

THE NATIVE SPEAKER PROGRAMME IN MALAYSIA: BOON OR BANE?

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Abstract

Malaysia acknowledges English as a global language when the government brought in native English speakers (NESs) to help local English teachers teach in primary schools through a programme called English Native Speaker Mentoring Programme (Program PenuturJati Bahasa Inggeris). Since a number of Malaysians have voiced their doubt of such a measure (MELTA, 2010), this qualitative research evaluated the role of NESs in the programme through the perspectives of three levels of implementers namely the Native English Speakers (NESs), Non-native English Speakers (NNEs) and District Officers using semi-structured interview method. The results of the study provided encouraging evidence to show that the respondents generally perceived the role of the NESs in multiple dimensions, depending on how one values NESs' contribution throughout the programme. The findings suggested the role of the native English speaker served as reflection of how much Malaysian teachers need training in professional teaching. However, despite the commitment shown by the NESs, the issue of poor execution of programme by MoE as well as the resistance of the local teachers arisen, much to portray the ugly truth of such high-invested programme. Strategies on how to improve the role of NESs are also discussed to demonstrate how to maximise their expertise to create a dynamic collaboration and gradually improve the local teachers' skills and quality of teaching.

Keywords: Native English Speakers, Non-native English Speakers, Ministry of Education, team-teaching

1.0 INTRODUCTION

English language has been extensively used in various regions of the world as a result of globalisation. In the field of education, the English language is the most widely spoken as well as being the global language that serves as an influential catalyst towards language planning and policy-making in many countries especially in the Asia-Pacific regions (Ho, 2002; Nunan, 2003). Currently, in view of this escalating need, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) has brought in native-speakers of English to help local English teachers in primary schools to use native-like English language. As announced in the 2011 Budget, the government has brought in 375 native-speaking English teachers to assist in training the English teachers at the primary schools through a programme called 'Program PenuturJati Bahasa Inggeris' or Native Speaker Programme. Those native speakers were engaged from several English speaking countries such as the United States, England, Australia and New Zealand (Jusoh, 2015).

The Native Speaker Programme is perceived to be able to encourage many primary schools, especially national schools throughout Malaysia, to create an alliance between the "native" English speakers (NESs) with the "non-native" English speakers (NNEs) in this joint project. The local teachers will still have the total authority over the lessons carried out in the classroom whereas the English native speakers will only assist the local teachers by being trainers as well as consultants. The objective of the incorporation

of the NESs in the English language lesson is to help improve Malaysian students and teachers in using native-like English language. The English as International Language (EIL) orientation also encourages the development of other English varieties around the world, and NNES learners should be able to feel comfortable with their ability to express themselves when required to use the English language. The NNES teachers who are advanced speakers of English themselves, should be informed first of this shift and benefit from the programme.

MoE has proposed the Native Speaker Programme as an initiative to enhance the English Language mastery level among students according to MBMMBI (*Memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu Mengukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris*), a policy which aims to uphold Bahasa Malaysia and strengthen the English Language. The initiative to bring in native English speakers to collaborate with the local English teachers aims to improve the teaching and learning strategy in the elementary level after the ministry realised the need to make changes to meet the challenges of the future. Therefore, MoE suggests the national curriculum to refer to the international standards as benchmark to produce proficient students to compete with others at the international level.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of the local English teachers, the District Officer as well as the NESs, who are involved in the Native Speaker Programme. The researcher will make a comparison of their perspectives regarding the role of the NESs, their contributions throughout the implementation of the nationwide programme as well as the effects of the collaboration towards the teachers' teaching development. The perspectives from all groups will be compared and contrasted to develop a better understanding of the problem arise

due to the collaboration and also to describe the variation in perspectives.

However, the announcement of the Native Speaker Programme has caused many pertinent points being raised and argued nationally. The Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA) has come out with a report titled "To Go or Not to Go Native: The Role of Native Speaker Teachers and Trainers in Second and Foreign Language Teaching" as a feedback derived from conference held pertaining the new policy making of Malaysian government. The report also stated that the history of Malaysian educational system has witnessed that the criteria for selecting the native-speaking trainers were only based on the status of native speakers' origin had proven that the employment of native speakers was not worth it as they do not have the expected English Language Training (ELT) skills and do not receive any formal and proper English as a second language teacher (ESLT) training (2010). Due to the shortage of NES teachers in the local primary schools, it has been made possible for NESs with any academic degree to be accepted and granted a full time teaching job in Malaysia.

Thus, the practice of employing NESs without professional training to teach English to the local students, in most cases, has engendered unsatisfactory quality of English teaching (Barratt & Kontra, 2000; Mattos, 1997; Tian, 2003). A primary school in China recruited untrained NESs as teachers and resulted in disorganised classroom teaching, discontinuity of teaching content, language barrier to communicate with the students, poor instructional presentation and behaviour problems (Tian, 2003).

As stated in the MELTA report, New Straits Times (2012) claimed that Malaysia has spent enormous amounts of money to train local talents and upgrading their knowledge

and competencies in Malaysian and foreign universities. By implementing the Native Speaker Programme, the country is sending out a negative message that Malaysian graduates are not good enough or will never be good enough to become self-reliant. It is believed that the local experts are extremely capable and dedicated in nurturing their own young generations. In local context, if the incentives were channelled to local graduates in using their professional services to replace the foreign 'native speaker' trainers, national funds would go to a committed team of local experts and would be preserved and maintained within the country instead of being drained away to foreign shores. It is highly plausible that the country could minimise the expenditure and precious Ringgit could be better spent on the development of schools throughout the nation.

The local teachers have voiced out their opinions that the native speaker trainer programme will have serious implications on Malaysian ESL teacher morale, motivation and self-esteem. Teachers felt that they will be seen as second best at the most by fellow teachers and their students. The binary paradigm that this model creates will encourage comparison and unfair judgements.

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 ELT Practice and the Native-speaker Fever

In a number of countries whose English is considered as second or foreign language, the demand to have English native speakers to collaborate with local English teachers is burgeoning especially in English as a Second Language (ESL) nations which regard education and knowledge as indicators to become linguistically proficient. This emerging perspective has not only brought up and introduced educational system, but is also

acknowledged as the administrative and official language by these nations. However, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) circumstances, English language serves only as a supplementary language whose importance is portrayed by its economic development as well as global requirements. For example, English is only applicable in a few development sectors such as the services of local train in Germany.

Native speaker fever is always synonymous with the offers and availability of jobs for English teachers in both educational institutions and private centre. Even though English is treated as one of the supplementary modern languages by most people, there is still a strong connection and demand for NES teachers even though English is considered as a foreign language. It is disappointing that the language is not taught for the reason to pursuit perfection but rather to put up to certain party's reputation. This is mainly because English Language Teaching (ELT) is a career and the native-English speakers lack some qualities to teach suitably according to students' level of understanding in an ESL environment. In most of the advertisements or vacancies, the emphasis is placed on the status, which is the origin, of the potential candidate compared to the level of their language proficiency and education as well as their professional development experience. Therefore, the opportunities are biased to the favour of native speakers if compared to non-native speakers.

The main concern on this issue is the imbalance prerequisites on the language which signifies that university degrees and professional development are positioned below the status of native speaker. This is proven when the advertisements in media, newspaper and on the website highlighted that application from NES was only obtaining any degree from any recognised universities

and institutions or being professionally trained in ELT. However, it is indisputable that there are a number of potential employers who looked into the nativity status and candidates who meet other prerequisites set by them. The mission to have NES as teachers or to form a collaboration between the native speakers with local English teachers as a fever has influenced other aspects of normal life apart from ELT field. This phenomenon is described by Anchimbe (2005) as the effects of globalised world and the phenomena of native-speaker fever have resulted in influencing parents to be aware of the value of English language, and they are keen to enrol their children in English medium schools to enable their kids to learn and acquire English as their first language.

The stereotype opinion that native-speaker is flawless in using their language has resulted in the spread of native speaker fever to other countries across the globe. Although it might be true, this case is not applicable in every situation especially in ELT as we have to accept the fact that there are diverse challenges in handling the ELT classroom apart from being fluent in the language itself. To make any ELT process a success, we have to incorporate the local context of the socio-cultural aspects which is foreign to the native speakers. By doing this, the English learners could have better understanding of the language as they have the personal attachment of the localised approach. In a way, this approach could also bridge the gaps of communication that happened as a result of socio-cultural differences. Therefore, based on the evidence, the native speakers' criterion to teach English in ELT field is inadequate and to certain degree is irrelevant and biased.

2.2 The Native Speaker Programme or Programme PenuturJati

In 2008, the Ministry of Education decided to employ NES as experts or mentors to assist in capacity building of primary school English teachers in this country. The programme was planned to be implemented from 2011 to 2013. The Native Speaker Programme is one of the programmes designed to enhance a language policy called MBMMBI (*Memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris*) to uphold Bahasa Malaysia and strengthen the English Language. This programme is under the department of BPK (*Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum*), and taken care by a vendor called SMR Group Company who is responsible in bringing in the native speakers.

The Native Speaker Programme has been implemented to selected primary schools in all states in Malaysia involving students from Years one, two and three. The Ministry of Education hoped that the programme could increase the capacity of English language teachers in 1800 primary schools, apart from strengthening the mastery level of English language at schools. One of the initiatives required the local English teachers to attend professional input sessions conducted by the NESs after school hours. The BPK is responsible in conducting the professional input sessions.

There have been informal feedbacks debating on the issue of bringing in NES as consultants and trainers to the local teachers could be seen in the media as well as the dispute among the teachers at schools. This situation has led to discussion in MELTA (2010), in a report from two colloquiums, "To Go or Not to Go Native: The Role of Native Speaker Teachers" and "Trainers in Second and Foreign Language Teaching" in discussing over the relevancy of the programme, and the issue of undermining Malaysian home-grown talent. In

the end, those colloquiums have come out with a list of possible strategies that will make such implementation to be more promising.

There has been limited research that focused on the collaboration between NESs and NNEs in a language programme in hiring NESs. Therefore, this study is hoped to be able to bridge the gap in the literature by focusing on the NESs and NNEs' perspectives in regards to the employment of NESs to monitor and supervise local English teachers in Malaysian primary schools.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach to explore the perspectives of the local English teachers as well as the NESs regarding the role of NESs in the collaboration of a language policy. Therefore, these two groups' perspectives were compared, and the data were obtained through interviews using open-ended questions. In addition, several district officers were also interviewed to capture variety perspectives of those involved in the language policy. This study also aimed to support or validate the perspectives of the English native speakers as well as the local English teachers.

In this study, all three perspectives were investigated simultaneously. The design of the study reflects the cyclical nature in which current policy affects state-level administration, school-level administration as well the classroom implementers who were the local English language teachers. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were then used for analysis. The researcher triangulated the different sources of information by examining the data obtained from these three perspectives before using it to build a coherent justification for themes. This approach was used to enhance the validity of

the study as themes were established based on converging various perspectives from the different groups of participants.

There were twenty NESs selected as the respondents from five districts in Kedah namely Kubang Pasu, Langkawi, Padang Terap, Kuala Nerang, and Kuala Kedah. The participants were cooperative and were willing to be interviewed in sharing their experiences. Meanwhile, there were only 18 local English language teachers whom the researcher managed to interview due to some constraints faced by them. Besides that, three district officers (PPD) from Kubang Pasu, Padang Terap and Kodiang were also interviewed for this study.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The section discusses on the experiences of all parties involved in the Native Speaker Programme. The results from the interviews revealed not only the roles of the NESs, the local teachers and the district officers, but also the obstacles faced by them throughout the programme. Generally, all respondents from the three groups responded well to all questions which led to the surfacing of four prominent themes. In each theme, they discussed their contribution and reaction throughout the programme. During the interview sessions, they also gave suggestions on how to improve the situations especially on the part of the NESs as well as reasons of the NNEs or the local teachers' resistance. In general, several themes were identified namely, the roles of native English speakers, the acceptance and attitude of local English teachers, the roles of the representative of administrator-MOE/PPD and should the Native Speaker Programme be continued.

The Role of NESs in The Native Speaker Programme

One of the frequently mentioned themes surfaced as the outcome of the interviews is the roles of NESs in the Native Speaker Programme. The roles of NESs in this programme are divided into three main areas: in-school support, observations and in-class development and professional language development. Apart from that, the respondents also identified the role of the NESs in contributing to the phonics teaching and training. Their perspectives towards the issue are based on their judgement of what they have gone through and validated with the current needs of our educational system policy.

The Acceptance and Attitude of Local English Teachers

The respondents emphasised on the issue of the acceptance and attitude of local English teachers towards the roles of NESs in the Native Speaker Programme. Despite the dispute on this issue, there were respondents who approved and accepted the roles of NESs as mentors and consultants as to help the local English language teachers to enhance their teaching skills development. The District Officer reported an account from one of the NES, who complained on the poor attendance among the local teachers of the once a week workshop conducted by the NESs to develop teachers' professional skills. The officer added:

I know that there were cases where our local English teachers slept in the class and refused to be observed. (Personal communication, 10 April 2013)

Apart from that, there were also cases where the NESs had to change school as they were

not accepted in that particular school. There is an unusual case in Kota Setar District where they were not allowed to change school because the school teachers refused to be observed, attend workshop and be coached. Despite being warned and penalised, the particular local teacher begged to change the teaching option from English to another subject just because he/she did not want to be observed.

Despite the negative reactions on the part of the local teachers, there were also cases reported in other Education District Office where NES abused and fought with the local teachers. There was even a native speaker from other district who reacted violently that he/she punched the teacher and ran away after a few months in a secluded case. The company has to incur the cost every time a native speaker ran away. There were NESs who always got drunk. As reported by the officer from Kedah, there was a native speaker who went there only for three months and ran away after having a disagreement with his manager. However, the District Officer of Kubang Pasu expressed her gratitude for getting good and cooperative NESs. She said that the NESs were hardworking but it was just the local teachers who refused to co-operate with them. She further explained that there was a NES who would go around book shops during school holiday and bring back the materials for the teachers. She added:

There is a NES whom I know has done something that we probably will not do. She did cards for every teacher under her supervision. Her willingness is to that extent. However, the local teachers were sort of reluctant. Lately I received report from my colleague in other PPD, teachers refuse to be observed while they should have got a lot of info on that but teachers are not appreciating it. They think that it takes time and they are in

comfort zone. They don't want to improve since there is no competition. They don't need extra knowledge, extra work as it doesn't make different with their salary (personal communication, 27 April 2013).

The NNES teachers were not unanimous in responding to the issue and they have come out with different perspectives. Some of them showed appreciation while some of them expressed dissatisfaction and blatant resistance. An NNES teacher with 20 years of teaching experience articulated that:

I think learning from this programme is a mere waste of time and burdening. Although he (the NES) is eligible, resourceful and motivational, it doesn't help much in our Malaysian classroom concepts as we have around 40 pupils in a class and limited time as or syllabus is very exam-oriented. Moreover, we are answerable to our admin (personal communication, 7 June 2013).

Conversely, there are still some supportive local teachers who have good perspectives and have been optimistic in dealing with the Native Speaker Programme. One of them claimed that:

The most beneficial activity is the remedial teaching techniques session that I had with them. I got a lot of new ideas from them especially to handle my low-proficient students. To me, it is necessary for teachers who do not have experience in teaching, especially the fresh graduates (personal communication, 7 June 2013).

There were also local school teachers who clearly deemed the NESs' roles as unnecessary and certify it with some reasons. Besides that, they shared their thoughts on what causes the resistance towards the execution of the programme and talked about the importance of every party involved to work hand in hand to support this programme.

The Role of the Ministry of Education

Moving on to the next part, the respondents also described the roles of the representative of administrator which is the MoE as well as their representative which refers to the PPD. Most of them discussed on the top-down policy practised in Malaysian educational system and how diffusion of information works on the NESs, the local English teachers as well as the district officer in each state. Furthermore, they also complained on the poor monitoring system that has been applied throughout the nationwide programme. Based on an interview session with a native speaker, he claimed that the problems occurred as a result of unorganised diffusion of information as mentioned:

I notice a few problems surfaced due to poor organisation where at the beginning of the programme, they found it difficult to understand their roles in the programmes as the information given was not clear and other people just want to simply express their dissatisfaction and thoughts without knowing what we have been through (personal communication, 27 Mei 2013).

The NNES teachers mentioned that they received no briefing and were not asked to attend any courses before participating in the Native Speaker Programme. One of the NNES teachers claimed that:

We were all in the dark. The government should have been well-prepared before introducing another high-invested programme like this (personal communication, 27 April 2013).

As a response to this issue, the District Officer articulated that the execution of the Native Speaker Programme is good but there are still rooms for improvement especially on the administrator's part. She added:

They should have been more systematic whenever they introduce any new programme to support any policy. As for example, the local English teachers should have been given at least a course before participating in the Native Speaker Programme so that they will get a general insight of what the programme is all about (personal communication, 11 April 2013).

Should This Programme Be Continued?

The respondents were also required to discuss on the issue whether or not to continue the Native Speaker Programme. Their insights were based on what they have gone through and reflect on their achievement as the outcome of participating in the programme. The respondents' responses were undecided as there were a few respondents who agreed on continuing while there were a few who opposed the suggestion. All of them validated their views by reasoning it with multiple perspectives which range from home-grown talents issues to the importance of the international standard issue.

It is proven that the Native Speaker Programme gave an impact towards the NNEs teachers' teaching quality where the improvement can be sensed and seen by certain those involved. Some of the NNEs teachers admitted that the NESs provide them with more exposure of English language as they have gained so much knowledge, levelled up their skills and have a huge collection of resources from the native speakers. In some aspects, the NESs have assisted and inspired to search for teaching resources from the websites as well as knowledge and skills on how to have fun and different activities in English lesson. This approach is similar to the Krashen's input hypothesis on the idea that language learners need maximum exposure to the target

language to progress in their knowledge of it (1985). Some of the local English teachers agreed on continuing with the programme as they claimed that they have undergone some improvement especially in terms of having variety in conducting language activities in English lesson. They learnt to create activities covering any levels, from simple and easy to exciting and complex activities. The knowledge that they acquired from the NESs has improved their pedagogical skills and given a positive impact on their students' performance too especially in terms of participation in class. One of them added:

I have gained so much knowledge, levelled up my skills and I have a huge collection of resources from the native speakers. In some aspects, yes, I think they have helped me a lot and inspired me in terms of having the source of items from the websites as well as knowledge and skills on how to have a fun and different activities in English class (personal communication, 17 Mei 2013)

On the other hand, there is a teacher who thinks that the government should have put the NESs more in the teachers training college compared to primary schools so that they can nurture the right teaching skills and motivate the teachers from the grass root level. Besides that, the NESs can share their knowledge and skills in advance or make them involved in teaching students in the classes. However, the local teachers further explained that the programme could be continued if all parties such as the community, MOE, parents, teachers, school administrator, JPN and PPD give full support and work hand in hand. Responding to this issue, the NNEs teachers have voiced out multiple views towards the continuation of the Native Speaker Programme. All of the NESs who were interviewed suggested a strong call to continue the programme as they optimistically claimed:

I do think that world-class students can be produced if the programme is continued. Continuation of monitoring and re-training, when needed are essential. After the initial 3-year contract, it should be expanded to other primary schools and then in 3 more years, the secondary teachers should receive training, as well (personal communication, 12 Mei 2013).

Meanwhile, the District Officer criticised the MoE's decision to terminate the Native Speaker Programme at the end of September 2013 as she claimed that the impact of having the programme cannot be justified within the three-year timeline. She added:

This programme needs time. We cannot just see it in 3 years, probably we need like 6 years so that we can have the desirable result. I'm not saying that there is no impact at all to the schools involved but we need more time (personal communication, 12 April 2013)

The officer also claimed that history has proven that our nation can improve even without the help of the NESs as she recalled:

Previously we had had a couple of district language officers in our PPD, Mr Charles and Dona. We had this discussion too of whether it should be continued or not. After thinking of it over, we agreed that our local teachers' expertise are good enough so their service (native speakers) were terminated (personal communication, 12 April 2013).

Essentially, according to the MOE, most Malaysian teachers have met the international standard, in terms of grammar, and vocabularies. In addition, Arva and Medgyes (2000) suggested that as a result of learning English explicitly, the NNES teachers are able to explain grammar well, in contrast to NESs who were not able to perform. They have the expertise, and only need to improve on the way they think. They should be more positive and possess the courage to think out of the box and make changes and be more creative in

their teaching. To illustrate this point, the officer reported that:

...we can make do with our locals, as we have a lot of capable teachers, it's just only that they need training and guidance. Currently we also have SISC (School Improvement Specialist Coach) where they go down to school to coach teachers in terms of pedagogy. Those who are involved are the master teacher, experienced teacher, excellent teacher (GC). We can actually run the programme using our own people if we really want (personal communication, 12 Mei 2013).

There is a variety of new perspectives and connected theories emerged as the three group of people shared their experience in participating in the nationwide programme. Despite the disagreement from some local English teachers, at certain points, the District Officer and the NESs shows pessimism towards the role of NESs in the programme although there were some problems rose along the way. It is inevitable for any language or educational programme to be accompanied by some conflicts or issues. The situation also applies to the Native Speaker Programme. There is no harm to proceed with the continuation of the Native Speaker Programme, as long as every party involved gives full support and play their role evenly. In order for MoE to be increase the success rate in producing Malaysian teachers with quality teaching profession through the Native Speaker Programme, they need strategies to help them move forward. Thus, they have to revise the programme including the selection criterion of the NESs, and also on the execution of the programme as well as the monitoring system.

In order to continue the Native Speaker programme, the local teachers should change their mind set and attitude. They should be more open and optimistic toward the

programme. When there is no choice offered since the participation is unlikely to be optional, they should have taken this opportunity to make improvement on their teaching techniques and strategies by accepting the NESs. Overall, the local teachers are experts in the language as claimed by the District Officer, and they need to improve the way they think, act positively and have the courage to think out of the box and make changes and be more creative in their teaching.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The significance of this study is to ensure that Malaysians' grass-root voices are heard as the discussion is on crucial issues related to the rationale of hiring NESs as teacher trainers. Some respondents expressed their concerns that the programme might undermine the legitimacy and expertise of the home-grown talents. This study, however, does not intend to discuss the flaw or wrong policy-making made by the government of Malaysia. Yet to a national view, its intention is to help others to understand the roles of NESs in Native Speaker Programme from the perspectives of the three groups of people involved in the programme. It is hoped that the outcome of this study could provide positive and proactive support to the Ministry of Education to ensure that this programme is fruitful and worth invested.

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