, often face with difficulties in communication via the English language in their academic courses. Steps need to be taken to address the problem of low communicative abilities of learners. Based on the findings, in which that the Malaysian form five English language speaking curriculum is primarily in alignment with its communicative label, so it could be concluded that the problem may not be due to the curriculum. Thus, further research needs to be conducted on the other aspects of language instructions which are the *Design* (e.g., selected language skills, learning tasks, learner roles), and *Procedure* (e.g., classroom techniques, classroom observation, teacher interviews) in order to identify the root of the problem plaguing the Malaysian learners particularly in the area of speaking.

8 CONCLUSIONS

Despite the curriculum being considered in alignment with its communicative label, improvements should be made to align it further. Thus, it is imperative that those who develop the secondary speaking curriculum to have the knowledge and understanding of the principles of CLT, the related SLA theories that underpin the approach and the L2 speaking theirs as well as the related communicative instructional approaches. It is equally important that textbook writers are also equipped with similar knowledge and understanding as the curriculum developers. This will ensure that textbooks are written in alignment with the approach intended.

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